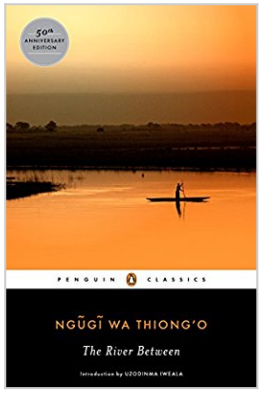

The River Between (Penguin African Writers Series)

By Ngugi wa Thiong'o

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A 50th-anniversary edition of one of the most powerful novels by the great Kenyan author and Nobel Prize nominee

A legendary work of African literature, this moving and eye-opening novel lucidly captures the drama of a people and culture whose world has been overturned. *The River Between* explores life in the mountains of Kenya during the early days of white settlement. Faced with a choice between an alluring new religion and their own ancestral customs, the Gikuyu people are torn between those who fear the unknown and those who see beyond it.

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From the Trade Paperback edition.

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Editorial Review

Review

‘It has rare qualities of restraint, intelligence and sensitivity’
The Times Literary Suppliment

‘ A sensitive novel about Gikuyu in the melting pot that sometimes touches the granduer of tap-root simpliticity.’
The Guardian

About the Author

Ngugi wa Thiong'o was born in Limuru, Kenya, in 1938, was educated at the Alliance High School, Kikuyu, at Makerere University, Uganda and at the University of Leeds.
His novel, *Weep Not, Child*, was published in 1964 and this was followed by *The River Between* (1965), *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), and *Petals of Blood* (1977). *Devil on the Cross* (1980), was conceived and written during the author's one-year detention in prison, in Kenya, where he was held without trial after the performance by peasants and workers of his play *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (I Will Marry When I Want). This was his first work to be published in his own language, Gikutu, and then translated into English and many other languages. His novel *Matigari*, was published in Gikuyu in Kenya in 1986.

The author has also written collections of short stories, plays and numerous essays. Ngugi is an active campaigner for the African language and form, and he writes, travels and lectures extensively on this theme. His work is known throughout the world and has made powerful impact both at home and overseas.

He now lives and works in the United States, writing and lecturing, and is a Professor at New York University.

Introduction

My first encounter with Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s writing came relatively late for a person who considers himself a student of African literature. A friend of mine, a painter from South Africa, left a copy of Ngugi’s essay collection *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* in my apartment with the instruction to read it if I wanted to “free my mind.” These days it is hard to read such words without thinking first of the 1999 blockbuster science fiction movie *The Matrix*, in which humans have become slaves to technology, which has imprisoned them in a picture-perfect virtual world. While most people in the film move around oblivious to the fact that they are literally sleeping through life, a select few experience discontent with the perceived order and long for something more. They are offered a choice between the blue pill, a chance to erase all indications of their discontent, and the red pill, an opportunity to explore the twists and turns of an enlightened life. Their problem is that freeing the mind requires that they embrace a contradiction: their world is built on a fallacy and this fallacy provides a foundation for what can be an expansive—if difficult—new life.

Ngugi's body of work, from his 1965 novel *The River Between* to his 2012 memoir *In the House of the Interpreter*, is the red pill, delivering readers from a simplistic understanding of the forces of colonialism in Africa to a complicated imagining of Africa before, during, and after colonialism. *Decolonising the Mind*, first published in 1986, some ten years after he wrote *Petals of Blood*, the last novel he wrote in English, is Ngugi's self-described "farewell to English as a vehicle for any of my writings,"1 and it provides great insight into the motivation for all of Ngugi's writing, but especially for *The River Between* and his other early novels.

In *Decolonising the Mind*, one of the most marvelous analyses of the colonized (or formerly colonized) person's existential predicament since Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* or *Black Skin, White Masks*, Ngugi explores the role that language plays in the process of colonization and in the long and incomplete struggle to emerge from colonialism's shadow. It is not an easy text, primarily because it advocates abandoning many assumptions that the postcolonial African (which is to say every living African) has about the struggle for freedom and the institutions that structure everyday life. Ngugi's unpacking of the damage done to independence movements by Africans being forced to use the colonizers' languages to express discontent calls into question the authenticity of the work he chose to write in English, but such is the attitude of Ngugi, a writer profoundly allergic to the simple. Ngugi describes African existence as a struggle between two competing forces, an imperialist tradition and a resistance tradition:

The biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism against that collective defiance is the cultural bomb. The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves.2

For Ngugi, imperialism extends well beyond the period of European expansion into Africa following the infamous Berlin Conference of 1884–85, which divided the continent's peoples among European fiefdoms. Ngugi's imperialism is not a time-bound event. It is an infectious mind-set that radically corrupts self-perceptions and sociohistorical narratives, a constant and dynamic process initiated to cause

despair, despondency and a collective death wish. Amidst this wasteland which it has created, imperialism presents itself as the cure and demands that the dependant sing hymns of praise with the constant refrain: "Theft is holy." Indeed, this refrain sums up the new creed of the neocolonial bourgeoisie in many independent African states.3

