



## RESEARCH ARTICLE



## DIMENSIONS OF NATIONALISM IN THE NOVELS OF NGUGI WA THIONG'O

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## ABSTRACT



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This paper has examined various attributes of nationalism in the two novels, *The River Between* (1965) and *Petals of Blood* (1977). African nationalism is a subjective sense of kinship or harmony held by African people. It is an emotion rooted in common racial heritage, cultural standards, indigenous institutions, and historical experiences. The novels of Ngugi have covered the entire pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial span of Kenya. These novels have portrayed Kenya's cultural, social, political, and economic realities brooding with nationalism. The awareness of nationalism has been a prevalent notion in African fiction writings due to the advent of colonisers who tried to impose their missionary culture and ideology on natives. The novel *The River Between* is set against the backdrop of colonialism and depicts its aftermath in Kenya. This novel also explores the political theme of national movement and independence. *Petals of Blood* contains historical and revolutionary aspects of Kenyan society. This novel is a mordant critique of corrupt and impaired national rule in Kenya after independence. These two novels of Ngugi importune themes of nationalism, Afro-centric ideology, and the indigeneity of Africa. This research paper has applied interdisciplinary and analytical modes of study with the help of various post-colonial and post-modernist theories to validate the proposed argument.

**Keywords:** Nationalism, Kenya, Colonialism, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Post-colonial



## INTRODUCTION

Nationalism developed as a political and intellectual movement that was embraced by a wide range of social elites in the majority of nations that experienced some sort of direct colonial domination. Diverse nationalist leaders shared a desire to be free from colonial oppression and create an independent nation-state with a clear, cohesive national identity. However, after the goal of freedom was attained, decisive inclinations threatened the bond that had been created throughout the independence movement. This, in turn, makes it impossible to maintain the once-unifying movement. Kenyan scholar and thinker, Atieno Odhiambo, has acknowledged the importance and relevance of nationalism, particularly in the African context, by saying:

As a force in human history, nationalism has had to accommodate concepts, ideals and practices not readily compatible with its tenets. It sits as uneasily with class and ethnic particularism as it does with egalitarianism; it can be reconciled with neither autocratic dictatorships nor with democratic space. Nationalism, more particularly African nationalism, has been set in idealistic terms as a desirable goal and an integrative process. A political party and visionary leadership have always been held up as the necessary vehicles for its attainment (Odhiambo 19).

The romantic nature of nationalism does not imply that it is a less valuable philosophy. It is rather the reality that nationalism can assume a variety of shapes that conceal divisions within a population by striving to create a nation-state following the desires and aspirations of that population. It is impossible to reconcile the polarising nature of ethnicity with nationalism's capacity to mask divisions until after independence. However, nationalism is unable to maintain its suppression of ethnicity because of the polyglot nature of a state, which is a setting in which nationalism frequently plays a role. Ethnicity almost always emerges after the nation-state has been established. When nationalism gains the full support

of the populace, ethnicity, history and language spoken at home and patois are wholly irrelevant to the conception and achievement of the nation. However, nationalism in the peripheral globe is perceived with "checkered" eyes, undermining the history of colonial subjects' right to self-determination by denying them agency as asserted by Rupert Emerson:

[This history] ... has been a checkered one, both in its practical application and in the theorizing concerning it. It has tempted the sophisticate to display his wit by demonstrating the inadequacies and contradictions and many a statesman to shake their heads at its uncouth proportions. Neither the skeptical sophisticate nor the perturbed statesman, it should be immediately added, has had any significant bearing on the revolutionary drive of peoples to achieve their independent destiny in their own fashion. (Emerson 295)

The peripheral world's perception of nationalism impoliteness has the consequence of strengthening its epistemology. It makes a process that is fundamentally political and unhistorical. Renowned Indian scholar Partha Chatterjee sees the difference between Western and non-Western nationalism as:

