

Alienation and Identity Crisis on Fictional Characters in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *The River Between*

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Abstract

*This paper attempts to highlight the story of a whole community of the Gikuyu people who inhabited the ridges of Kameno and Makuyu in Ngugi wa Thiongo's *The River Between*. The paper will integrate the public aspects of the novel with the dramatic actions of the private individuals. The main characters, as protagonists in the conflict, represented opposing forces within the society and yet they remained convincing as human beings. The alienation and identity crisis of protagonists and other significant fictional characters will take the centre stage in this paper. There are so many editions of *The River Between* but this paper used the 1988 version, ISBN 043590017X.*

Key words: alienation, identity crisis, fictional character,

Introduction

This paper has tried to include many writers to bring out the various forms of alienation and identity in literature. According to Hussam, (2013), Alienation and Identity Crisis form the subject of many psychological, sociological, literary, and philosophical studies. Hussam (2013) goes on to say that these are major themes of the human condition in the contemporary epoch. It is hoped that the paper, will help students, researchers, and teachers in enhancing their interest and encouraging them to explore Alienation and Identity Crises in any genre of their interests. Before analysing the fictional characters, it is of prime importance to look at the concepts of Alienation and Identity Crisis and then juxtapose these concepts with what the fictional characters go through in *The River Between*.

Literature Review

Alienation

According to Bani (2013), alienation is the basic form of rootlessness, which forms the subject of many psychological, sociological, literary, and philosophical studies. He goes further to say that alienation is a major human condition that emerges as a natural consequence of existential predicament both in intrinsic and extrinsic terms. It is quite evident from the above definitions by Bani (2013) that alienation can come because of a loss of identity. It is quite imperative to note that human beings sometimes fail to find meaning behind life and they later find the world they live in to be unfriendly and antagonistic towards them. As human beings, we tend to suffer not only from war, persecution, famine, and rain but also from inner problems (Bani 2013). Alienation can have many causes that may include: i) *Social alienation* which refers to the feeling of being segregated from one's community (Neal & Collas, 2000). ii) *Meaninglessness* which Seeman (1959), and Geyer (1996) believe is the quality of having no meaning or the quality of having no importance or value. iii) *Normlessness* denotes the situation in which the social norms regulating individual conduct have broken down or are no longer effective as rules for behaviour. Neal and Collas (2000) believe that normlessness derives partly from conditions of complexity and conflict in which individuals become unclear about the composition and enforcement of social norms. iv) *Powerlessness* refers to a situation where people become powerless when considering persistent problems facing society that are not currently solvable, such as widespread violence and war or a cure for Coronavirus, HIV/AIDS, or cancer. v) *Relationships* are attributed to alienation. Relationships refer to the way two or more people are connected or the way they behave towards each other. McKnight (2003) argues that familial

estrangement between parents and adult children is a related factor that is attributed to several biological, psychological, social, and structural factors affecting the family, including attachment disorders, incompatible values and beliefs, unfulfilled expectations, critical life events and transitions, parental alienation, and ineffective communication patterns. vi) *Political alienation* which according to Schwartz (2007) can be a feeling of estrangement from the political system and a lack of engagement therein. Such political alienation could result from not identifying with any political party or message and could result in revolution, reforming behaviour, or abstention from the political process, possibly due to voter apathy. vii) *Self-estrangement* which according to Seeman (1959), is the heart of social alienation. Self-estrangement can be defined as the psychological state of denying one's interests – of seeking out extrinsically satisfying, rather than intrinsically satisfying activities. viii) *Cultural estrangement* is the last of the causes of alienation. According to Bernard, Jochen, Gebauer, & Maio (2006), this is viewed as dissociation from popular cultural standards and a rejection of popular culture and fundamental societal values and Nettler (1957) defined the alienated person as one who has been made unfriendly toward his society and its culture.

Identity Crisis

Identity crisis has demonstrated its power or prowess as one of the main thematic concerns in literature. Psychologist Erik Erikson coined the term “identity crisis.” (Erikson, cited in Fall, 1970). In general, identity refers to who you are and what you define yourself as being. The theme of identity is often expressed in books/novels or any other piece of literature so that readers can intrigue themselves and relate to the characters and their emotions. This is what this paper aims to look at in Ngugi wa Thiongo's *The River Between*.

