

**COLONIZATION AND DECOLONIZATION: A
COMPARATIVE STUDY OF CHINUA ACHEBE'S *ARROW OF
GOD* AND NGUGI WA THIONG'O'S *THE RIVER BETWEEN***

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Abstract

Growth and diversity in cultures over the years have led to man's quest in comparing himself with others culturally. In the academic field, since 19th century Comparative Literature developed to align with man's quest to evaluate himself with others, but this time in the line of literature. The course, Comparative Literature outlines the principle and the modus operandi in evaluating texts across cultural borders with the aim of assessing ourselves, contributing to or borrowing from the past. Some decades ago, African countries underwent colonial rule under Europe. Their experiences, responses and agitations for freedom were in varied ways. This study explored the colonial and the decolonising imports of Igbo (Nigeria) and Gikuyu (Kenya) societies with Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* and Ngugi Wa Thiong'O's *The River Between* and found out that the two societies witnessed oppressive colonial rule as such it becomes exigent to revert the situation and this necessitates the need for decolonisation. As observed in the texts, the two societies witnessed colonization in harsh manners but while decolonisation failed in *Arrow of God*, it was a success in *The River between*. Post Colonial theory is concerned with scholarly responses and agitations against colonialism. It therefore becomes the most appropriate theory that guided this research.

Keywords: Comparative, Colonisation, Decolonisation, *Arrow of God* and *The River Between*.

Introduction

Many countries of the world have at one time or the other undergone colonial rule that it becomes one of the parts of their historical peculiarities. As colonization lingers, it exerts its influence thereby forming an integral part of the countries that experience it. According to Ogene et al:

Colonialism is the system of adopting a policy for acquiring full or sometimes partial control over a country or continent by another with the aim of ruling them and exploiting their human and natural resources. It uses various means like religious indoctrination, military might, social, political and economic conquest. Force and coercion are mostly noted in this practice. (A Comparative Analysis of Racial Discrimination in Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* and Kaunda's *Zambia Shall be Free*, 344)

In the words of Asika, "colonisation is a process whereby sovereignty is established over a colony" (423). Colonisation is a process whereby a superior country or power lays its dominance over a less powerful one. In the colonial setting the imperial powers take dominion over their colonies and control almost every aspect of their lives. Between 1881 and 1914 and extending to the 1950s, the European colonists engaged in a scramble for African continent. This was made possible by military invasion and quest for might. Agricultural benefits and power control were some of the enticing baits that lured the Europeans to Africa. Undoubtedly, colonialism sucks the colonised and could tantamount to a parasitic and exploitive relationship. This is however one of the painful experiences in the history of every colonized country.

As the colonized gets subdued and somewhat dehumanized over the years, they begin to see the need to regain back these lost ideals and values. Their tendency and move to regain these values give birth to what can be referred to as decolonisation. Decolonisation is the process of relinquishing a dominating power, resources and freedom back to states or nations that had been held as colonies. Describing what one could perceive as decolonization in Africa, Ngugi posits:

...but on the other, and pitted against it, are the ceaseless struggles of African people to liberate their economy, politics and culture from that Euro-American based stranglehold to usher a new era of true communal self regulation and self determination. It is an ever continuing struggle to cease back their creative initiative in history through a real control of all the means of communal self definition in time and space. (4)

Decolonisation has become a necessary tool in the fight against colonization. As colonization sucks the colonized of their ideals, decolonization becomes a proactive reply to these evils and a means of getting back these ideals lost to the colonial engagement.

Background of African Literature

During the period of colonization, the African continent lost most of her ideals, resources and lands under the forceful hands of these predators. They were treated like slaves in their own land. The above situation gave rise to a reawakening and political zeal in some African elites like Achebe, Ngugi and

nationalists like Nnamdi Azikiwe, Harbert Macauley and so many other African writers who were educated in western schools and colleges. These were obliged and through their works speak out against injustices inflicted on their own people. They saw the need, as Achebe would say to ‘regain this dignity.’ Such works like *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God* and *The River Between* are novels that epitomize colonial and anti-colonial discourse. These elites and nationalists strived to instill in the people, a decolonizing tendency.

The text which challenged Achebe in his fight against colonialism is Joyce Cary’s *Mister Johnson* (1939). The novel has a Nigerian setting and created in Achebe “a most superficial picture of – not only of the country but even of the Nigerian characters. I thought this was famous, then perhaps someone ought to look at it from the inside” (Pieterse & Duerden, 04). Another was Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902) Conrad creates a general picture of the Western conception of the Africans in his characters as half naked and crude savages. In response to this, Achebe presents the characters of Winterbottom, Clark and others as multifaceted and complex in a complicated society. Achebe’s guiding principle in the fight against colonial debased orientation of the Africans is, that:

African people did not hear of culture for the first time from the Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity that many African people all but lost in the colonial period, and it is this dignity they must

regain. (*Morning Yet on Creation Day*, 157)

Achebe's *Arrow of God* and Ngugi's *The River Between* were set when the Colonial missionaries had already gained their ground in the African soil. *The two texts* expose the Igbo and Gikuyu societies already entertaining the colonial rule. Ngugi creates conflicting Makuyu and Kamenno in Gikuyu society imposed on it by a deep seated rivalry which existed even from the history of the tribe. Even though these rivalries existed there were subdued. It was however given an emphatic tone with the advent of the missionary ideals.

