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ARTICLE DE RECHERCHE

Le conflit culturel dans le roman de Ngugi The River Between

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Résumé

Le roman The River Between de Ngugi Wa Tshiong'o est l'un des romans qui décrit le conflit des cultures, particulièrement, le conflit entre le christianisme et la tradition chez les Gikuyus en ce qui concerne la circoncision des femmes. Le christianisme rejette cette pratique pendant que les gens attachés à la tradition souhaitent sa continuité. Ces deux points de vue opposés sont à la base du conflit entre les personnages dans ce livre.

Mots-clés : conflit, culture, la présentation, le rejet.

Abstract

The River Between is one of the African novels that portrays the conflict between. African and European cultures. This opposition concerns religious issue, especially Christianity, and the traditional practice of women's circumcision. Perpetuation or rejection of women circumcision is the cause of social tension between the two groups of characters in the novel.

Keywords: conflict, culture, perpetuation, rejection

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Introduction

This article analyses the conflict of cultures between two groups of characters on the issue of circumcision of women among the Kikuyus in Kenya. Those among the Kikuyu who converted to Christianity think that circumcision of women is sinful, and ought to be banned; but the non Christians think that there is nothing bad in it. The method to use in order to fight white domination is also a second cause of conflict that opposes characters.Waiyaki thinks that Africans must accept to be educated in the European way to be able to face white domination. But Kabonyi thinks that Africans have to take arms to face that domination. Thus, the conflict between the two groups of characters in The River Between. For the purpose of this article, the multiple approaches is used to account for the critical approach, the social approach, the analytical approach, and the discourse approach which is eclectic. There are six sections to cover: definition of conflict and cultures, an analysis of the novel, the main problem and its resolution, an analysis of characters' attitudes, and the causes of the conflict.

1. Statement of the plot

Kameno and Makuyu are two opposed neighboring villages among the Kikuyu people. Leadership in the area is what opposes the two villages. This opposition goes back far away in the past. Makuyu claimed to be the leader because Gikuyu, Mumbi and Murungu had sojourned there. But it had always been whispered and rumored that Gikuyu and Murungu finally settled at Kameno. And a small hill grew out of the soil on which they stood south of Kameno .And Murungu had given the people of Kameno that land. Kameno had a good record to keep this old story. A sacred grove sprang out of the place where Gikuyu and Mumbi stood; people still paid homage to it.And everybody knows that Kameno produced more heroes and leaders than any other ridge.Mugo Wa Kibiro, that Great Gikuyu seer of old, was born there including the great witch, Kamiri and Wachiori, who is a great warrior. In spite of this

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opposition, the people of the two villages led a life of their own, and were united and attached to their culture.Men and women had nothing to fear. The country of many ridges where Kameno and Makuyu were located

was left alone, unaffected by turbulent forces outside. These ancient hills and ridges were the heart and soul of the land. They kept the tribe's magic and rites, pure and intact. Their people had time to rejoice together, giving one another the blood and warmth of their laughter. Sometimes they fought. But that was amongst themselves and no outsider need ever know. To the stranger, they kept dumb; breathing none of the secrets of which they were the guardians. They said the oil-skin of the house is not for rubbing into the skin of strangers. In Kameno, there is a young man called Waiyaki who is the focal point in Ngugi's story. At an early age, he was already considered to have a special gift of reconciliation. Once he met two boys; Kamau and Kinutshia, fighting. These two boys were older than Waiyaki; but Waiyaki was able to stop them fighting, to bring and keep peace in the two villages. Fighting reflected violence among the people of the land. The coming of the white missionaries brings troubles in the area. Those who accepted christianity could not collaborate with those who refused it. The new influence tends to dominate on the traditional ways and society. To face this domination ; Waiyaki, Kinutshia and Kamau young boys of the ridge go to Siriana mission in order to learn the white man's magic and power. This learning will help them fight against the white settlers and their influence. Before Waiyaki goes to Siriana mission, his father Chege shows him the secret of the land. For Chege, Waiyaki would be the savior of the land in the years to come for which he had to be equipped with the knowledge of the land. In Makuyu, there is Joshua who at his young age went to Siriana mission where he got converted to Christianity. This conversion changed his attitude towards African traditions, customs and rituals. Circumcision and the other rituals were sinful to him. His wife and his two daughters, Muthoni and Nyambura, are also converted. The other villagers see Joshua's conversion as an act of betrayal that needed revenge. Joshua is seared and so he runs away back to Siriana. After some time, Joshua returns to his village, Makuyu, to preach the Gospel. While in Makuyu, Joshua's daughters start questioning themselves on what was bad in traditions that obliged Christians to hate traditional customs and rituals. Circumcision, for example, seemed to be something that made a woman beautiful among the Gikuyu.Yet, the new influence considered it to be sinful.

