

The Path of African Women in Fiction: a Critical Analysis of Ngugi's *the River Between* and *a Grain of Wheat*

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ABSTRACT: African writers involved in the trend of writing to re-establish the socio-cultural identity of Africa countries have not failed to mention the status of women in African communities. On the one hand, for some writers, the status and position of the African women since pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods have not changed. They have presented the women as inferior beings in all fields. They have portrayed them as human beings with no authority while men hold all authority. On the other hand, others have symbolised Africa as a woman who is in search of freedom and independence. Thus, they have portrayed mature, independent and capable women taking initiatives in the post-colonial period. The aim of this paper is to critically analyse *The river between* and *A grain wheat* and highlight the evolution of women's status and position in African communities from the pre-colonial to the post-colonial era. With the feminist and post-colonial criticism, this paper concludes that women have moved from the status of a dispossessed person to a status of a leader capable of suggesting and taking the lead of activities for the development of communities.

KEYWORDS: Women, feminism, post-colonialism, colonisation

INTRODUCTION

Writer of several novels promoting the image of Africa portrayed as the land of the savages, Ngugi wa Thiong'o fights against colonisation and contributes with doubt to the cultural independence of Africa. His struggle for the ideological, cultural and political emancipation of African countries enabled him to establish himself as one of the radical African nationalists. From *Weep Not Child* published in 1964 to *Decolonising the Mind* published in 1986, from the colonial era to the post-colonial period, this African writer originated from Kenya does not change his objective which is to sensitise Africans to free themselves from the shackles of the colonial power which continues to keep them under several forms of imperialism. In the nationalist battle against the Western imperialist powers, he does not forget to make room for women. From the image of a housewife with no rights, no property, no opportunity for public speech and denied rights in *The River Between* (1965), Ngugi takes us to the status of a woman as a leader with the right to speech and to elaborate initiatives in *A Grain of Wheat* (1967).

Thus, what are the factors that motivates this change in the status of woman in African communities? What are the stages in the evolution of this status?

Through a critical study of *The River Between* and *A Grain of Wheat*, this paper analyses the factors which allow the change in the status of the women in the novels and evaluates the stages of this evolution. This research work is mainly fiction and it uses the Feminism and Postcolonialism as literary theories. It is based on a qualitative approach and secondary sources such journal articles, books and internet publications.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The status of women in African society is a much talked about issue. Many writers and researchers around the world and in Africa in particular have written to set out different opinions. Although in the treatment of the image of women in African society in the precolonial period, some writers give less value to the role of women; but several others give them rather a positive image. For example, Jane B. Okunlola describing the status of the pre-colonial women in African communities says:

African woman has long held a position of power in society; she has long been an integral part of the struggle for survival; she has ruled millions of people successfully. She is respected for her qualities and treated as a human-being. She is the mother, she from whom all life emanates; she is indeed the most important element of survival and continuity (1989, p.202)

Reading Okunlola point of view, can we say that the consideration given to women in African communities was mainly related to their ability to give birth and provide labour to provide wealth and support their communities? Rose Waruhiu answers this question with her analysis. She says: "early images of the African woman south of the Sahara depict her with a heavy load on her back, a back straddles on top and hands left free to wieve a kiondo or shell maize as she walks. Her back is bent over; she is fulfilling three

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roles at once: work-provider, manager, mother" (1995, p.136). For her, the role of the woman was not only to give birth and provide labour, but she was actually involved in the role of managing the household. Chinua Achebe goes further by highlighting the woman as having a high responsibility in the traditional religion of the community. Considering the masculine greatness of the man, it is almost unthinkable that such an important responsibility in the traditional religion is given to the woman. It is to be the spokesperson for the gods within the community, to be a channel through which community members can interact with the ancestors. Woman is also a means of manifesting the gifts of healing. In *Things Fall Apart*, the narrator uses the character of the priestess to express it as follows:

No one who had ever beheld Agbala, except his priestess. But no one had ever crawled into his awful shrine had come out without the fear of his power. His priestess stood by the sacred fire which she built in the heart of the cave and proclaimed the will of god [...] The priestess in those days was a woman called Chika. She was full of the power of her god, and she was greatly feared (Achebe, 1958, p.13).