From a sociological perspective, Castells (1997) asserts that societies are going through an identity crisis because identity acts as a source of meaning and experience for people through self-construction and individuation particularly based on cultural attributes in a context marked by power relationships.

Mustafa (2006) concludes this section on identity by saying that our world is undergoing an identity crisis. He implies that it is a period of uncertainty or confusion in a person's life. The reasons why societies or individuals go through identity crises can be summarised:

- Self-construction
- Cultural attributes
- Power relationships or play of power
- Identity building
- Social association
- Sexual identities (Feminist movement and patriarchal society)
- Exclusion and marginalisation due to gender, race, ethnicity, or class

The development of these relationships and identities above radically increases the number of interfaces between people and provides increased opportunities for cultural, social, and political exchanges between and among people on a global level regardless of geographic location and time zone.

Centre stage of this paper: Alienation and identity crisis on fictional characters in *The River Between*

Based on the background view of Alienation and Identity Crisis above, it is of paramount importance to focus on how that literature review is then juxtaposed to the fictional characters in Ngugi wa

Thiong'o's *The River Between*. The universe of the novel is populated by a multitude of characters who are involved in the action or narrative that takes place in the plot.

Thehoua (2018) postulates that before dealing with the crisis and alienation related to the characters in *The River Between*, it should be noted that the following information on Ngugi as an author of the book is crucial. Ngugi refused to be called "James" and decided to take a name typically African which is Ngugi wa Thiong'o. The attitude of Ngugi, as an African author or writer was indicative of the identity crisis, which was raging in the colonial space and mainly in his native country, Kenya. It was about the extra-diegetic life of Ngugi who had to abandon his first name "James" as a sign of a strong awareness of the alienation by a foreign culture, that of the coloniser. This sign is even more significant that the Kikuyu writer, in his books, through his characters, showed himself as a true defender of enslaved people. Thus, Ngugi drew some crises in his works and tried to provide appropriate solutions to them.

The characters in *The River Between* are indicative of the multifaceted crisis in Africa in general and Kenya in particular. Names like Mugo, Kinuthia, Waiyaki, Chege, Nyambura, and Muthoni, just to name but a few are indicative of the desire of the narrator to repair an identity crisis, alienation, and a dash of realism that commanded to draw from the local culture to give local colour to the story. The study of characters, space, time, and aesthetics, which accounted for alienation and the crisis, revealed that the narrator of Ngugi succeeded through images, symbols, and other literary tools, to gather Makuyu and Kameno using elements and parallel events that set confusion among religious extremists in the plot.

The following characters will therefore be analysed pointing out alienation and identity crises in the plot.

- Waiyaki, the protagonist of the story, was a young Gikuyu man from Kameno.
- Nyambura was Joshua's older daughter and Waiyaki's love interest.
- Kabonyi was an elder from Makuyu and Kamau's father.
- Muthoni was Joshua's daughter who died after circumcision.
- Joshua was Muthoni and Nyambura's father and a Gikuyu Christian pastor who lived in Makuyu. Joshua accepted everything that the white missionaries said and believed that they spoke with the authority of God.
- Chege was Waiyaki's father and a well-known elder.
- Reverend Livingstone was a white Christian missionary and the only named white character in the story.

Waiyaki

Waiyaki was an ambitious young man who tried to save his people from the white man by building schools and providing education. His eyes were his most striking feature; they seemed to have a light that appeared to pierce your body, seeing something beyond you, into your heart. From his first appearance when he broke up in the fight between Kamau and Kinuthia, he was established as the hero of the novel. Bailey (1985) says that his prestige was derived partly from his birth as the son of Chege, a man of reputed magical powers; but his claim to leadership also stemmed from his remarkable personal qualities of bravery and determination.

In that early encounter with Kamau and Kinuthia, Waiyaki imposed his authority on them with his burning eyes:

“Not a man knew what language the eyes spoke. Only if the boy gazed at you, you had to obey. That half-imploring half-commanding look was insisting, demanding.” (p. 10)

Since his gaze was described as demanding (p. 6), leaving others no choice but to obey him, he became the natural leader of his tribe. His father Chege was the last of a long line of people going back to the gods, which meant that Waiyaki was chosen to become a saviour. This ultimately shaped his strong identity.

