


IMPACT OF COLONIALISM IN NGUGI WATHIONG'O'S SELECT NOVELS
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Abstract :

NgugiwaThiong'o is a renowned literary figure from East Africa. He is known for his description of colonial issues in his works especially in his novels. He has exposed how the British colonial education annihilated native language, native culture and native identity. This paper examines how the Britishers annihilated native elements and the serious consequences of it. During the colonial and the post-colonial period, native people suffered from 'white ache'. According to Nyamnjoh, "Whiteache is black man celebrating the negation of himself"(65). Native people want to identify themselves with white people and hate their own black identity. Native people feel that the Britishers are superior in terms of their culture and education, because they have introduced the knowledge of literature, science and technology to them in the colonial school. Ngugi in all of his novels highlights the impact of colonialism. In Weep Not, Child, Ngugi describes in a detailed manner how the native land and native labour have been taken by the Britishers. This inhuman act of Britishers paves way for the alienation among the native people. In The River Between, Ngugi is highly critical of Britisher's conversion process. The Britishers introduced their own Christian religion in Kenya and other African countries in order to destroy the native people's religion, native unity and native identity and to dominate the native people. In A Grain of Wheat, Ngugi pinpoints the stark reality in Kenya. He also exposes how the native men have been tortured in the concentration camps as their fellow country men have formed Kenya's Land and Freedom Army (Mau Mau) in order to liberate Kenya from the clutches of colonialism. All the men in Kenya have been taken to concentration camps and women including children have been allowed to stay in their homes. More restrictions have been laid before them. Women were beaten severely and forcefully raped and resulted in their inhuman death. During the colonial period, native suffered a lot due to the various inhuman practices employed by the Britishers in Kenya.

Key words: : Colonialism, Mau - Mau, religion, Conversion, alienation, liberation, identity)

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Introduction :

NgugiwaThiong'o ,a renowned Kenyan novelist,playwright, essayist, a post colonial critic and a short-story writer is the spokesman for his Kenyan people and has been hailed as a chronicler of Kenya's modern history. In his novels,



Weep Not, Child, The River Between and A Grain of Wheat discusses in a detailed manner the insurgency of Mau Mau, Kenya's Land and Freedom Army to protest against the British imperial rule during the 1950's. Ngugi vehemently opposed Christianity, Colonialism and European influences in Kenya and also in other African countries. Even Ngugi deserted his Christian name and started writing under the Gikuyu name Ngugiwa Thiong'o after the publication of A Grain of Wheat to felicitate the decolonization process.

Taking Away the Land and Labour of the Dominated by the Dominating :

Weep Not, Child deals with the story of a young boy, Njoroge. This novel also highlights the Mau Mau insurgency which took place in 1950's in Kenya to cope with colonial repression. The novel highlights the loss of land. The land is the compact with an ancestral deity. Land is the myth of the people. Land is treated as the body of their deity. Native Kenyan people feel that losing their connection with the land is losing their connection with their Gods. The people in Kenya maintain a close contact with their ancestral land. Land is referred to as language, individuality and independence. Mau Mau insurgents express native people's attachment to the land. Mau Mau resistance collapses the whole family of Njoroge. Even his dream of coming up in life by pursuing the Western education has been shattered as his family members has joined Mau Mau to resist the British rule in Kenya. Ben Okri in his introduction to *Weep Not, Child* has rightly pointed out the implications of colonial rule in the following manner, "The realities of Kenya are all in *Weep Not, Child*: the divisions in society, the root of betrayals, the problematic question of the land, the never - ending implications of colonial rule"(xv)

Ngugi has highlighted in this novel that the Britishers have taken the land and labour of the native people. In their own land, the native land owners were rendered hopeless as *ahoi* (landless farmers). The young native people were forced to fight for the Britishers in the World War I and II. In these two big wars, the native people were forced to lose their limbs and lives for the sake the Colonial masters who subjugated the native people. The narrator pinpoints the native people's bitter experience in the battle field, "People did not know how big the war had been because most of them had never seen a big war had been because most of them had never seen a big war fought with planes, poison, fire, and bombs - bombs that would finish a country just like that when they were dropped from the air" (WNC 5)

In Africa, those who own land is treated as rich and the person who is having much money without land is not considered rich. The narrator explains the tendency of the native people in the following way, "Naganga was rich. He had land. Any man who had was considered rich. If a man had plenty of money, many motor cars, but no land, he could never be counted as rich. Amam who went with tattered clothes but had at least an acre of red earth was better off than the man with money."(20)