It is true that in the pre-colonial period of Africa, the African woman, although totally subordinate and considered as the weaker sex, was the core of the family. But the concern of this paper lies in the evolution of the status through the colonial period to the post-colonial period. To respond to this analysis, the literary theories mentioned above will be of great help. The Post-colonial criticism and Feminism aim at discussing the problems of women under patriarchy from the pre-colonial era to the period after the independence of the African countries.

The theories have begun to go side by side after 1980s.

WOMEN IN *THE RIVER BETWEEN*

The image of the African women has evolved considerably from the pre-colonial period to the colonial period. In *The river between*, the narrator steps back in time to a period when women had a great deal of responsibility in African society. This period of the African community can be referred to as the period before colonisation. In a discussion between Waiyaki and his father Chege when they are walking in the mountains, the father reveals to him the reason why in this era women lost the position they had. The narrator says "Waiyaki liked antelopes. He always felt a desire to touch their smooth bodies" and then, Waiyaki says "They see men and run away." "Why? Don't they run away from women?" Waiyaki asked, puzzled." (Ngugi, 1965, p.15). In this questioning of Waiyaki, one can discern a thirst to understand a fact that concerns women in general and her mother in particular in his community. The fact is that women have no possessions in the home. Nothing belongs to them and everything belongs to the men. A fact that certainly leads him to experience internal suffering when he sees that his mother, who gives birth, who suffers to support the children, and who is involved in both domestic and agricultural work, has nothing of her own. Actually, his father's answer clears everything to him. His father says:

You don't know this! Long ago women used to rule this land and its men. They were harsh and men began to resent their hard hand. So, when all the women were pregnant, men came together and overthrew them. Before this, women owned everything. The animal you saw was their goat. But because the women could not manage them, the goats ran away. They knew women to be weak. So why should they fear them? (Ngugi, 1965, p.15)

The first sentence in Chege's reply should attract attention. He is surprised that his son does not yet know his authority over the woman as a man. This honour of being superior to the woman resounds in his voice until the end of his answer to his son. In fact, the use of the exclamatory sentence to begin his answer is done consciously. This form of sentence is used to ironize the fate of the woman who once was a leader but lost this position because of her weakness. Secondly, this response advocates the supremacy of patriarchy which gives the man the right to monopolise everything even if some things are for the woman.

But Ngugi leaves the stage where the woman is totally dominated by the man to another stage where the woman enters a process of struggling against colonisation. At that new stage, Ngugi tries to portray the image of a free woman who can make decisions for herself. A woman who is not dictated to. This is a level where women try to regain their place as leaders in African communities. They try to give themselves the status of women who can now be listened to because they bring approaches to solutions that they believe can help their communities to find solutions to free themselves from the colonial imperialism.

Ngugi highlights the status of women at this stage by portraying the attitude of Muthoni to the practice of circumcision. Muthoni rebels against his father, Joshua who is an early convert to Christianity and becomes quite fanatical in abandoning the traditional ways including the practice of circumcision. Her rebellion is considered as the worst possible kind because it cuts Joshua to the core. Actually, Muthoni insists on being circumcised since this is what ritually and spiritually can bind her again to the people from whom her father, in his Christian zealotry, separates her. Under the dominion of the western imperialism, African communities are forced to abandon their traditional practices and beliefs. Among those African traditional practices, we have circumcision which before colonisation was considered as a national identity and a unifier, becomes a satanic practice according to the colonial administration. Although, her father forbids her to go under circumcision, Muthoni insists. She tells her sister Nyambura that she desperately wants to be circumcised even though her Christian father regards it as a pagan rite that comes from the devil:

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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 the ridges [...] it is beautiful, oh so beautiful to be initiated into womanhood. You learn the ways of the tribe. Yes, the white man's God does not quite satisfy me. I want, I need something more (Ngugi, 1975, p.26).

Muthoni then steals away from her family to be secretly circumcised. She courageously disobeys her father. This disobedience to her father is a way for her to assert herself. The author uses the character of Muthoni to show the woman who is in search of freedom after having been under male domination for several years. In fact, before this colonial period, in the African tradition, the woman has an important place where she plays roles for the survival of her community. But the advent of colonisation demonstrates a total deprivation of freedom. In the book, Joshua, Muthoni's father is trying to deprive her from the freedom to make a choice. The community is facing colonisation with restrictions that Africans has to respect. So the people envision a liberation that they can foresee in the person of the main character Waiyaki. According to his father Chege and members of the community, Waiyaki is the one through whom the deliverance of the community is to be possible. He inspires confidence and as a man it is obvious that he bears the responsibility of freeing his community from the throes of colonisation. His father speaks to him as follows: "We are his offspring] ... [. You are the last in our line] ... [. And keep on remembering, salvation shall come from the hills" (Ngugi, 1975, p.19-21).