One day, Muthoni, one of Joshua's daughters, runs away and goes to Kameno to her aunt's in order to be circumcised. Joshua sends his wife, Miriamu and his daughter Nyambura to look for Muthoni and bring her back home. Their effort was in vain .Nyambura remembers what her sister said one day while talking. She said that she would go to her aunt's in order to be circumcised.Nyambura is sent to go to look for Muthoni so that she could return home. Muthoni refuses to return to Makuyu. Instead she joins the group of other girls of her age who were ready to be circumcised. Meanwhile, the children of the pagans are expelled from Christian schools.Waiyaki and his friends are dismissed from school and they return to Kameno.Muthoni is circumcised but her wound is infected. Her aunt tries to use some plants to cure her. Unfortunately these plants do not work.Muthoni's situation becomes worse. Waiyaki and his friends decide to take Muthoni to Siriana hospital. Finally,Waiyaki and his fellows decide to build their own schools to give the opportunity to pagan children to learn the white man's magic and power. This activity of building schools makes Waiyaki famous in Kameno.This fame calls on Kabonyi's jealousy. The latter thinks he himself or his son Kamau who should have deserved that fame because Kabonyi thinks to be older and more experienced than Waiyaki. Muthoni dies at the hospital in Siriana, Waiyaki and some other young man go to take Muthoni's corpse so that it can be burried in Makuyu. To Joshua this death of Muthoni means nothing since Muthoni rebelled. After Muthoni's death Waiyaki transfers his intimate relationship with Muthoni to Nyambura.To protect the purity of the tribe, the elders create a group of elders called a Kiama that had a special mission to protect the purity of the tribe. Waiyaki is also appointed as a member of the Kiama. Unfortunately, the activities of the new schools do not give him time to take part to the activities of the Kiama. Kabonyi uses that opportunity to accuse Waiyaki of betraying the tribe. Waiyaki betrayed the tribe because he went to Siriana Mission, he was a lover of Joshua's daughters who were converted to Christianity, he sometimes was seen at Joshua's church and he planned to go to Nairobi to look for teachers. For these charges, Waiyaki and Nyambura are arrested and put at the disposal of the Kiama so that they could be judged. What happens beyond that remains a mystery.

2. The main problem in The River Between and how it is solved

The main problem in this novel is that Makuyu and Kameno are two villages of the same ridge that were united. The coming of the white missionaries divides the two villages into two parts; those who accepted Christianity and those who refused it.Waiyaki; a young man from Kameno tries to reunite the two villages in order to face white men's domination. This effort reveals itself to be without success because Kabonyi and Waiyaki cannot come to an agreement on the issue of leadership in the ridge. The problem is resolved with the jailing of Waiyaki and Nyambura, which, puts also an end to the conflict.

3. The conflict in the novel

Five characters in the novel are involved in the conflict namely Joshua, Muthoni, Waiyaki, the elders and Kabonyi. Josua is from Makuyu village, he was converted to Christianity and he would like all the village people to get converted in Christianity and act according to Christian faith. He wants his fellows to abandon circumcision of women that he thinks to be so sinful. When he tries to impose his opinion in his own family, Joshua gets in conflict with his own daughter, Muthoni. An elder in the village who observed the conflict declares: I have always said so. You see what discord in the family does. If Joshua had not sold his heart to these people, it would have been a simple case. Why! A black ran without blemish under the Mugumo tree-simple sacrifice. And all would have ended well (Ngugi 1965:48).