In addition, Waiyaki’s education and position as a teacher further enhanced his standing among the people. He was an energetic and idealistic young man, who worked tirelessly at building schools and providing teachers. He won the support of the parents through his dedicated efforts and changed the identities of many young people in the tribe. This was a way of convincing the people not to be alienated from their tribal way of doing things and not to foolishly adopt the vices of their colonisers. He was praised for his hard work and dedication. Indeed, he was considered a saviour.

However, Waiyaki became engrossed with education as the salvation of the tribe that he lost touch with other possibilities and became alienated/isolated from the realities surrounding him. Bailey (1985) says that Waiyaki was gradually overtaken by self-doubt, and increasingly frustrated by the disunity and alienation on the ridges and yearned for reconciliation. He remained committed to the traditional beliefs and customs, yet he rebelled against the bigotry and hypocrisy, which prevented him from expressing his love for Nyambura. He thus went through an identity crisis paving the way to his tragedy as he was supposed to go and meet the people:

“People wanted action now. The stirrings of the hills were awakening to the shame and humiliation of their condition their isolation had been violated. But what action was needed? What had he to do now? How could he organize people into a political organisation when they were so torn with strife and disunity...he would preach if he ever got the chance: education for unity. Unity for political freedom...” (p. 143)

His mind was in turmoil as he was going to meet the people and the question that came to his mind was about Nyambura:

“What if they should ask him about Nyambura?” (p. 143)

As he went through this identity crisis, he longed with more intensity for happiness in marriage. Nyambura came to symbolise his quest in his identity crisis and alienation:

“He would fight for unity, and Nyambura was an integral part of that battle. If he lost Nyambura, he too would be lost. He was fighting for his salvation.” (p 143)

Waiyaki had leadership qualities and the potential to unite the alienated groups of the two ridges but the love affair with Nyambura who was not circumcised led to his tragic fall. How could a saviour marry a girl who was not circumcised? That would spoil the togetherness and purity of the tribe.

The tragic love affair of Waiyaki and Nyambura followed a pattern common in romantic literature and is epitomised by William Shakespeare’s story of *Romeo and Juliet*. As Romeo and Juliet fell in love, they progressively alienated themselves from their families and society. By the conclusion of the play, the inexorable march of tragic irony alienated the two from each other, first physically, then permanently. In this case, alienation had tragic consequences. Both Waiyaki and Nyambura went

through an identity crisis because of the deep divisions in their society and they independently dreamt of a marriage that would not only unite them in personal happiness but would also bring unity to the alienated ridges.

Bailey (1985) believes that the love of Waiyaki and Nyambura was doomed to disaster because both Joshua and Kabonyi regarded it with inflexible hostility; and because it affronted Christians and traditionalists alike at a time of mutual suspicion and intolerance. Kabonyi skilfully stirred up the prejudice in the Kiama against uncircumcised women. Waiyaki was accused of betraying his tribal oath, an unforgivable act, by planning to marry an uninitiated girl.

Waiyaki made no denial though ironically at the time of the accusation, Nyambura had refused him. However, the interference of the Kiama in his private affairs increased Waiyaki's frustrations and loss of identity with their reactionary attitudes. Cook (2015) says that these attitudes of the Kiama threatened the unity of the tribe at the time when Waiyaki was committed to healing the rift.

At last, Waiyaki was even tempted to escape with Nyambiya to Nairobi where he could live happily, unfettered by the intransigent views of the Kiama and the church. The option of escape was not open to Waiyaki because even though he was now discredited as a leader, he had not abandoned his messianic mission. Thus, as Shahwan (2018) puts it, the tragedy of Waiyaki's love affair was interlocked with his tragedy of failing to fulfil the ancient prophecy and become a saviour of the people. Perhaps one of the weaknesses of this story was the extent of this failure, for although Nyambura called Waiyaki her 'Black Messiah', and although Kinuthia and many people were said to worship him, Waiyaki was patently lacking in the maturity and wisdom essential for the herculean task of bringing unity to the ridges.

Bailey (1985) says that Waiyaki was a young man of charisma and dedication, strong in emotion and enthusiasm but lacked perception and clarity of purpose. Identity crisis came because of his confusion and uncertainty, which arose, in part from his immaturity and the mistakes and missed opportunities. In his single-minded obsession with building schools and spreading enlightenment through education, he resigned from the Kiama and allowed himself to be alienated from the people and rituals of the tribe. Consequently, he lost contact with what the traditionalists were thinking and what his opponents were plotting.