A disease that offers itself as its own cure? A problem that presents itself as its own solution? This is the circular reasoning against which Ngugi argues in his critical nonfiction and his fiction. His oeuvre is unapologetically ideological while at the same time concerned with the aesthetics that distinguish art from propaganda. Ngugi describes his approach to writing like this:

First of all let me say [that] writing out of ideological convictions, of course, is very important. One has important ideas that arouse one's anger, passion [and] commitment. . . . But of course when one is actually writing fiction or poetry and so on it is very important that one lets those ideas emerge from concrete reality. . . . In other words, to try and not necessarily impose those ideas on the situation. . . . So the fictional narrative has to be artistically compelling to the reader and I would say this is a challenge to fiction writers. Because there is no way we can simply impose your views, your ideology, no matter how much you are convinced of that ideology, onto a situation. Rather the situation concretely should be the one that generates those ideas.4

• • •

It is with this in mind that we can now turn to Ngugi's *The River Between*, the first novel he wrote—and the

second to be published—in a career that spans numerous works in multiple languages. It is perhaps one of the first pieces of African fiction to deliberately address the complex thoughts and feelings of Africans about living under colonialism.

Written during Ngugi's final years as a student of English at Makerere University, an affiliate of the University of London in Kampala, Uganda, *The River Between* was first published a year after his novel *Weep Not, Child* (1964), which he wrote after *The River Between.* It represents an inflection point in his life, marking his transition from amateur artist to professional craftsman. More important, it presents evidence of an evolution of his attitude toward the colonial apparatus that would eventually lead to his decision to write only in Gikuyu as a means of celebrating African literary and cultural traditions while escaping the bubble of a petite bourgeoisie readership in favor of a readership of the masses.

Ngugi has chronicled his literary and personal growth in several memoirs that speak both fondly and critically of the colonial education he received. He developed a love of the English literary canon and Christian religious traditions while living through numerous pre-independence upheavals—the Mau Mau rebellion among them—in which the British, who were responsible for his education and for introducing him to the Christian church, imprisoned his brother and tortured his mother during a state of emergency. In a sustained exploration of how James Ngugi, admirer of Conrad and the Bible, became Ngugi wa Thiong'o, firebrand postcolonial novelist and imperialist critic, the scholar Carol Sicherman suggests that Ngugi's personal experience along with an undercurrent of campus revolutionary spirit gave rise to a transformation that finds expression in his early work. She also cites the 1962 African Writers Conference, which exposed for Ngugi and other East African writers the lack of literary material produced in their region as compared to southern and western Africa.5 It was around this time that Ngugi ventured to show his manuscript of *The River Between* to Hugh Dinwiddy, a British faculty member at Makerere. Dinwiddy remembers saying, "It's time we had some African novelists. We can't go on with Elspeth Huxley." His recollection continues:

And so about three weeks later, at ten o'clock at night there came a knock on our front door, and there was James [Ngugi]. He said, "I've done something awful." I said, "What can I do? How can I help?" He said, "I've started writing a novel, and I've got stuck! There it is." He'd brought the manuscript with him, stacks of paper. I said, "For goodness sake, come in."6

The River Between distills this atmosphere of urgency, self-questioning, and change into a beautifully compact and almost dystopian bildungsroman set in a vaguely fictional historical context around the time of the push by the British colonial religious infrastructure to eradicate female circumcision. At first its subject seems to be Waiyaki, a young boy who is supposed to mature into a beacon of hope and renewal for the Gikuyu community he inhabits as it processes its first encounter with the newly arrived white man, but really its subject is the tension surrounding this community as it confronts change.

Writers have never been an easy lot. More than anyone—except perhaps soldiers or mercenaries—they thrive on conflict, viewing it as an integral part of any society. Ngugi is no exception. In fact, he is a master at placing conflict at the center of his narrative, almost at the expense of the characters who must live through it. In its account of a small community's interaction with imperial powers, *The River Between* offers us not the idea that there was peace before the white man and will be peace when Africa expels him, but the notion, however disturbing, that we owe this colonial conflict not resolution but understanding or even, if you will, respect.

The River Between begins like this:

The two ridges lay side by side. One was Kameno, the other was Makuyu. Between them was a valley. It was called the valley of life. Behind Kameno and Makuyu were many more valleys and ridges, lying without

any discernible plan. They were like many sleeping lions which never woke. They just slept, the big deep sleep of their Creator.

