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[www.the-criterion.com](http://www.the-criterion.com)  
[criterionejournal@gmail.com](mailto:criterionejournal@gmail.com)

## Ethnic Belief in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's Novels

**Sathyapriya.K**

Ph.D Scholar

Sri G.V.G Visalakshi College For Women

Udumalpet, Tamil Nadu

The association of mortal with the perennial land and the mutational customs exist until the survival of the last soul. The fabricated life of human with the country, plants and beasts are not less considerable with that of the customs and the beliefs. The human has well-knitted his relationship with the land and ethos from the ancient days. People those who have affiliated themselves to the attained culture steadfastly stand in the same or at times switch to some other. It is moderately easy to watch the human bounded with the country and customs. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o has concentrated on the life of the tribe, how they make their difference among each other based on the demands, their contribution to the maintenance of chosen habitat and their variation in culture, customs, rites and rituals. His novels *The River Between* and *Weep Not, Child* clearly portray the people's attachment to their land and their belief in the Gikuyu customs. Whereas in *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi has presented the deterioration of the once rich land.

*The River Between* seeks to discover the cultural ethos of their respective societies. Ngugi attempts to explore and identify the roots of their societies and their socio-religious contexts. The novel depicts the texture of life of the Gikuyu people in central Gikuyuland of Kenya. The primary issue in the novel is the significance of land which is not only the source of livelihood, but also that forges the spiritual bonds with the people. People believed that Gikuyu and Mumbi were the original parents of the clan who moved around the places of Kameno. They also evidenced the presence of Gikuyu and Mumbi on a small hill surrounded by bushes on the banks of the river Honia in ancient days. The Gikuyu people considered the 'sacred grove' holy and held in great awe and reverence. The reference about the African first men Gikuyu and Mumbi is made in *The River Between*, as well as *Weep Not, Child*.

The land was offered as a gift to the people by Murungu, the Gikuyu God and the myth in Gikuyu creation. The author has not straightly dealt with the myth but it is found in the form of symbols and metaphors. Murungu told the people "This land I give to you, O man and woman. It is yours to rule and till, you and your posterity." (*The River Between*, 2) In the beginning, the people of Kenya led a happy, peaceful and united life without any fear of meddlers from outside. The people were closely bounded together by their ancient traditions and customs which closely attached them to their land. The ignorance of the Africans and the strong belief in their impenetrable nature of the hills paved way for the White men to invade Kenya and they could not forestall the incoming invaders from settling down with their religious missionary at Siriana. "Who from the outside can make his way to the hills?" (*The River Between*, 9) The God sent leaders Waiyaki, the clairvoyant, Wachiori, the warrior and Kamiri, the magician became strangers to the hills, while Kameno is proud of these legendary figures.

New birth is an important factor to both Gikuyu and Christians, where the rituals practiced are diametrically opposite. Joshua, the converted Christian feels completely free from his sin as he has surrendered himself to the god. "He felt a new creature. That is always what he said at home

and in church. If anybody is in Christ, behold, he is a new creature.” (The River Between, 34) The Gikuyu youth always look forward to initiation and circumcision. Their life is governed by rites and rituals of their religion.

The seasons were rich in those days and the crops like maize and beans grew in plenty. It was during the season of Njahi people had long rains. The rain was so favorable to them and they were sure about the good harvest. Ngugi admires his native land when he sees the peas and beans bursting into life which gave colour and youth to the land. He does not find his women cultivating at the fields but he feels that they speak to the crops and the soil in a secret language. Not only the women rejoiced during the seasons but also the cows and goats got back its life. The two groups, Christians in Makuyu and the tribes of Kameno offered prayers to their God and gave sacrifice to Murungu.

The life of people who delighted in their land slowly changed due to the break in seasons. The rain which was good at once failed frequently and even when it fell it destroyed the land and the crops. On such a rainy season, Waiyaki noticed the rain, “Carrying away the soil, Corroding, eating away the earth. Stealing the land” (The River Between, 76) Ngugi, in the beginning of the novel, has said that the ‘sleeping lions’ would never wake, but now it seems to cry as the downpour of the rain has eroded away the soil everywhere. The earth was much important to the people and Waiyaki felt angry with the rain. He thought that he would fight with the rain if he could do it, because the drops of water turned to filth and mud. As of the contradiction in human, there are some in nature too. People long to have rain if it fails and curses it when it turns to be a flood. There was a cry that “the soil no longer answered the call and prayers of the people.” (The River Between, 92) Ngugi says that the nature decides whether it is a blessing or a curse to be sent to the people and the land.