This distinction is designed to explain how a profoundly liberal idea could be so distorted as to produce grossly illiberal movements and regimes. It does so by constructing a dichotomy between a normal and special type. The normal is the classical, the orthodox, the pure type. This type of nationalism shares the same material and intellectual premises with the European Enlightenment, with industry and the idea of progress, and with modern democracy. Together they constitute a historical unity, defined with a fair degree of clarity in both geographical and chronological terms. This gives the liberal-nationalist his pragmatic form in which nationalism goes hand-in-hand with reason, liberty and progress. The



special type emerges under somewhat different historical circumstances. It is therefore complex, impure, often deviant; it represents a difficult and contradictory historical process which can be very 'disturbing.' (Partha 03)

## DISCUSSION

The modernist notion of what achieving nationhood would entail somewhat encouraged Ngugi wa Thiong'o, an ambitious Kenyan writer of Gikuyu descent. Early in his career as a journalist, he wrote articles that mirrored his well-considered convictions, "He came out against racialism, tribalism, regionalism and censorship, and championed such causes as old age pensions, enlightened peasant agriculture, strong labour unions, national policy planning, and women's rights." (Lindfors 23) There are constants in Ngugi's corpus despite changes in ideologies throughout time. His works are infused with genuine care for the common person. From the beginning, he writes about "the common man" or the rural poor, rather than the metropolitan class. Ngugi nearly always expresses a desire for political unanimity. This desire for political unification was concentrated on the ethnic tensions that nationalism had momentarily subdued, since the state was already a legally recognised possibility on December 12, 1963. As Ngugi said in his non-fiction book *Homecoming*, as a nation and its diversity:

To look from the tribe to a wider concept of human association is to be progressive. When this begins to happen, a Kenyan nation will be born. It will be an association, not of different tribal entities, but of individuals, free to journey to those heights of which they are capable. Nationalism, by breaking some tribal shells, will be a help. (Ngugi 24)

Nationalism, especially in the context of post-colonial Africa, is a recurring theme in his novels. In Ngugi's earlier novels, the notion of the nation was closely associated with a singular leader, reminiscent of a Kenyatta-like patriarch. In contrast, his more recent works present a somewhat rigid interpretation of the

nation as being comprised of 'the people' who are guided by patriots and united by a common history and cultural heritage. Nevertheless, liberation is still perceived as occurring within the framework of a Kenyan nation-state. For Ngugi, the establishment of a genuinely national culture, along with the reconstruction of people's historical narrative, language and identity, is essential for the restoration of oppressed groups. It appears that his revolutionary concepts have served to strengthen and more accurately articulate his vision of Kenyan nationalism.

Ngugi envisions a revolutionary future that paradoxically relies on participation in a seemingly uniform culture rooted in Gikuyu myths and history. Furthermore, he singularly defines the nation, portraying it as a unified people's nation, where other ethnic groups and societal sectors within Kenya are relegated to a subordinate status. This commitment to a monolithic understanding of national identity and authority poses a significant risk of undermining Ngugi's stated ideals of joyful populist expression and the self-actualisation of the people. The harmony in the polyphony of Kenyan cultures that he advocates ultimately transforms into a national uniformity, which raises concerns regarding some of his most cherished goals. On a nationalist level, this includes his initiative to promote the Indigenous cultures and languages of Kenya, as well as his dedication to elevating the role of women in the national struggle for social emancipation. Despite his persuasive rhetoric to the country, Ngugi in several critical respects inadvertently supports the authoritarian and patriarchal structures of the neocolonial regime he aims to dismantle.

In Ngugi's *The River Between*, nationalism is a pivotal theme, particularly in its relationship with cultural identity, colonialism and the quest for political autonomy. The narrative illustrates a profound sense of cultural nationalism with the characters' identities intricately linked to their Kikuyu heritage and customs. The conflict between individuals striving to maintain their traditional practices and those who adopt Christianity and Western ideals mirrors the larger colonial fight for cultural self-determination.