For a time as Shahwan (2018) puts it, Waiyaki seemed blinded by his zeal for schooling, but he was never entirely clear about what kind of education he wanted nor what its effects would be. There was naiveté in his conviction that education alone could be the panacea for all contemporary ills. Waiyaki gradually came to recognise that the growth and development he desired for his people could not be gained while disunity and alienation reigned among them. But at his first crucial parents' meeting, he did not even mention unity and he had limited his chances of achieving reconciliation by taking the tribal oath of the Kiama which bound him to strict adherence to the tribal customs. Waiyaki was losing that contact with people He was becoming too obsessed with the schools and the widening rift and divisions. However, his most serious blunder was failing to understand, despite Kinuthia's warning, that his education movement needed a political dimension to succeed. It was only at the end of the novel that:

"All at once Waiyaki realized what the ridges wanted...People wanted action now. Now he knew what he would preach if he ever got another chance: education for unity. Unity for

political freedom” (pp. 142-143).

Waiyaki’s downfall and alienation from the tribe were caused by his political naivety and personal immaturity (Robson, 1979). Killam (1980) observed that by the time Waiyaki visited the sacred grove for the second time his understanding of the complex dilemmas facing the tribe had considerably deepened.

Lastly, Waiyaki’s tragedy because of the identity crisis and alienation described in this character analysis was also inseparable from the tragedy of his people for whom the conflict portrayed in *The River Between* would lead to a bloody and bitter struggle for independence. This is exactly what happened, and Kenya is now an independent country!

Nyambura

Nyambura was portrayed as a woman frustrated by the lines of religious differences enforced in her community. Her identity crisis stemmed from this frustration because of the antagonism between the tribe and the Christian faith. She was a Christian but resented her overbearing father and this further worsened her fears. She wanted to be herself, but her father would not give her the autonomy to make her own decisions. She was alienated from the people she wanted to be with, and she ultimately suffered from a further identity crisis:

“Nyambura still feared her father. She knew that if he saw her standing there, he would be angry. She was often lonely. The death of Muthoni had deprived her of the only companion she had ever had. So now, she went to the river alone. She went to church alone...So the river, especially on Sundays, was her companion... To her father, she grew cold” (pp. 74-75).

The other predicament for Nyambura was her love and admiration for Waiyaki. She was so lonely after Muthoni’s death:

“Waiyaki was the only person who had been close to her sister, and Nyambura could never think of Muthoni without Waiyaki coming into the picture. Sometimes she wished he had been on their side...Sometimes she feared him and thought that he refused to talk to her because she was the daughter of Joshua” (pp. 75-76).

She loved Waiyaki even though Waiyaki was not a Christian. Waiyaki belonged to the Kameno traditional religion whose seer was Mugo who prophesied about the coming of the white people and the threat they posed to the Kenyan tribes of Makuyu and Kameno. At first, she rejected Waiyaki’s advances, as she was unwilling to repudiate the Christianity of her father, both because of her obedience to him and because of her faith. However, as Bailey (1985) puts it, Nyambura’s love for Waiyaki was too strong and too disturbing to allow her peace without him. She came to believe that Christianity could offer no spiritual meaning to her unless it contained the forgiving power to overcome the differences, which separated her from the man she loved.

We also see that Nyambura showed love to her sister, Muthoni, when she was circumcised according to the customs of her tribe, despite also being a Christian. Nyambura was positioned as caring, empathetic, and open-minded. In many ways, she was a window that helped readers to see the pain and alienation caused by the weaponisation of religion through colonialism in Kenya that *The River Between* explores.

If we imagined the book without Nyambura, it could simply become a clash between two opposing groups that is Kabonyi's group versus Waiyaki's group, without giving us a sense of what this clash meant for those who pulled both ways. Nyambura and Waiyaki's love was also a central plot device that propelled the story to its conclusion.

Kabonyi

Kabonyi was an elder from Makuyu and Kamau's father. Kabonyi began the story as a devout Christian and one of Joshua's followers. However, he suffered from an identity crisis when he left the religion after Joshua disowned Muthoni for undergoing the tribal custom of circumcision and then callously upheld this decision even after she died of an infection.