The young boy Waiyaki, is not allowed to play the role of Demi na Mathathi, the legendary heroes of the tribe. The Demi’s cut the trees at the dense forest and made it worth for cultivation. Often they sacrificed cattle, sheep and goats to Murungu and had intercourse with the ancestral spirits. Waiyaki asks Koina to state the reason for why he cannot be a Demi. The other boys said, “You are not ready for circumcision. You are not born again.” The young boy’s opinion is a reflection of what is believed by adults. Waiyaki could not accept the boys and says “But I am Demi.” (The River Between, 13) Immediately he involves in the act of cutting down a tree with all his strength. Waiyaki feels the need to be born again. The dissension between the ridges takes a serious turn on the issue of circumcision. Several aspects are there in the circumcision of both the sexes. It is a sort of initiation into womanhood and manhood. The Gikuyu considered it as an emotional issue. The dripping of the blood at the time of circumcision on the banks of the river Honia, links them to the land emotionally and spiritually.

On the eve of circumcision, the tribes gather together to rejoice in the ceremony. The dance is being held for all young, old, men, women and children at an open air in Kameno. People blow horns, beat the broken tins and use whistles to the rhythm of the song and dance. Everyone is excited and they lose themselves in the magic of dance. Some danced in a circle and the men shrieked, jumped and shouted with ecstasy. All men and women of tribe consider this to be the moment of enjoyment. Ngugi finds the age and youth to be one at this time and they are free on the night. He feels that the rituals like these might bring forth unity among people. Muthoni, the

daughter of Joshua, rebels against her father to get circumcised liberally at Kameno, the place of her aunt Njeri. She admires the best in both the worlds of Christian faith and the tribal faith and she wishes for a blend in two contradictory faiths. Muthoni says Nyambura that, she would like to be a real woman and states her reason for the need of circumcision. Nyambura is found to be speechless at the wish of her sister Muthoni. According to her “A daughter of God should never let even a thought of circumcision come to her mind.” (The River Between, 27) She reasons out Muthoni by saying that they are Christians who follow the ways of the white people. Moreover the missionaries oppose the circumcision of girls and it is the work of the devil.

The novelist portrays Waiyaki as a kind of saviour who is believed to lead the people while the character Muthoni tries to act as a reconciling agent who has faith in Christ and the same while wish to grow in the tribe. Muthoni joins the ritual of circumcision at the behest of her inner voice and also she believes in her father’s faith and sees Christ while dying. Everyone who underwent circumcision has been cured but for Muthoni. The conflicting loyalties bring her division and death. Waiyaki reminds the people that they belong to one family and they will become strong and prosperous through their unity. On his summon to the crowd Waiyaki decides “He shall show them the way; he shall lead them.” (The River Between, 168) Waiyaki is unlike Chege who was deep in his own religion. He had some love towards Christian precepts also. He sees good things in Christianity and the native customs and wishes for their integration.

When Muthoni is visited by her sister, she says “You too will have to make a choice one day.” (The River Between, 58) This is not a statement of Muthoni, but Ngugi himself has stated his wish through the words of the girl. Ngugi says that everyone’s ‘choice’ is needed to exercise in one’s life in relation to one’s community or society. Muthoni feels appease for she is able to yoke her pagan rites with Christian faith and says Nyambura “I am still a Christian, see, a Christian in the tribe.” (The River Between, 61) Her last words to Waiyaki remains as an answer to the question of the people which they do not understand, “tell Nyambura I see Jesus. And I am a woman, beautiful in the tribe ....” (The River Between, 61)

Joshua, Nyambura and Muthoni’s father, was against the initiation rites and particularly about the female circumcision. Indulging in circumcision ceremonies is an unforgivable sin and those who involve in the act are sinners to Joshua. He thinks that, even his wedding with a circumcised woman to be sinful and prays to god to forgive him. He shares his dejection with his wife Miriamu “I wish you had not gone through this rite.” (The River Between, 35) Joshua determines to be a ‘man of God’ and a man who executes ‘God’s justice’. He prays to God asking that the sinners should leave their ways “O, God, look at their preparations, O, God, why don’t you descend on their wicked generation and finish their evil ways? Circumcision is coming. Fight by me, Oh Lord.” (The River Between, 37) Joshua’s wife Miriamu was a woman who always loved peace and injected her children to obey their father to avoid tension at home. Her attitude towards life is to do what the master of the house says. She believed that it is religion “She had learnt the value of Christian submission” while “the true Gikuyu woman was sleeping.” (The River Between, 39)