On the other hand "*Arrow of God* becomes the central volume in a trilogy of novels in which Achebe explores the colonial rule in one area of Nigeria" (Killam, 60). Achebe bemoans the encroaching disharmony and disarray in *Arrow of God* by the characters of Ezeulu and Nwaka. Gikandi opines that "the conflicts in Umuaro are not rivalry between two gods, Ulu and Idemili but actually a struggle between two conflicting ideological interests and authorities represented by Nwaka and Ezeulu" (153). This paves the way for the war in Okperi and the gradual encroachment of the colonial rule in Umuaro. The quest and obsession for power by these two key figures contribute to the establishment of colonial rule in Umuaro.

Colonialism Compared in *Arrow of God* and *The River Between*

As a result the above unresolved issues in the two societies, colonialism seen as domination over another group therefore sees a fertile ground in these communities to thrive. The Gikuyu society feels that the white missionaries are foolish and laughs at them. They allowed them to live side by side with them since they seem to disturb no one, consequently colonialism deadly,

yet unavoidable, crawls into the heart and culture of the people. They were later to bear the brunt of this thoughtless decision. Ngugi speaks through the character of Waiyaki:

There is something unexplainable in the coming of the white man. He had found no resistance in the hills. Now he has penetrated into the heart of the country, spreading his influence. This influence could be destructive. Muthoni had died on the high altar of this disruption (72)

As the plot unfolds, Ngugi explores the history of the Gikuyu people. It was a land bequeathed to Gikuyu and Mumbi, the ancient parents of the Gikuyu tribe. Ngugi writes “and Murungu had told them “this land I give to you, O man and woman. It is yours to rule and till, you and your posterity”. The land was fertile. It was the whole of Gikuyu country ... so the story ran in Kameno, spiritual superiority and leadership had then been left there” (TRB, 2). These lands were their ancestral inheritance and as such highly valued. There were also revered cultures like circumcision. Ngugi reveals through Waiyaki that it was “... the biggest of all rituals, circumcision. This would mark his initiation into manhood” (TRB, 11).

As a primitive society, they live a communal life which revolves around their daily existence. As a society which believes in magic, Mugo Wa Kabiro, the ancient seer had warned them of an impending doom in the guise of the white men who would come and disrupt their daily existence and destroy them. He had prophesied that “there shall come a people like the butterflies. These were the white men” (20). They laughed at him and neither heeded to his descendant, Chege.

Chege bemoans the nonchalance of the people in heeding to the warnings of Mugo but however there was a remedy. There was another prophecy which is known to Chege, who is from the line

of seers. Chege confides in his son Waiyaki thus “salvation shall come from the hills. From the blood that flows in me, I say from the same tree, a son shall rise. And his duty shall be to save his people” (20). Unfortunately, Kabonyi from Makuyu ridge knows of this prophecy. His quest to outwit Waiyaki and become the leader and saviour forms the underlining crisis in the novel.

Colonialism from its definition sucks the colonized of their cherished cultures, lands, resources and political freedom. The Gikuyu tribe begins to feel more deeply the harsh and negative impacts of it from the death of Muthoni, a Christian and the daughter of Joshua, the fanatical Makuyu convert, who desires to be circumcised and dies out of it. The white man, Livingstone and Joshua perceive her death as a mark of the barbaric nature of the native customs. Ngugi writes “Livingstone perceives that circumcision was wholly evil. Thenceforth nobody would ever be a member of Christ’s church if he was so much as found connected in any way with circumcision rites” (59).

“Livingstone, the head of the mission, had always shown reluctance in penetrating the ridges. He had always liked the idea of training some boys who would go out and spread the good news.” (5). However with the death of Muthoni, the white man gets really involved in the colonisation of the natives. Firstly, all the natives who attend school in the Siriana Mission and still practice tribal customs like circumcision gets expelled from the school. Land which is one of the cherished inheritances of the tribe especially those around the Siriana Mission are ceased. Taxes were imposed on the people.

The people regret their inattentiveness to Chege’s words “...the white man should never have set foot in Siriana” (58). The death of Muthoni is the tragic force which creates an aching gap

between the missionaries and the tribe, each seeing the other as the architect of the problem. A hitherto ‘peaceful’ scenario exists between the tribe and the missionaries till the incident of the circumcision. Perhaps Gikuyu, the land of the ‘sleeping lions’ and the missionaries would have existed peacefully if Muthoni did not die as a result of what the missionaries termed a ‘barbaric tradition’ of circumcision. The circumcision rite and the death of Muthoni strike off the clash between Makuyu “...home of the Christians” and Kameno “... home of all that was beautiful in the tribe” (54). The tribe therefore sees Muthoni’s death as a punishment to Joshua who had abandoned the custom and ways of the land to embrace the white man’s religion.