This opening has long fascinated scholars because of its privileging of geography, place, and their mythological significance over characters as a narrative force. The novel starts slowly, almost frustratingly so, building tension in its imagery of opposition, of the ridges Kameno and Makuyu—villages that we come to learn have competing philosophies—as lions in extended slumber. What is so important about Ngugi's world is the suggestion that this tension predates colonialism. "It began long ago," he writes, and we are introduced not to a precolonial utopia, unsophisticated in its social dynamics, but to a complex environment. Colonialism is not the start of history, nor will it be its end; it exacerbates existing tensions, embodied in an opening scene by a fight between two boys from different ridges: Kamau, the son of Kabonyi, the closest thing to the novel's villain, and Kinuthia, the fatherless youth who later serves as the voice of clarity for an increasingly isolated Waiyaki. It is a young Waiyaki who breaks up the fight, and in so doing establishes himself as the presence through which readers will access subsequent struggles in the narrative.

Waiyaki is introduced as a typical hero. As a boy he is "already tall for his age," with a "well-built, athletic body" and a scar from an errant goat. Most important, he has the right curiosity and bloodline. He role-plays the mythological heroes of the tribe while attending to his daily duties but gains real insight into his supposed purpose and the turmoil it will bring through his father, Chege, a weary prophet and elder statesman from the Kameno ridge. Chege is privy to secrets of the tribe—the prophecy that the white man will come like butterflies, that the tribe will produce a savior to deal with him, and that this savior will come from his own lineage, a prominent bloodline that includes the seer Mugo wa Kibiro.

The moment of revelation of the prophecy sets Waiyaki on a path of growth but also reveals more tension, the specter of Kabonyi, the opportunist who will later come to haunt Waiyaki and highlight intergenerational political tensions that are as much a problem as the arrival of colonizing forces. Hidden here in this moment is the fatal flaw passed from father to son, the belief that the upheaval created by the white man can be stilled by incorporating into daily life the white man's philosophy and using it against him. Waiyaki is told to "Learn all the wisdom and all the secrets of the white man. But do not follow his vices," and later tries to establish education as the basis for the community's self-reconciliation and simultaneous salvation.

More than anything else, it is the white man's religion, Christianity, that exacerbates existing tensions within the community. There are those who reject it, like Chege; those who see it as a tool to achieve status, like Kabonyi; and those who become fervent believers, like the fanatical Joshua, a preacher from Makuyu so enraptured by it that he would disown his children for existing outside his narrow interpretation of its tenets.

We are not given a concrete reason for Joshua's conversion, told only that he is consumed by his devotion and disconnected from the geography of the tribes. Life for Joshua is complete—except that it is not. The trouble with Joshua comes through in a description of his residence that demonstrates Ngugi's narrative brilliance:

Joshua's house was different. His was a tin-roofed rectangular building standing quite distinctly by itself on the ridge. The tin roof was already decaying and let in rain freely, so on top of the roof could be seen little scraps of sacking that covered the very bad parts.

The passage recalls the biblical parable of the man who built his house on sand. It does not take long for Joshua's reality to cave in on itself: His second daughter, Muthoni, ignores his prohibition against the "sinful" practice of female circumcision. Her embrace of the tribal initiation ceremony that will make her a woman and the resulting rupture in her home and community make gender a subject of major conflict in the novel.

While not set at a particular time, *The River Between* maps loosely to 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 in the novel by Reverend Livingstone, the sole white character given voice. Attending some of the dances on the eve of circumcision, he

was horrified beyond measure. The songs he heard and the actions he saw convinced him beyond any doubt that these people were immoral through and through. He was thoroughly nauseated and he never went to another such dance. Circumcision had to be rooted out if there was to be any hope of salvation for these people.

A wide swath of the community that Livingstone condemns stands in opposition to his thinking and finds a voice in the prophet Chege, who reflects: “Circumcision was the central rite in the Gikuyu way of life. Who had ever heard of a girl that was not circumcised? Who would ever pay cows and goats for such a girl? Certainly it would never be his son. Waiyaki would never betray the tribe.” Both female and male circumcision, as coming-of-age rites for the youth of Kameno and Mayku, play a central role in the novel, but it is female circumcision that is of greater consequence, because of its importance to the institution of marriage—a means of wealth transfer in almost every social group. The Church of Scotland Mission’s prohibition of circumcision amounted to a prohibition of tribal life and of the future itself.