Waiyaki had predicted this when he said that he saw great splits and alienation coming after Muthoni's death. Disturbed by Joshua's behaviour, Kabonyi was the first to break away and the reason for his change of heart and alienation from the new faith was that he wanted to protect the tribe from the corrupt influence of the white colonialists. He decided to go back to the tradition when the church rejected traditional circumcision, which was greatly valued. This change of heart and identity from Kabonyi was going to be a problem for Waiyaki who was considered a saviour to unite the two ridges which still "antagonised each other" (p. 54) with Makuyu being:

"the home of the Christians while Kameno remained the home of all that was beautiful in the tribe" (p 54).

Kabonyi created the Kiama. The Kiama represented the council of the elders and, therefore, the conservative forces within the community. He claimed that the Kiama should fight for the purity of the tribe by going back to the traditions and rejecting the foreign culture. This was quite ironic because, before this change of identity, Kabonyi was against the purity of the tribe and supported the new faith. However, the Kiama turned out to be a political fabric, which Kabonyi used to fight against Waiyaki for the leadership of the community. He knew well that Waiyaki was the anointed messiah, foretold by the seer, but he did not want to admit this.

Burke and Stets (2009) state that identity crisis comes because of conflict. This could be a conflict between a person or group and another person, which can drive one into change. This is typical of what we see in Kabonyi. He detested Waiyaki for many reasons. Firstly, he resented his rise to power and influence because he considered him "a mere boy" with silly ideas. Second, he felt that Waiyaki took the people's attention away from him, even though he should be respected more due to his age and experience. Moreover, he would have wanted his son Kamau to lead the people. Finally, knowing the prophecy, he feared Waiyaki might be the one sent to save the people:

"Waiyaki was capable of really hard labour. For this and his courageous determination, he was liked and admired by the people of the ridges. Waiyaki was becoming the pride of the hills and the pride of Kameno. Already they had started calling him the champion of the tribe's ways and life" (pp. 69-70).

Kabonyi's uncompromising stand for tribal unity was partly a devious ploy to undermine Waiyaki's popularity because people admired Waiyaki. He had a smile for all, pleased all, and had a word for everyone (p. 92) Kabonyi did not like it (p 92). Because of conflict within Kabonyi after being defeated by Waiyaki many times, Kabonyi and the Kiama planned sittings to 'judge' Waiyaki, and to accuse him of having betrayed the tribe by associating with Christians and even planning to marry Nyambura who

was not even circumcised. Eventually, however, Kabonyi was able to punish Waiyaki during a council meeting, effectively ending the struggle for reconciliation. Education from Waiyaki and political activism from Kabonyi, instead of being collaborators, they became antagonists, and this further alienated the ridges.

Because of Kabonyi's thirst for power, Waiyaki went through four features of alienation described by Seeman (1959) in the social causes alluded to at the beginning of this paper and these are Powerlessness, Meaninglessness, Social Isolation, and Self-Estrangement. Because of the alienation experienced by Waiyaki through Kabonyi:

"The land was now silent. The two ridges lay side by side, hidden in the darkness... And Honia River went on flowing between them...its beat rising above the dark stillness..." (p. 152)

Kabonyi had caused the darkness and the stillness. Killam (1980) says that Kabonyi was the antagonistic force blamed for the catastrophe in the tribe and the fall of an enormously impressive hero and messiah of the ridges.

Joshua

Joshua represented the influence of the white man and was one of Waiyaki's antagonists. He was Muthoni and Nyambura's father and a Gikuyu pastor who lived in Makuyu. He was one of the first people to be converted to Christianity, seeking refuge in Siriana because he feared the revenge and anger of his people, who felt betrayed. He changed his Gikuyu identity to suit that of the new faith. He also alienated himself from the ways of the tribe and thus accepted everything that the White missionaries said and believed that the missionaries spoke with the authority of God. He was almost a fanatic, renouncing his tribe's rituals and traditions.