Simon Gikandi a prominent critic of Ngugi has a view about the historical relevance of this novel; "Indeed what appears in novels such as *The River Between* to be a precolonial history, is only history (in the modern sense of world) to the extent that it is appropriated to counter the culture of colonialism and its historiography." (Gikandi 16).

The customary service of circumcision serves as a significant point of contention between individuals such as Kabonyi, who fervently advocate for the preservation of Kikuyu traditions and Joshua, who endorses Christian principles and rejects these customs. Ngugi employs this conflict to represent the broader struggle for cultural identity and preserving Kikuyu heritage amidst the pressure of Western influence. It is evident that when Muthoni, the elder daughter of Joshua, justifies her desire to be circumcised to her sister despite her parents' conversion to Christianity, "Nyambura, I want to be circumcised...look, please, 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 24-25)

The ridges of Kameno and Makuyu represent the terrain depicted in the novel and transcend mere physicality to embody cultural and spiritual significance. The safeguarding of this land, untouched by external forces, signifies a profound aspiration for artistic independence. The nationalistic echo in the novel pertains when Mugo wa Kibiro a native seer warns the people of Kenya about the arrival of colonisers, "Mugo wa Kibiro, that great Gikuyu seer of old, had been born there. And he had grown up seeing, visions of the future and speaking them to the many people who came to see and hear him...there shall come a people with clothes like butterflies." (Ngugi 02)

The colonial influence in Kenya entails introducing Western values, religious beliefs and systems of governance. Figures such as Waiyaki arise as leaders strive to reconcile traditional practices with modern influences, aiming to oppose colonial rule while incorporating certain elements of Western education to uplift their communities. It is visible in the context of Waiyaki. To him, "the white man's education was an instrument of enlightenment and advance if only

it could be used well." (Ngugi 116) Waiyaki's father also instructed him in his childhood, "learn all the wisdom and all the secrets of the white man. But do not follow his vices." (Ngugi 116)

A key theme associated with nationalism is the conflict between unity and division within the Kikuyu community. The rift between traditionalists (Kameno) and Christians (Makuyu) exemplifies the way colonialism disrupts indigenous societies. Waiyaki's challenge lies in reconciling these conflicting factions to pursue a nationalist agenda encompassing preserving culture and advancement. Waiyakai has said while defending himself, "I too am concerned with the purity of the tribe. I am also concerned with the growth and development of ridges. We cannot do this through hatred. We must be united, Christians and non-Christians, Makuyu or Kameno. For salvation of the hills lies in your hands." (Ngugi 124-125)

Ngugi's *The River Between* illustrates the challenging journey of cultural transformation, as the Kikuyu people grapple with the necessity of maintaining their traditions while also confronting the unavoidable impacts of colonialism and modernity. Ngugi employs this narrative to examine how cultural tensions influenced individuals, communities, and the wider socio-political environment in Kenya throughout the colonial period. M. Sivasasipoorani points out the conflict and complications portrayed in the novel, "Ngugi's *The River Between* recaptures the stage of the split in African consciousness when it had drunk in full the pain of the hurt and finally decided to look the white world in the face. It reflects both the reaction and uprootedness of a culturally unhinged Africa." (Sivasasipoorani 2017)

In Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*, nationalism is prominently featured, examined through various aspects and complexities of post-colonial society. The narrative investigates the social, political, and economic challenges the characters face, mirroring the larger national quest for genuine independence and identity following the end of colonial domination. This was the first novel of Ngugi that unfolded the post-independent complexities of Kenya. As David Cook points out, "*Petals of Blood* is the first of



Ngugi's novels which is fairly and squarely about independence. *Petals of Blood* sums up Africa in English from its beginning to the present day." (David 202) This novel exposes the infused corruption and degradation of Kenyan leaders and businessmen as Durgesh Vitthal Borse points out:

The story of Kenya after independence was also the story of exploitation. Now the agents are different. The independent Kenya is ruled by indigenous ruled by indigenous bourgeois. They oppressed and exploited the financially weak faction of the Kenyan society. The new rulers have deprived people from history too. They have been maintaining a colonial policy of negating common lot from history. (Borse 108)