Jomo Kenyatta, the first leader of Kenya, tried to explain the controversy over female circumcision in his anthropological study of Gikuyu culture, *Facing Mount Kenya*:

The real argument lies not in the defence of the surgical operation or its details, but in the understanding of a very important fact in the tribal psychology of the Gikuyu—namely, that this operation is still regarded as the very essence of an institution which has enormous educational, social, moral and religious implications, quite apart from the operation itself. For the present it is impossible for a member of the tribe to imagine an initiation without clitoridectomy. Therefore the abolition of the surgical element of this custom means to the Gikuyu the abolition of the whole institution.7

Today the practice is widely referred to as female genital mutilation, a term coined by its mostly Western and white opponents who have succeeded in framing the debate. What appears in the novel to be a full-throated defense of it seemingly puts Ngugi and his characters on the wrong side of history in a debate about female equality and autonomy, even though Ngugi is generally seen as progressive in his views of women as agents of change.8 But the discomfort we feel at the way the novel addresses the subject is part of a larger point Ngugi is making: that female circumcision, whether a primitive practice or an institutionalized custom, should be the subject of intratribal discussion, not prohibitive decree; that indeed conflict about tradition and culture can exist within a society.

Muthoni thinks there is a middle ground—that she can be true to her father’s interpretation of Christian faith while at the same time becoming through circumcision “a real girl, a real woman, knowing all the ways of the hills and ridges.” She offers her body as a locus of compromise for two competing worldviews, attempting to reconcile them, and to bring about a utopia, through simple force of will, unaware that most utopias can accommodate only one grand vision. The end result for her is dramatically unfavorable. For the scholar Apollo Amoko, Muthoni’s character makes sense only when she is seen “to repudiate shallow ill-conceived multiculturalism”9—in other words, when she is seen to resolve conflict without respect for the complexity of human relationships. This applies also to Waiyaki. In the wake of the controversy over Muthoni’s circumcision, Waiyaki single-mindedly pursues education as a means of uniting the communities of Kameno and Makuyu. It is an approach encouraged by his father’s insistence that he learn the white man’s ways, solidified by his time spent in missionary educational institutions, and finally unleashed by his self-aggrandizing (self-deluding?) belief that he is the savior his people have been waiting for.

Waiyaki becomes a powerful symbol for the community and a fixture in local politics. He finds himself in constant conflict with Kabonyi, who represents the older generation—in this case one without strong convictions or belief in the primacy of Gikuyu culture, and with greater interest in proving itself right, however opportunistically, than in improving the lot of its people. Waiyaki is elevated to a leadership position in the Kiama governing body, and he understands the Kiama's importance as well as the source of his power within it—his Western education. What he fails to see are the limits of a Western education in effecting change. He is so confident that education will solve everything that he resigns from the Kiama to pursue the expansion of schools. Waiyaki's ultimate fate owes itself to this dogged push for resolution to a conflict that has much deeper roots than he chooses to grasp.10

It is through Waiyaki that we see the question that animates Ngugi's body of work: How can you possibly cure the disease with the disease itself? The ills of colonialism cannot be treated with the tools of colonialism. Ngugi pushes this idea further, suggesting that to assume that colonial tools can heal cultural rifts is to exhibit a lack of respect for indigenous cultures. When Waiyaki aggressively promotes education in a meeting with the Kiama, the community responds, "Will education give us back our land? Let him answer that."

• • •

This slim book—which, as a first novel, begs to be underestimated compared to some of Ngugi's later, longer works, such as *Petals of Blood* or *Wizard of the Crow*—is too important to take lightly. Although occasionally heavy-handed in its symbolism and perhaps too concerned with the formality of language, it has an undeniable power to deliver us from unhelpful binaries of pre- and postcolonialism and from simplistic solutions for emerging from the shadow of imperial rule. It takes its reader on a journey out of the colonial matrix and into the world of the real, showing us life reclaimed in all its complexity from the simplifying template of colonialism.

You can put this book down and return to the life you had before, or you can read it and see just how deep the rabbit hole is. Ngugi offers us a truth. Whether to seek it out and free your mind—that choice is yours.

UZODINMA IWEALA

Notes

1. Ngugi famously decided to stop writing fiction in English and instead to write in his native Gikuyu so that he could reach a more class-diverse audience. He continued to write criticism in English.

2. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: J. Currey, 1986), 3.

3. Ibid.

4. D. Venkat Rao, "A Conversation with Ngugi wa Thiong'o," *Research in African Literatures* 30, no. 1 (1999): 164.

5. Carol Sicherman, "Ngugi's Colonial Education: 'The Subversion . . . of the African Mind,'" *African Studies Review* 38, no. 3 (1995): 22.

6. Ibid., 30.

7. Jomo Kenyatta, Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), 128.

8. For an excellent consideration of Ngugi's treatment of gender and sexuality in his novel *Petals of Blood*, see Bonnie Roos's "Re-Historicizing the Conflicted Figure of Woman in Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*," *Research in African Literatures* 33, no. 2 (2002): 154–70.

9. Apollo O. Amoko, "The Resemblance of Colonial Mimicry: A Revisionary Reading of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between*," *Research in African Literatures* 36, no. 1 (2005): 43.

10. Ibid., 41.

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From reader reviews:

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