"The new faith worked in him till it came to poison him wholly. He renounced his tribe's magic, power, and ritual. He turned to and felt the deep presence of the one God" (p. 29)

Considering his people to live in darkness, he was dedicated and determined to convert as many people as possible to save them from hell:

"He realised the ignorance of his people. He felt the depth of the darkness in which they lived. He saw the muddy water through which they waded unaware of the dirt and mud" (p. 29)

Furthermore, Joshua militarily governed his family and demanded that they adopt the same identity as his in following the Christian rules. He viewed female circumcision as the ultimate unforgivable sin and forbade his daughters from undergoing the procedure even though it was the most important Gikuyu traditional cultural tradition (Cook, 2015). He hated that his wife, Miriam, was circumcised before they got married and he often beat her for it even though she could not do anything to change it. He had an ego that needed a psychiatrist because he was also circumcised but his wife did not complain about it (Graves, 1998).

The sad part of Joshua's overzealousness in the new religion was when he disowned his daughter Muthoni when she decided to be circumcised. To him, she did not exist, and was unmoved when he heard of her death:

"He had, in any case, disowned her. To him, she never existed. What had a man of God to do with the children of the evil one? As the spiritual head of the hills, Joshua enforced the church's morality with new energy. All the tribe's customs were bad. That was final. There

could never be a compromise.” (p. 84)

When Nyambura decided to be with Waiyaki, Joshua tried to forbid it since Waiyaki was involved with the Kiama and was thus his mortal enemy, an agent of Satan. When Nyambura defied Joshua, he disowned her as well. His new identity created stubborn opposition to Nyambura’s happiness. He was more preoccupied with wielding his authority over his family than their actual well-being. Because of his newly acquired identity, Joshua suffered from the following types of alienation: cultural estrangement, normlessness, powerlessness, and self-estrangement. He was disconnected from those who did not follow the new faith. As a result of this alienation, he had symptoms of psychological pain, which included anger and depression. He did not even want to listen to anyone associated with the Kiama. Waiyaki tried to warn Joshua that Kabonyi’s followers were considering attacking Joshua’s church but Joshua, blinded by his hatred for Waiyaki would not listen. (pp. 132-133)

In Joshua, therefore we can see that the novel used him to represent one view of White people and Christianity: that of enthusiastic acceptance and displacement of traditional religion and beliefs (Homstad, 2020). This of course led to the central conflict in the novel as different characters with different opinions of the Whites and Christianity were brought into conflict with each other.

Muthoni

Muthoni was one of Joshua’s daughters. However, instead of following the Christian way of life like her parents and other siblings, she followed the traditional path and chose to be circumcised to become a woman.

“Nyambura, I want to be circumcised” (p. 25)

The words came from Muthoni, and this shocked her sister since circumcision was regarded as the devil’s work (p 25). Her father viewed circumcision as a sinful pagan rite, proof of the tribe’s backward ways. Muthoni was determined to do it at whatever cost. She questioned the criticism of her parents who were also circumcised but were allowed to convert to Christianity anyway.

“Father and mother are circumcised. Are they not Christians? Circumcision did not prevent them from being Christians. I too have embraced the White man’s faith. However, I know it’s beautiful... to be initiated into womanhood. You learn the ways of the tribe. Yes, the white man’s God does not quite satisfy me....” (p. 26)

In fighting to change her new identity, she exposed the hypocrisy of the Christian leaders who considered circumcision a sin. When Joshua disowned her after learning about her plan, she stayed with her aunt in Kameno, who supported her. This alienation was a true indication that Muthoni wanted to stick to the ways of the tribe. Zalta (2018) says that this kind of alienation identifies with a problematic separation between the self and society. Muthoni felt that within a tribe, circumcision for both men and women represented one’s entrance into adulthood as a Gikuyu and their commitment to tribal tradition and identity.

However, the circumcision led to medical complications and even though Waiyaki managed to get her to a hospital she died after claiming that she had seen Jesus and that she felt like a real woman, signifying that she had merged her Christian identity and tribal identity and thus proving that unity could exist between Christians and Gikuyu tribalists. Her death left a great impression on everyone in Makuyu and Kameno. Nyambura and Waiyaki were stunned by her bravery to rebel against Joshua,

while Joshua and his followers grew more militaristic about opposing tribal rituals. Muthoni's death also prompted Kabonyi to leave the church because he blamed Joshua for the situation, and he began his crusade to protect the tribe's purity.