The source of the conflict between Joshua and the other people, particularly his daughter, Muthoni, is his Christian faith as the book reads: Joshua himself was strict and observed the word to the letter. Religious uniformity in his own house was binding. He meant to be an example to all, a bright light that would show the way, a rock on which the weak would step on their way to Christ (Ngugi 1965:30).

Joshua always considered his family as a model that would be followed by his neighbors. For this, Joshua paid much attention to his daughters' education. On this education we can read: He looked at them, at the way they were working, the way they kept together and felt a father's pride. His home had a strong Christian foundation and wanted his

daughters to wax strong in faith and ways of God. Would this not prove to all what a Christian home should be like?(Ngugi

1965:30).

Sometimes, Joshua regrets his past and the past of his wife which he considered to have been so sinful as the text reads: Sometimes, when alone with Miriamu, his wife, he would look at her and sadly remark, 'I wish you had not gone through this rite '(Ngugi 1965:31).

Another cause of the conflict between Joshua and his village mates is the coming of the white men in the region. Joshua's conversion to Christianity opened the way to the white man in the area. The missionaries used to come in the region to visit their mission. These frequent visits called on the natives 'anger. On the villagers 'anger Ngugi writes: For the whole of that year things had not gone well with Joshua. People at Kameno were becoming restless and believed that it was Joshua who was responsible for the white men who these days often came to the hills… Nevertheless, they blamed Joshua for his interference (Ngugi 1965:31).

The villagers think that the coming of the white men in the area is not good because these people will come with their vices among which is domination. A second character in conflict in the novel is Muthoni, Joshua's daughter who is in conflict with her father. In spite of her Christian education, Muthoni is fond of circumcision this traditional rite as the text reads: Look, please, I – I want to be a woman. I want to be a real girl, a real woman, knowing all the ways of the hills and ridges (Ngugi 1965:26).

In addition, Muthoni compares her state to the state of her parents and complains: Why! Are we fools? … Father and mother are circumcised. Are they not Christians? Circumcision did not prevent themfrom being Christians. I too have embraced the white man's faith. However, I know it is beautiful, oh so beautiful to be initiated intowomanhood. You learn the ways of the tribe (Ngugi 1965:26).

It is because of the conflict between her and her father that Muthoni runs away from Makuyu to Kameno where she is circumcised. A third character in conflict in The River Between is Waiyaki.He is a Kikuyu young boy who was sent with other boys to school. On the day he is sent to school, his father warns him in:

Go to the mission place. Learn all the wisdom and the secrets of the white man. But do not follow his vices. Be true to your people and the ancient rites (Ngugi 1965:20).

Waiyaki has two sorts of education; the western and the traditional education. He is trained according to western education at school, and he is also initiated in the ways of the tribe. Initiation in the ways of the tribe was an object of pride for his father, Chege.Chege's satisfaction for this traditional education is read in: Pride, indeed, could be detected in Chege's voice. He had a reason for this. Everywhere he went, he received compliments on the way his son had emerged from the whole experience. People were amazed that the white man's education had not softened him, he could stand the traditional ordeal without flinching (Ngugi 1965:47).

As Waiyaki received two opposed educations he has an internal conflict within himself. Should he behave and act according to western or African culture? This internal conflict of cultures in Waiyaki is expressed in: Waiyaki still felt uneasy. Something inside him prevented him from losing himself in this frenzy. He wondered what Livingstone would say now if he found him or if he saw the chaos created by locked emotions let loose (Ngugi 1965:41-42).

A fourth character in the conflict is Kabonyi, Kamau's father, a traditionalist in Kameno village and a jealous and ambitious man. He thinks that he ought to be the leader in the area simply because of his age and experience. He is also selfish because he thinks that he alone or his son deserves the position of leader in the village. To disqualify Waiyaki from the leadership in the region he charges him of betraying the tribe for not respecting the customs and traditions. On Kabonyi's effort to disqualify Waiyaki, Ngugi writes: His big accusation was that Waiyaki was unclean. He had thahuand if he continued teaching the people would be darknessinstead of light… He was in league with the white man, whobrought a secret religion to quieten the people while the landwas being grabbed by their brothers (Ngugi 1965:147).