To achieve this goal, Waiyaki has to go through the practice of circumcision, but at some point he is filled with doubt. When the time for initiation comes, Waiyaki's mind is "unsettled" (p.40) not only by the importance and the excitement of the huge dance and the rituals to come, but also by Muthoni's revolt: "All the time Waiyaki kept on wondering 'Why should she do it?' And he felt a desire to speak with her and hear it from her own mouth" (p.40). When she is pointed out to him at the dance, he notices her hips "swinging from side to side" (p.40) sensually among the group of dancing women. He is amazed that Muthoni should have the courage to disobey her father, a thing that he cannot contemplate doing to his father, Chege. Waiyaki's gaze becomes even more eroticised such that he even seems to achieve a kind of ecstasy and consummation that he does not achieve later in his relationship with Nyambura:

And then Muthoni appeared on the scene. The singing increased in volume and excitement. And she was a wonder. Where has she learnt this? Waiyaki wondered as he watched from the side. She danced, sang; describing love; telling of relationships between a woman and a man; scenes and words of love-making [...]. Waiyaki gazed at her. Something slightly stirred in him. In the yellow light she appeared beautiful and happy, a strange kind of elation [...]. And suddenly he felt as if a hand soft and strong had held his soul and whipped it off. It was so strange that he felt his emotions and desires temporarily arrested in a single timeless moment; then release. Waiyaki was nothing. He was free. He wanted only this thing now, this mad intoxication of ecstasy and pleasure. Quick waves of motion flashed through his flesh, through his being [...]. Muthoni's secret was out. You did not have to learn. No. You just gave yourself to the dream of the rhythm. Within a few seconds he found himself face to face with Muthoni. Both had been thrown into the centre (Ngugi, 1975, pp.42-3).

The communion that Waiyaki experiences here is a response to the mysteries of initiation, but it is a response that is provoked by Muthoni's presence.

WOMAN IN A GRAIN OF WHEAT

In *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi portrays the status of women in Kikuyu community from two angles through one of the main characters. During the colonisation, colonisers completely dispossessed local people from their local wealth including the land. Peasants no longer have control over their lands. Supported by the colonial administration and its various institutions, the colonisers, whatever their origins, have the power to take what belongs to the local people. So what the peasants have to do is to work for the colonisers as slaves on their own lands. Then frustrated, Kikuyu people initiate a process of decolonisation that is not actually peaceful. Far from being peaceful, the process that leads to the independence of the Kikuyu's community gives birth to the Mau-Mau nationalist movement. This nationalist movement fights for the freedom of the Kikuyu community's wealth in order to gain the community complete independence.

He describes how the Kikuyu community suffers from the oppressive management system of the Western imperialistic supremacy. He denounces the upper class activities and magnify the actions of the proletarian class members who lead the fight against the colonisers. The main character Kihika is the representative of the proletarian working class whose leadership is appreciated by the members of his social class. Although, he is Christian and is educated in the Western ways, he critiques missionaries. Ngugi uses Kihika's sister to achieve a goal which is to show the position of women in the community. Ngugi gives Mumbi an image of a leader. Someone in whom people can believe to bring solution when things seem to be difficult. That is why when the obvious leaders do not succeed to convince Mugo to deliver the speech during the ceremony for the independence, "the women decided to send Mumbi to Mugo" (Ngugi, 2008, p.196). This is an evidence that Mumbi is actually a reliable leader and what comes from such a person can easily be seen as good. The choice of Mumbi shows that Ngugi gives an important place to women in the novel. Indeed, she is chosen because of her background, her dedication to work and to finding solutions to problems in her community. Ngugi

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evolves from the status of the woman on whom the public choice is made to the woman who gains deep selfconfidence and who proposes solutions for the development of her community.

A critical analysis of the novel shows that Mumbi struggles to secure Kariuki, his brother, a good education as she says "In him we saw the hope for the future. There is nothing like education" (Ngugi, 2008, p.160).