People proclaimed several reasons for the death of Muthoni. Her own father curses her for having disobeyed him “Anything cursed here on earth would also be cursed in heaven. Let that be a warning to those who rebelled against their parents and the law of God.” (The River

Between, 62) In Siriana, the Christians considered the act as a ‘barbarity of Gikuyu customs’ and Muthoni as an evil spirit who was sent to access faith. For the people of Gikuyu, Muthoni’s death took place not because of her wound but of the poison of the missionaries. Some people believed that it might be Joshua who has sent Muthoni for circumcision, to pacify the gods of the hills. Her death threatened them for they thought the rise of any new faith to be evil. The tribes take it as a warning for people to stick to their own ways of the ridges, wisdom of the land and its ritual and song. Later, the name of Muthoni became a legend.

Ngugi’s *The River Between* vitalizes the African consciousness when it floats in the pain of hurt and finally decides to face the white. The river Honia which was once the soul of Kameno and Makuyu and the life stream of man turned to be the valley that divides African life on the intellectual, political, religious and emotional levels. The people were neighbours but the difference in monotheist faith and polytheist faith separated them. The bitterness between them caused much hatred between the adults of each side. On the one side Ngugi has placed the Christianized Africa and on the other the Indigenous Africa.

As predicted by the elders of the tribe; land became a significant part of the colonial supremacy and power in *Weep Not, Child*. It established the White man’s economic control over the new country and paved way for his political control. The novel explores Gikuyu myths and legends. The Whites are hated more as they have taken over the land which belonged to the African people. In African culture the land is most important thing to them. As said in *The River Between*, here too it is believed that God gave this land to them and they must retrieve it from the Whites, who forcefully occupied their land. Cultural conflict plays an important part, because it highlights the feelings among the characters in the novel.

In *Weep Not, Child*, the town Kipanga is demonstrated as a ‘country of ridges’. There were many valleys and small plains where the big road passed through a valley. In and around the plains there were four valleys - the first two valleys set its way into the country of black people, while the other two divided the land of Black people from the White people. Just by the look at the lands a viewer could differentiate the black and White people’s land. “You could tell the land of black people because it was red, rough and sickly, while the land of the White settlers was green and was not lacerated into small strips.” (*Weep Not, Child*, 7) In correspondence to Kameno and Makuyu in *The River Between*, Kipanga too constitutes the ridges, plains and valleys and Indian traders had their business in the town. So many black people earned their living in a shoe factory where strikes were held for higher wages and the Indian traders became rich from the labour of the colonized. People of Kipanga rather than fertilizing their own land, were forced to work at the factories.

The story on the creation of the world and the man and woman is narrated by Ngotho. The African people believe that Kerinyaga is the place where the tree of God Mukuyu rose. Gikuyu and Mumbi, the first man and woman were put under this tree and land was gifted to them by Mukuyu. Njoroge, the believed saviour imagined the sun to rise and shine on a dark night. On the touch by the warmth of the holy tree he saw the fear, gloom and terror of the living things of the creator to melt away. Njoroge was too curious to know about the land that was gifted and he exclaimed “Where did the land go?” Ngotho too had several times asked the questions. The God Murungu did not want to shed ‘His blessed tears’ which make crops grow. The big drought

would have been sent to the land by evil ones, as the jealous rose in their mind on the prosperity of the children of Mumbi. Plague attacked the land, cattle were put to death and people too lost their lives. Everything occurred according to the prophecy of Mugo wa Kibiro. The land which was once fertile and proud seemed to be barren and the White men entered like the butterflies and took the land of the black people. The entry of Whites brought war between the countries and the Africans lost their brothers in it. When the men returned from the war they wanted to go back to their soil, but the land was seized by the settlers and many died hoping the White men to go.