Kabonyi's fight against Waiyaki is twofold; first he fights him for leadership in the area, and second he fights him for cultural preservation and African freedom.Kabonyi reveals the secret for his second reason of fighting Waiyaki in:

When the Kiama said that people should take arms againstthe Government Post…… Waiyaki opposed this and cried: Education! Education! Will education give us back our land? (Ngugi 1965: 147).

Kabonyi's position to fight the white men with arms is less strategic since there is no guarantee that grants the victory to Africans as white men have arms which are more powerful than those possessed by Africans. So, Waiyaki's strategy can help well than Kabonyi's. The fifth characters in the conflict are the elders composing the Kiama whose role is to protect the purity of the tribe. As protector of traditions they consider anybody who collaborates with the white settlers as a traitor such as Joshua who converted to Christianity for which the elders are angry with him as the text reads: He (Joshua) was then a young man who ran from the hillsand went to live with the white man in the newly established Mission. He feared the revenge of the hills: the anger of his friendsbetrayed (Ngugi 1965:29).

So, the elders do not hesitate to jail Waiyaki after Kabonyi charged him. These people act and decide without any critical sense. They do not take time to examine and try to find out the real motives of Kabonyi's reactions and attitudes. Therefore, their punishment granted to Waiyaki is not objective. They also consider Waiyaki's intimacy with Joshua's daughters as an act of treason; yet that intimacy has nothing to do with people and culture. It is a matter of personal preference.

4. Causes of the cultural conflict in the novel

The causes of this conflict are: the opposing views, the fear of domination by the white men and of the leadership.

4.1. The opposing views

Characters are in conflict because they have opposed views. On one hand there is Joshua, a Christian, who thinks that circumcision is sinful; therefore, it ought to be banned. Muthoni, Joshua's daughter, thinks the opposite. For her, to be a woman, a girl should be circumcised. These contradicting views place both Joshua and Muthoni in tension.

On the other hand, Waiyaki thinks that black people have to get western education so that they can be equipped to fight the white men.Kabonyi's opinion is different. For Kabonyi, black people have to take arms (weapons) to fight the white men. The opposed opinions put Joshua and Muthoni in conflict and they also oppose Waiyaki to Kabunyi.

4.2. The fear of domination

Since the time of Chege, Waiyaki's father, the fear of domination by Europeans existed in the mind of Africans.Chege even predicted that domination. For this, he decided to send his son to a European school so that he could face these invaders. This fear of domination is also shared by Kabonyi.As Waiyaki does not agree with this, he is in conflict with Kabonyi.

4.3. The leadership

Waiyaki's conflict with Kabonyi is also caused by leadership ambition. Kabonyi because of his age and experience thinks that he should be the leader in the area. To preserves this position, Kabonyi manages to charge Waiyaki whom they arrested after their trial.

Conclusion

This paper analysed the conflict of cultures in The River Between, the intent of which is to show how Ngugi portrays the conflict between African and western traditional cultures and find out the various causes of the basis of this conflict. The causes of the conflict are the opposing views, the fear of domination by the white men and the ambition for leadership. The conflict of cultures in The River Between is mainly due to opposite views on the issue of a traditional practice of women circumcision among the Kikuyus. Africans converted to Christianity hate this practice but the traditionalists sustain that this practice ought to continue. The conservation and the wiping out of this practice are the two views that oppose characters first. Second, characters are in conflict on the method to use to face European domination.Waiyaki thinks that through modern education Africans may resist white domination; but Kabonyi thinks that Africans have to use weapons to resist the Europeans.

When the traditionalists sustain the perpetuation of women's circumcision, Ngugi shows that this rite is to be banned because it ruins women's lives as is the case with Muthoni's death in this novel. The opposed methods to resist white men's domination, for Kabonyi is to use arms which they did not possess, while Waiyaki thinks the best way is through education, sending people to school, which is wiser and much better than Kabonyi's method. The novel shows how ignorance and illiteracy are detrimental to people's lives, as is the case in this novel.

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