As the eldest of a family of three children, she has the responsibility to work hard so that her brothers can go to school and have a better life. Her brother Kihika gets involved in fighting with the Mau-Mau movement for the independence of their community, but unfortunately he is betrayed by Mugo. Thus, Mumbi makes sure that Kariuki gets a good education. She is able to achieve this with the help of Karanja to relieve her parents. She says: "Kariuki was with me, because he had passed KAPE and he was the only boy in these ridges to get a place in Siriana Secondary School [...]. Karanja did not raise any questions. He gave us a letter stating that Kariuki had been screened and found not to have taken the oath [...]. It's when Kariuki went to Siriana that life came back to my parents" (Ngugi, 2008, p.163).

This is during a period when many young people in the community take an oath to fight for their independence. Mumbi is able to survive in this situation and after the struggle his community is able to gain independence. So, in the period after the independence, one has to think about building an independent state. So Ngugi presents Mumbi as a key factor in this new nation building phase. The characters have to evaluate themselves in order to find real and solid foundations on which the community has to be built. From the relationship between Gikonyo and Mumbi, Ngugi draws the image of the past, present and future of the Kikuyu's community. Indeed, the two characters live a peaceful life in a couple until the colonisers come to take over the community's property by force through strong means. Not being spared by the consequences of the colonisation, the Gikonyo and Mumbi decide to be involved in the freedom fighting movement of their community. Gikonyo fights alongside other loyalist militants and is arrested and put in prison. Mumbi then becomes a target for Karanja. Having harassed her in various ways, Mumbi finally succumbs to having sex with Karanja. Thus, Mumbi becomes pregnant and gives birth to a child. Later on, her husband Gikonyo is released from prison and comes to find his wife with another man's child. He is consumed with the sentiments of redness, hatred, revenge and of destruction that have a severe impact on Mumbi. Impacted by Gikonyo's actions, Mumbi decides to end her relationship with Gikonyo. And so she does. Gikonyo understands that his attitude is destroying Mumbi and he decides to change her attitude so that Mumbi will forgive her and return home. But Mumbi makes it clear that with what she suffers because of him, a simple change of attitude cannot solve the problem. For Mumbi, they have to have a sincere discussion about the past to see how to envisage a possible future.

From Gikonyo and Mumbi's married life, Ngugi portrays the characters as political actors and the relationship between the two as the Kenyan political context from the colonial to the postindependence eras. Then, Ngugi emphasises the role Mumbi plays in Kenyan nation building. Here, Ngugi portrays women who offer a way out for the building of a stable nation, especially politically. Mumbi does not only suggest education as the solution to have a stable post-colonial nation. She also suggests a cooperation between characters and she also gives a way to that cooperation.

The narrator says:

[...]as if she was now really aware of her independence. Gikonyo was surprised by the new firmness in her voice [...]. 'will you go back to the house, light the fire, and see things don't decay? she considered this for a while, her head turned aside. Then she looked at him, directly, in the eyes. 'No, Gikonyo. People try to rub out things, but they cannot. Things are not so easy. What has passed between us is too much to be passed over in a sentence. We need to talk, to open our hearts to one another, examine them, and then together plan the future we want (Ngugi, 2008, p.267).

Mumbi calls for an actual discussion in order to build the future that can suit all parties. She represents the Kenya that is aware that it acquires its independence and is opened to an openheart discussion with the colonisers so that they can find the basis on which they can build the new Kenya. According to her, the discussion has two levels. The two parties must first of all recall the past to check things that must be kept and things that must be cancelled. Secondly, they must find the basis for the imagined future for the postcolonial Kenya. By the way, this proposal for a cooperation is a message for the postcolonial African governments and African elites. As soon as African countries obtain their independence, leaders on terms or not have to set forthright discussions with the Western powers. And as Gikonyo is obliged to recognise Mumbi independence, African countries state of independence has to be recognised and accepted and then discussions are to be held for cooperation that can lead African counties to sustainable development.

CONCLUSION

This paper shows that by critically analysing *The river between* and *A grain of wheat*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o portrays the image of women in an African community in three stages. He describes the status of women in the African pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial eras. About the period before colonisation, Ngugi portrays the condition of dispossessed women in some traditional African communities. Then, he comes to the colonisation era to write about women who try to make their way in order to be listened to. In

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the post-colonial period, he describes the image of accomplished women who are trusted. The women who make important decisions for the well-being of their communities and show the way to live in stable communities.

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