As Eustace Palmer says in his review of Ngugi wa Thiongo's *Petals of Blood*, "of all African novels it probably presents the most comprehensive analysis so far of the evils perpetrated in independent African society by black imperialists." (Palmer 228)

Ngugi underscores the significance of reclaiming African cultural identity, which the impacts of colonialism have compromised. In *Petals of Blood*, the characters confront the imposition of Western values and educational systems, leading to a disconnection from their African heritage. Ngugi critiques the colonial education framework that has estranged individuals from their own cultural roots. Through the experiences of characters such as Munira and Karega, the narratives illustrate the consequences of this alienation and the yearning to reconnect with African traditions, languages and beliefs. When Munira was going through the books of history, and political science written by Western writers he found that, "To the learned minds of the historians, the history of Kenya before colonialism was one of the wanderlust and pointless warfare between peoples. The learned once they never wanted to confront the meaning of colonialism and of imperialism. When they touched on it, it was only to describe acts of violent resistance as grisly murders..." (Ngugi 237) Munira was utterly disappointed with the description and detailing of Kenyan history and politics in books, "He turned

away in despair: maybe it was his ignorance and his lack of university learning. What of the resistance of African peoples? What of all the heroes traversing the whole world of black peoples? Was that only in his imagination?" (Ngugi 238)

In the novel *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi uses myth as the medium to depict the concept of creation in the Gikuyu community. In the Gikuyu myths, Earth has been considered the sister of the moon. Rain, Sun and Wind are trying to woo Earth. But it has been believed that Rain is married to earth because whenever it rains earth becomes fertile. The raindrops are considered the sperm of rain. In the novel importance of rain has been portrayed in African society. It is a belief of Gikuyu society that man has sprang from the womb of earth and day he will return to earth when he will die. The importance of land has been explored in this myth. Ngugi explains these myths in the novel, "The older folk told stories of how Rain, Sun and Wind went wooing Earth, sister of moon, and it was Rain..." (Ngugi 96)

The village of Ilmorog symbolises resistance and safeguarding cultural heritage. The novel depicts the struggle to uphold traditional lifestyles in the face of advancing capitalist development, which represents the ongoing influence of the West, even in the post-independence era. The novel carries a history where the past, present and future consist incessantly. The past, present and future are dynamically interrelated to both the individual and community. Karega, one of the important figures of the novel focuses on the knowing of the past which is interpreted as history, "to understand the present...you must understand the past. To know where you are, you must know where you came from, don't you think?" (Ngugi 127-28)

Ngugi was very much involved in the nationalistic politics of Kenya. In this novel, he dealt with many political issues for the betterment of the administration and government. Apollo Obnoyo Amoko has said about the political influence in *Petals of Blood*:





My ideas about *Petals of Blood* may seem counterintuitive. After all, the village of Ilmorog seems to be at the nerve center of the novel while the postcolonial university is situated at the margins. But the margins of this text define and determine its ostensible center. Actually and conceptually, the novel is framed not by the politics of everyday national life, but rather by the debates internal to the university regarding the production of historical and literary knowledge in post-colonial Kenya. (Amoko 70)

One of the predominant themes in the novel is the examination of neo-colonialism, wherein former colonial powers continue to exert control over the economy through local elites. Ngugi highlights the economic subjugation of the Kenyan populace even after achieving independence, as land remains concentrated in the hands of affluent and corrupt leaders. The narrative illustrates the plight of peasants and labourers, symbolising the extensive exploitation of Kenya's resources by both foreign entities and the local bourgeoisie. Characters such as Wanja embody the economic discontent prevalent in the post-colonial landscape. Wanja's effort to thrive as an entrepreneur, coupled with her eventual involvement in corruption, exemplifies the difficulties encountered by the working class, who find themselves trapped between capitalist ambitions and a faltering nationalist agenda. But she mustered her courage and "she started building a huge wooden bungalow at the lower end of her shamba, some distance from the shanty town that was growing up..." (Ngugi 329) Through Wanja, Ngugi has signified that in modern Kenya a woman can establish her own business, "she went about her work without taking anybody into her confidence...it was a brave effort so soon after her double loss, people said." (Ngugi 329)