Annihilation of Native Culture and Language :

Ngugi's novels primarily discuss various types of such exploitation in different spheres of the life of the colonized, such as religion, language, education system, politics, traditional practices etc. Amidst various annihilation activities of the colonized, Ngugi chiefly criticizes the practice of conversion by the colonizers in his novels. He sees the act of



conversion of the names of the natives to Christian names as the beginning of the annihilation of identity. In his *Barrel of a Pen: Resistance to Repression in Neo-Colonial Kenya*, Ngugi condemns the British administrator for his act of annihilating native identity by giving the Christian names to the native converts. One's name is a symbol of one's identity. African converts have been forced to give up their African names and have to take Christian names:

...give himself such good Christian names such as Smith, Welensky, Verwoerd, Robert, Julius, Ironmonger, Winterbottom, Elizabeth, Mary, Margaret. He does not realize that this business of getting new names has roots in slavery where the slave dealer branded the slave with his own mark and gave him his name so that he would forever be known as that master's property. (94)

The anguish of the colonial subject over the destruction of cultural identity is expressed in the "Introduction" to Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*; "Colonialism was rape, a criminal act, not masturbation, as some apologists rationalized it: it dispossessed, dislocated, and destroyed people's idea of themselves by trampling on their culture and trying to replace it with the colonizer's culture" (Isegawa, xii). From this frustrated articulation one can understand that the destruction and damage caused by colonialism have not just affected the physical plane but the mental plane of the natives so severely. In his early novels, *The River Between* and *Weep Not, Child*, Ngugi deal with the condition of Kenya before independence and his other novels present both the colonial and post colonial realities.

Among the various factors that annihilate the identity and culture of the native people, according to Ngugi, language is the deadliest weapon. In *Decolonising the Mind*, he says categorically that the colonizers have employed language as the means of spiritual slavery. British imperial power has annihilated the native culture and native language by forcibly imposing their culture and language among the colonial subjects. In colonial schools, students' achievement in the English language is appreciated. Students have been discouraged from employing the native language as a medium for communication. The Britishers have called the native people barbaric and thus made them feel that their language and culture are inferior and uncivilized. In the name of civilizing the native people, they have annihilated the native culture and native language. Ngugi upbraids Britisher's use of the English language for the annihilation of the indigenous language; "language was the most important vehicle through which that power fascinated and held the soul prisoner. The bullet was the means of physical subjugation. The language was the means of spiritual subjugation." (Decolonising 9).

In *The River Between*, Livingstone, Headmaster of the Christian missionary school in Siriana has evicted the native students who have undergone circumcision practice in order to annihilate native cultural practice. Kohn and McBride in their book discuss the importance of circumcision practice. They feel that circumcision practice is indispensable in establishing gender identity and developing ethnic identity, "female circumcision plays a role in establishing gender identity and symbolically marking the difference between the sexes. Also, the operations often define or enhance ethnic identity" (48).

Inflicting Physical Violence on the Native Inmates in the Concentration Camps :

As Kenya's Land and Freedom Army is formed to drive away the Britishers from the native soil, the Britishers have declared an Emergency to subdue the active Mau Mau warriors. The native men have been rounded up and taken



to concentration camps. The inmates have been forced to confess the oath and to give details about Mau Mau. Ngugi has highlighted the issues related to detention camps in his novel, *A Grain of Wheat*. In this novel, the narrator recounts how Gikonyo a carpenter has been taken and separated from his beloved wife, Mumbi, “One day the arm of the Whiteman touched Mumbi’s door. She had forcefully waited for the day, indeed had armed herself against its deadliness. But when the time came, she found herself against its deadlines. But when the time came, she found herself powerless to save her man.”(AGOW 11). Gikonyo’s arrest has terrorized Mumbi and the terror seized the whole of Thabai village.

The detainees have been abandoned in the desert. The voice of men from the outside world would not reach the inmates of the detention camps. During the noon, the hot sun would scorch them and even the detainees would be buried in the hot sand. The traces of their graves would be erased forever. Active, vibrant, and vigorous members have been tortured and meted out inhuman treatment in order to demoralize and demotivate them. The narrator has illustrated this inhuman treatment through the character, Gatu in the same novel mentioned earlier. He has been an active member of Mau Mau. He has been a great oath administrator in Nyeri. He has wandered one place to another on foot to gather the forces for the freedom struggle and motivated more young men to join the Mau Mau. He has talked about the freedom fighters of other countries like Gandhi and Napoleon to enliven their freedom spirit.