Ngotho loved his land and particularly during the rainy seasons where everything was green and the flowers bloomed. Njahi season was the best one for the people at Kenya and the harvest was rich enough, "Grass in this country was green in wet weather and flowers bloomed white all over the land, especially in Njahi seasons." (Weep Not, Child, 14) Ngotho admired the dew-drops on the leaves and had a desire to touch the drops. But once when he touched it, he could find the drop losing its shape and melting to nothing. He felt shame on his own activity and moved away. He found Ngotho to be a genuine person as he felt for his fault, the White men who have interfered in the life of Africans move freely without any guilt for his misdeed. When Ngotho walked along the track the water ran off from the plants, he felt that he had lost something when the water vanished from the leaves. This is also similar to the fault of the Black people who let the Whites invade in spite of the caution of Mugo. Ngugi suffers a loss of this heritage which bound the family together linking the living and the dead in an unbroken continuity. Ngotho owed it "to the dead, the living and the unborn of his line, to keep guard over this shamba." (Weep Not, Child, 31) Chege in *The River Between*, Ngotho in *Weep Not, Child* and Nyambura in *Petals of Blood* are the representatives of their land who disclose that the land and the Africans are 'inseparable'. They are too much of a part of the land to be separated from it.

In Ngugi's portrayal of Mr. Howlands, he is drawn in a manner that he is much more than an official of the colonial power. He loves the land he owns in Kenya not just because it gives him wealth and power, but because it provides him anchorage. When he was frustrated during the war, it was the land which he used as an ailment. The love for the land of Howlands is not less than the love of Ngotho. "He seemed to worship the soil. At times he went on for days with nothing but a few cups of tea. His one pleasure was in contemplating and planning to which he had now given all his life." (Weep Not, Child, 39) He always had his thoughts only towards the 'shamba'. He counted everything in relation to the 'shamba'. He sticks on to his farm. "He could never get away from it for the farm was the woman whom he had wooed and conquered. He had to keep an eye on her lest she should be possessed by someone else." (Weep Not, Child, 31) Moreover it gave a sense of victory to him whenever he passed through it.

Ngugi in his novel *Weep Not, Child* has put his effort in interlacing the traditional Gikuyu myth and the Biblical tradition. He relates the beliefs of the traditional and acquired religion. Njoroge places faith in the Bible, he comes to understand equity, justice and righteousness. He could hardly find any contradiction between the essence of Christianity and his tribal love.

Ilmorog in *Petals of Blood* is a tiny remote place unexposed to modern civilization initially. The novel has a secular side to it with representation for the indigenous Gikuyu leadership; Abdulla, a Muslim and his orphaned brother named by him Joseph and Munira who hails from an

orthodox Christian background. It is significant to note that the first three parts of the novel are cast and captioned in terms of Biblical allusions. The captions of the first three parts are Walking; Towards Bethlehem and To be Born that convey not only the religious symbolism of the novel but also are expressive of the journey motif. To Be Born is striking at once as an adaptation of the phrase from “Second Coming” of W.B. Yeats. Ilmorog is a grief stricken village which is in Chiri District and it is in the Republic of Kenya. The elders of Ilmorog share their despondencies to Munira saying that they were scared of the grains of maize and beans if it would last them till the end of the Njahi rains. In those days the people of Kenya used to trade with China, India and Arabia. As of the African shops in Weep Not, Child, there came a Ramjeeh Ramlagoon Dharamashah. Everything which was sold there was brought from the African farmers at a cheap price during the harvest time.

Ngugi in *Petals of Blood* has chosen a barren, drought-stricken part of Kenya where the farmers and the herders fight for their land like their ancestors. Land is considered to be the most important part as of *The River Between* and *Weep Not, Child*. The author has presented the land as a soul, as salvation, as god, as the subject of prophecy, as the basis of cultural and political identity. To regain the land, the people were ready to do anything on their part. The flee of youth at Ilmorog is an incessant act which could be stopped by none. One could never expect the return of men who flee to the city but for duplicitous reasons. Karega is one of the migrants who oppose the villagers and their idea to send away Abdulla's donkey. The people thought that the donkey ate the grass which was enough for their cows and goats. Karega says that the people should know the magic to make the land yield at rain, so that they could save a few grains for when it is hot. They remembered the days when they gathered in groups and danced from village to village and sang hymns praising their founders at harvest-time. At present it has become common to see the vultures in the sky waiting for the carcasses of dead workers which was unusual in those days. After the days work, men were seen only under the family tree in the front yard sipping honey beer and narrating stories to children.