Furthermore, her death stimulated the conflict of religion whereby it created a more significant alienation between the people who believed in Christianity and those who believed that the ways of the Whiteman were wrong and chose to follow the tribe's tradition (Hemingway, 2017). Some villagers considered Muthoni's death as a sign that the spirits were angered by the new religion of Muthoni's family. Others believed that it was an expected result of an antiquated belief system and alleged that circumcision should be abolished (Cook, 2015). After her death, it was speculated by the Gikuyu community that the death symbolised the idea of rejection and that there should be reconciliation between the two conflicting viewpoints.

The debacle surrounding Muthoni's circumcision and subsequent death emphasised above all the metaphorical relevance of female circumcision and its ramifications upon its gender dynamics of both Kameno and Makuyu social formations and families (Graves, 1998). On the other hand, circumcision was an indigenous, traditional, and therefore perhaps anti-colonial rite that operated as a form of resistance against British imperialism, and in Waiyaki, the death of Muthoni after circumcision proved that resistance:

“Waiyaki saw greater splits coming. He knew that the structures now adopted by Livingstone would alienate even those who had taken to the new ways...” (p. 59)

Furthermore, Ngugi juxtaposed circumcision and Christianity to suggest how circumcision became a “pagan” rite transgressive of Christian principles:

“For Nyambura had learned and knew that circumcision was sinful. It was a pagan rite form, which she and her sister had been saved. A daughter of God should never let even thought of circumcision come to her mind” (p. 33)

The traditionalists saw Muthoni's death as a curse and a warning to Joshua along with all those who had deserted their ancestral ways for the new faith:

“The death of Muthoni had clearly shown that nothing but evil would come out of any association with the new faith” (p. 58).

This then proved to be alienation at its best in *The River Between*.

We are also shown Chege in the thought:

“Had he not foreseen this drama? Had he not seen the estrangement between father and daughter, son and father, because of the new faith? This was a punishment for Joshua. It was also a punishment to the hills. It was a warning to all, to stick to the ways of the ridges, to the ancient wisdom of the land, to its ritual and song. Would Joshua listen? Would Kabonyi hearken to the voice of angry Murungu? Chege feared for them. He feared for those who had embraced strange gods” (p. 54)

These unsympathetic reactions showed the deep division and alienation in society. People were no longer brought closer together by tragedy; instead, it pushed them further apart. There was also the white Siriana missionary and educator, Livingstone, who for him the “death of Muthoni forever

confirmed the barbarity of Gikuyu customs.”

The reason for this was that

“these people seemed only interested in education, while they paid lip service to salvation,” (p. 55).

Muthoni’s death, therefore, brought to the fore the simmering tension. It was followed by further fragmentation and alienation of the two ridges.

“Firstly, there is a defection among Joshua’s followers when Kabonyi and “many others” break away amid high-pitched hostilities. Secondly, Siriana Mission expels the “children of those who defied the laws of the Church and continued with their tribal customs,” and passes the ruling that “no child of a pagan would again be allowed into school unless the child was a refugee. Even the child would have to renounce circumcision.” (p. 60)

According to Schultz and Schultz (2009), individuals face obstacles that may prevent the development of a strong identity. Muthoni went through this grim time since the new faith was an obstacle for her to achieve her inward desires as she pointed out:

“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,” (p. 26)

Furthermore, Muthoni said:

“Yes, the white man’s God does not satisfy me, I want, I need something more.” (p. 26)

This sort of unresolved identity crisis left Muthoni struggling to “find herself.” Muthoni turned to circumcision and from her point of view, having a negative identity could be more acceptable than none.

Chege

Chege was Waiyaki’s father and an elder from Kameno. He was old and wise, a seer, and one of the few people who knew of the ancient prophecy that a Saviour would rise from the hills and save their people. Since Chege’s family was part of an ancient line (p. 14), his son had the natural ability to lead. Chege believed that Waiyaki would be that (p. 20). Chege’s insight that Waiyaki should fight the White people with their knowledge rather than with weapons suggested that he understood that their world was changing and that their old methods of dealing with problems would no longer work:

“Arise, Heed the prophecy. Go to the Mission place. Learn all the wisdom and all the secrets of the White man. But do not follow his vices. Be true to your people and the ancient rites” (p. 20)

Chege had foreseen the alienation and division to be created by the Whites. He decided to send his son to study with the missionaries in Siriana so that he could learn their secrets and use that knowledge to free the Gikuyu people from the colonialists and restore the Gikuyu identity.