Britishers want to subdue the freedom spirit of Gatu. So, he is confined in a cell, all by himself in the Yala detention camp. For days he is not exposed to the sun and not allowed to speak to anyone. He has been given food once in a day and allowed to take food in the dark only. The other detainees in the camp are assigned the hard task of breaking stones in a quarry five miles from Yala. The broken stones are meant for building houses for new British officers and wardens. The detainees and the others are forced to walk through hot sand in a flat with cactus and tiny thorny trees with fewer leaves. There is no shade of a tree to take rest under the hot sun. Gatu is forced to confess the oath, but he is not willing to it. As a result, he is hanged against the wall of his cell by the soldiers. The commandant warns the other inmates by pointing out the merciless murder of Gatu, “Guilt, you see! Unless you confess, you will end up like him” (108). Gatu’s murder has forced Gikonyo to confess oath. Despite his confession, he is not released from the camp. In the detention camp, the active Mau Mau members are tortured, murdered in order to warn other native inmates who aspire to liberate their native country from the clutches of British imperial power by following the footsteps of the Mau Mau warriors.

Ngugi’s *The River Between* exposes the Britishers’ attack on the native cultural practices and the environment. In this novel, Ngugi explores the impact of the White settlement on the Gikuyu village. Because of European hegemony, Native rituals and customs have lost their significance. The native people are forced to believe that native rituals will not satisfy their spiritual needs. Many native people are converted to Christianity and attracted to Western Education. Rice study reveals the importance of tribal customs. The narrator in the novel has rightly said that the survival of Tribal people is possible only when they preserve the native religious practices and native educational systems which



are interwoven, “The tribe’s customs and rituals are central to maintaining and preserving its identity and purity. Together, the tribe’s religion and educational system embody the spiritual life of the people”(12). *The River Between* describes the turmoil resulting from a 1929 decree by the Church of Scotland Mission prohibiting circumcised individuals from attending mission schools. The Church of Scotland Mission is represented by Reverend Livingstone. Attending some of the dances on the eve of circumcision, he is horrified. The songs and the actions he has observed made him come to the conclusion that these people are immoral through and through. Circumcision has to be rooted out if there is to be any hope of salvation for these people.

Inflicting Physical and Sexual Violence on Native Women during Emergency :

During the Emergency, the soldiers arrested the native men and took them to the detention camps. The native people are asked to move into the new village. If anybody fails to vacate their old homes, their houses are burnt down. The house of Mumbi’s mother is burnt down by home guards. All the huts in Thabai village have been burnt down and the walls of the old village have tumbled down.

The family members, especially the wives of these rebels are subjected to sexual harassment at their homes by the British Soldiers and the home guards. Men have been sent to detention camps, women have been left alone and become prey to the sexual advances of Home guards. This atrocity is illustrated through Kihika’s ladylove, Wambuku. She is exposed to sexual torture and she has died in a pathetic manner. When Kihika leaves Wambuku, she is a pregnant woman of three or four months. She is not ready to forgive him as he has left her as he goes to fight against the Britishers. Kihika has been betrayed and hanged on a tree. She is unable to bear the loss of her lover. She is affected mentally. So, she has given herself in sex voluntarily to home guards and soldiers in order to destroy herself. As once Wambuku rejected the advances of a home guard, in the trench that home guard has beaten her severely to death in order to take revenge against her,” But she refused, so it is said, the advances of this particular home guard, who got his chance for revenge during the trench. She never recovered from that beating and died three months later, in pregnancy.’ (133). This shows that the colonizers have no sympathy even for women. They have treated Wambuku, the wife of Kihika, so cruelly who is not directly involved in any activities. The only cause for her ill-treatment is that she is the wife of Kihika.

Conclusion :

NgugiwaThiong’o expresses his disapproval of Britisher’s annihilation process of native language, native identity, and native cultural practices. At the earliest stage of colonialism, the Britishers took away the native land and native labour. To annihilate the native cultural practice, in the Christian Missionary school, the Britishers have eliminated the students who did circumcision rituals. In order to dilute the freedom spirit of the Mau Mau warriors. The members of Mau Mau warriors were separated from their men and taken to concentration camps. In the concentration camp, native men were tortured to confess their oath. In the absence of Men, women were forced to dig trenches and the wife of MauMau warriors were forcefully raped to death or beaten to death.



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