Demi na Mathathi, considered as the hero of the tribes in *The River Between*, and *Weep Not, Child* has a role to play in *Petals of Blood* also. Ndemi was the only reason for the clearance of forests and the growth of fields. He had learnt the medicinal values of the plants, roots and herbs which protected him and the peasants of Ilmorog. For the work done, the herdsmen who pass Ilmorog would give him a goat or two, in gratitude. The magic in the hands of Ndemi turned the forest to a “series of cultivated fields and a breed of tamed cows and goats.” (*Petals of Blood*, 146) Ilmorog flourished even after the days of Ndemi and he became the father of many sons and daughters and grandchildren. Ilmorog became a great trade center and people from all over visited the village to have their goods in exchange on market days. The community of the tillers hands alone was not raised but also men grew to be skilled workers in metal, pottery and stonework. They were deep in the knowledge of metal which reached the ears of the Arab and Portuguese invaders. The Africans called the European foreigners as ‘naked creatures’ and gave him maize and beans, sweet potatoes and yarns in exchange for calico and shiny beads. But all the things came to an end and there was a great change. Some of the old people at the delegation recollected the days, “Of a past. A great past. A past when Ilmorog, or all Africa, controlled its own earth.” (*Petals of Blood*, 151) Karega feels that he could find no use in thinking of the past. While drought, thirst and hunger hang over Ilmorog, he doesn't want to look back at the past

victory. But Wanja says, “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?” (Petals of Blood, 154)

New Ilmorog rose after the return of the pilgrims on a delegation. So many things came into existence: flickering neon light; bars, lodgings, groceries, permanent sales and Theng’eta in bottles; robberies, strikes, lockouts, murders; prostitution at night clubs; police station, police raids, police cells and everything were new. Even the rain fell after a month and Nyakinyua, Njuguna, Njogu, Ruoro and some others thought that God was held in response to the rain. People believed that Earth grew a swollen belly only after the rain touched it and the author had symbolically praised the rain and also calls the raindrops as the sperms of God and even human beings sprang from the womb of the mother Earth. All the women were waiting for ‘tomorrow’. The Ilmorogians were to witness the second harvest since their return from the city, which was the biggest one in the history of Ilmorog. During the Njahi season they earned the much. The circumcision ceremony was also about to take place following the harvest and few of the herd-boys were to be initiated into men. The major theme of circumcision which had a greater part to deal with in *The River Between* is dealt much less in *Petals of Blood*. Munira feels incomplete as he had been circumcised in hospital with the aid of a pain killer. As he couldn’t prove himself to be a man like Waiyaki, he feels that he does not belong to his age-group.

The initiation was to take place at Njogu’s house as his son Njenga was to be circumcised. Along with Njenga, Muriuki and few others were to face the knife. People from the nearby ridges were attracted by the dances on the eve of circumcision. Karega was one of the dancers who took part in general dances like Mumburo. Nyakinyua was good at singing and she praised someone, threw erotic abuse or straight celebrating words with ease. Njuguna and Nyakinyua were on the either sides on the battle in an erotic war of words and gestures and tones. When the crowd was waiting to see the first person to give way; Njuguna withdraws from the song. It’s because he doesn’t want the children of the same womb to fight one another. The shedding of blood at the circumcision ceremony has got a similar meaning to that of *The River Between*.

Theng’eta was the drink which was common in those days before the Europeans came. The plant grows wild in the plains and people drank it after finishing the day’s work, and on some special occasions like marriage, after the ceremony of circumcision and after the harvest. The poets and singers composed their words while they were drinking Theng’eta. But the art of making Theng’eta was known only to a few. Nyakinyua revives the lost tradition of brewing Theng’eta, being unaware that it would be Theng’eta marketed as commercial liquor that would alter old Ilmorog totally. In singing an evocative song of her people’s history and making them re-live that history, the singer and song merge. Munira feels that under the influence of Theng’eta, Nyakinyua transcends beyond the real into the mythical. Nyakinyua mortgages her land to the African Economic bank for loans to buy imported fertilizers, because of the debt she loses her ancestral lands which is to be auctioned by the bank. She was determined to keep her land for it symbolized her link with ‘her man’ and ‘her ancestral past’. But her life comes to an end in her sleep before the bank can claim the land. This kind of economical exploitation of the Kenyans by the Europeans continued in the form of loans given by European banks.

*The River Between* and *Weep Not, Child* constitute a landscape where the fields are found green and flourishing. At times in *Weep Not, Child*, the land seems to be dry without rain, but in *Petals*



of Blood the condition becomes worse. People got practiced to the failure in rains and hopes for the seasons to downpour. The young men feel proud to get circumcised and they wish to prove their courage on this occasion. The eve of the ceremony is meant for the sharing of oneness which reflects in all the three novels. The tribes and the herdsmen, who led a life of their own, were interrupted by the foreigners. The invaders were not only involved in seeking fertile land to farm but also extracted resources from the natives to export to other countries. Ngugi in all his novels had made an attempt to highlight the oppression of the black people.

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