At times Chege wondered if his son was going to be successful as the Gikuyu saviour. Chege’s fear that Waiyaki might fail foreshadowed the story’s ending where Waiyaki failed to unify the tribe or lead them against the White people. Chege’s resentment that Christianity taught against the tribe’s beautiful traditions implied that he did not oppose the religion itself but merely the way some used it to destroy their tribal identity. Chege’s identity about Gikuyu was clear because Gikuyu's customs and

traditions reinforced the group's sense of community and identity. He wanted his son to learn the ways of the White man to unite the two opposing ideological forces and integrate them rather than exclude one for the sake of the other.

He wanted his son to form his identity between the two worlds. Chege wanted to take what was useful from the White people- their approach to education and strengthen his people without destroying their long-held cultural identity. His intention was for the Gikuyu tribe to mutually embrace the White man's education as the best way to preserve their lifestyle and cultural identity and to progress and adapt to their changing world (Homstad, 2020).

In Chege, we see more of the change in the tribal identity crisis leading to tribal alienation. Chege understood that his people must react and meet with this new threat, but the isolationist villagers wanted to simply ignore the problem and continue with their traditional agrarian lifestyle. Joshua and Kabonyi's conversion foreshadowed the conflict between European Christianity identity and Gikuyu tribal identity.

Although Chege wanted his son to be the Gikuyu Saviour, it was going to be difficult for Waiyaki to honour distinct aspects of the cultural and religious identities simultaneously. His son found himself caught between the competing influence of Christianity and the weight of the ancestral customs demonstrating the identity conflict that arose from the intersection of two differing ideological views.

Reverend Livingstone

Livingstone was a White Christian missionary and the only named White character in the story. Livingstone believed he was enlightened compared to the earlier missionaries because he did not force the Gikuyu people to abandon their tribal rituals:

“Livingstone was one of those missionaries who thought themselves enlightened. They were determined to learn the customs of the natives and not repeat the mistake of the missionaries of the earlier generation who had caused tribal warfare and civil strife because they could not appreciate the importance of tribal customs” (p. 56)

The only tribal ritual that Livingstone opposed was that of circumcision.

“Circumcision had to be rooted out if there was to be any hope of salvation for these people...” (p. 56)

Circumcision represented the core of Gikuyu identity, which Livingstone saw as opposed to Christian identity (Homstad, 2020). However, Livingstone did not adopt rash and desperate measures to eradicate it. Livingstone was a man of moderation and advocated gradual methods of eradicating the custom. The only identity crisis he went through came from the great enthusiasts who had joined him in Siriana and preached against the custom vigorously. He knew that the enthusiasts would accuse him after Muthoni's death.

“He felt cheated by fate. Circumstances were laughing at his old age... Circumcision had now to be fought by all means in their hands...” (p. 56)

This identity crisis haunted him further when one of the staunchest critics of his policy named Martha talked about Muthoni's death and that this girl was Joshua's daughter. He had hoped that Kabonyi and Joshua would help him to eradicate circumcision and now he was with this woman accusing

Joshua of allowing his daughter to be circumcised.

“The war was on.” (p. 57)

Livingstone knew that taking a radical move about circumcision would further worsen the alienation and animosity between the Christians and tribalists. It was this powerlessness that escalated into the major cause of his alienation:

“Circumcision was an important ritual to the tribe. It kept the people together and bound the tribe. It was at the core of the social structure, and something that gave meaning to a man’s life. End the custom and the spiritual basis of the tribe’s cohesion and integration would be no more” (p. 68)

However, from a Christian identity, Livingstone found it necessary to save the Gikuyu people by bathing the inhabitants living in darkness and blind superstition with the light of the divine truth, by which they could become co-heirs with them of the Kingdom of God and their fellow man (Diouf, 2020). Although Livingstone suffered from an identity crisis, he tried to work with the Gikuyu people encouraging mutual respect for the interreligious dialogue which was the only choice to fight against any societal disintegration and alienation caused by religious strife (Amoko, 2010).

Conclusions

In conclusion, the alienated protagonists and other fictional characters in *The River Between* go through an identity crisis as highlighted in this paper because there are serious attempts to sketch the confusion, frustration, alienation, disintegration, and estrangement because of the new faith that divided the two ridges of Kameno and Makuyu. The protagonists and other fictional characters become misfits in their society largely because of some defects in themselves or some evils in society.

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