Ngugi critiques the inability of political leaders to deliver on the promises made during the independence movement. The narrative highlights the betrayal of nationalist principles by the ruling elite, who while having supplanted the colonial

oppressors, continue to exploit the populace. Karega's engagement in activism and union activities signifies a growing disenchantment with post-colonial governance and underscores the necessity for grassroots political initiatives. He embodies the vision of a more inclusive, people-oriented nationalism exhibited by the political elite. The interactions between characters and political figures expose the pervasive corruption within the government. This situation reflects the widespread disillusionment with Kenya's post-independence leaders, who rather than, fostering a new era of equality and justice, perpetuate the exploitative systems established during colonial rule.

The novel explores the relationship between nationalism and class dynamics. In post-colonial Kenya, society is stratified by class, where a small elite benefits from independence while the vast majority continues to live in poverty. Ngugi highlights the struggles of the working class in Ilmorog, whom the nationalist agenda has marginalised. Characters such as Abdulla, Wanja Munira and Karega embody various aspects of the class conflict, demonstrating how nationalism has neglected the requirements of the impoverished. Ngugi also envisages that the learnings of history are crucial in making any nation and could shape up the nationalistic approach as Karega believes, "The true lesson of history was this: that the so-called victims, the poor, the downtrodden, the masses, had always struggled with their spears and arrows, with their hands and songs of courage and hope, to end their oppression and exploitation." (Ngugi 360)

The narrative's critique of land ownership and economic disparity underscores the urgent need for a more radical and inclusive nationalism that emphasises the welfare of the broader population rather than catering to the interests of a privileged few.

In Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*, the Mau-Mau resistance is portrayed as a heroic and pivotal struggle against colonial oppression, though its legacy becomes complicated in the post-independence era. Ngugi presents the Mau-Mau movement as a central symbol of anti-colonial resistance, fighting for land,



freedom, and dignity in the face of British exploitation and brutality. Ngugi employs the historical context of Mau-Mau resistance against colonial domination as a framework for the novel. He delves into the unfulfilled aspirations of the anti-colonial movement, which initially sought to restore land and dignity to the Kenyan populace but was ultimately appropriated by the elites following independence.

Mukami, Karega's girlfriend, expresses her inability to continue their relationship as her father discovered that Karega's brother was a Mau-Mau activist. Mukami says, "You see, my father has discovered our love...he says that your brother used to be a Mau-Mau...and it was he who must have led a gang into our home and who cut off his right ear after accusing him of helping white men..." (Ngugi 261) Even Karega is shocked to hear that his brother was a Mau-Mau activist so he confronts his mother and she tells him, "Nding'uri. He carried bullets for fighters and he was hanged. Don't ask me any more. I am not a judge over the actions of men. We are all in the hands of God." (Ngugi 261)

## CONCLUSION

*The River Between* delves into multiple aspects of nationalism, emphasising the conflict between traditional values and modern influences, the importance of cultural preservation, and the opposition to colonial rule. Ngugi wa Thiong'o employs the interpersonal conflicts among characters to illustrate the wider nationalistic movements that were emerging in Kenya during the era of colonisation. In *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi offers a comprehensive critique of nationalism, highlighting its shortcomings and inconsistencies in the context of post-colonial Kenya. By exploring the experiences of his characters, Ngugi reveals the disparity between the lofty ideals of nationalism, such as freedom, equality and self-determination and the grim realities of neo-colonial exploitation, corruption and social disparity. The narrative advocates for a more profound and inclusive form of nationalism that meets the economic, cultural and political aspirations of every citizen.

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