Like Gikuyu, Umuaro in *Arrow of God* had to forcefully welcome the colonial presence having not been able to resolve a land issue between them and Okperi. Ogbuefi Nwaka tactfully lures the people into war with Okperi against Ezeulu’s warning signs. Captain Winterbottom, the white missionary moves in to resolve the case. It is however made easier by the testimony of Ezeulu. He rules in favour of Okperi by breaking the guns of the warring parties which earns him the name “otiji egbe.” Consequently, the missionaries establish their ruling powers in Umuaro.

Having penetrated Umuaro, the colonial masters establish their own judicial system, law courts, religion and a government which go against the established norms. The gradual colonial hold on Umuaro lays the foundation for taboos such as wiping of Ezeulu’s son, Obika. Ezeulu says “... but the white man would not whip a grown man who is also my son...” (88). There was also the imprisonment of the sacred python. Achebe asserts that “an abomination has happened... The sacred python now raised

its head above the edge of the box and began to move in its dignified and unhurried way” (44-45). “The outrage which Ezeulu’s son committed against the sacred python was a very serious matter; Ezeulu was the first to admit it...” (59). The imprisonment of Ezeulu, the priest of Ulu, which made it impossible for the sacred yams to be eaten, forms another sacrilegious act. As these atrocities are committed, Ezeulu is tensed, the society gets more confused and Nwaka’s hatred for Ezeulu heightens. It was the culmination of the enmity between Ezeulu’s village Umuachala and Umunneora, the village of Nwaka. Everyone seeks for an opportunity to poison the other.

Like the situation in *The River Between*, *Arrow of God* witnesses the conflicting figures of Nwaka and Ezeulu. The leadership and superiority quest between these two parties is made more explicit by Ezeulu’s part in the land case between Umuaro and Okperi. Nwaka views Ulu as a god made out of necessity and as such not fit to give Ezeulu the kind of power he wields. Favoured by Eru, the god of wealth, Nwaka hides under the protection of Ezeidemili, his childhood friend and spits at Ulu. Ezeulu views the situation differently. Like Waiyaki, Ezeulu believes in peace and unification. Since the white man has come to stay, let peace exist between the two parties. As a custodian of the gods Ezeulu tells Umuaro that “... our fathers did not fight a war of blame” (18). This made it impossible for the two parties to resolve the land case between them and Okperi and therefore paves the way for more disintegration in Umuaro.

Contrastive Analysis of *Arrow of God* and *The River Between*
The Igbo (Nigeria) and the Gikuyu (Kenya) societies experienced colonialism but there were many ways the mode of operation and the colonizing strategies of the colonizers differ from the other. Firstly, in *The River Between*, the white

missionaries already exist in one part of the Gikuyu land called Makuyu. Livingstone, the colonial master seemed distant and preferred not to interfere with the affairs of the tribes. He uses Joshua, a Makuyu convert, who represents all that the Christian faith stands for in Gikuyu tribe.

Unlike Gikuyu, Umuaro had not the colonial presence in their land. They only dragged them in by their inability to resolve the land case between them and Okperi. As the war becomes fierce, Captain Winterbottom goes to Umuaro to resolve the case and with him the colonial presence. Unlike the methodology of Livingstone in *The River Between*, Winterbottom administers his government directly. The wiping of Obika is a clear case of the colonial direct punishment. The religious leader Mr. Goodcountry encourages Oduche to kill the sacred python, while Mr. Goodcountry the church catechist utilizing Ulu's desertion by Umuaro persuades the people to offer their sacrifices to the Christian God, stating that their god Ulu was a dead god. Winterbottom opts for Ezeulu as a warrant chief "the only man who says the truth" (107). This appointment and Ezeulu's refusal was later to lead Ezeulu to imprisonment and more taboos.

The second point of divergence exists in the colonial strategy in the two novels. It is worthy of note that in colonial environment a stronger force overshadows a weaker one. The colonised feels the weight more as their cherished ideals and customs are brought to disrepute by these imperial forces. In *The River Between*, lands were confiscated by the missionaries. Taxes were imposed. The spite on the revered culture of circumcision couldn't be overlooked by the tribe.

While in *Arrow of God*, no land was ceased but sacred traditions were desecrated. Even though Livingstone in *The River Between*

sees circumcision as barbaric, he makes no attempt to stop it. The least he did was to excommunicate those who wish to identify with the church and the tribal customs. A different scenario is witnessed in *Arrow of God*. Taboos were committed in the bid to force the natives to align with the colonial government. Obika is wiped, the sacred python is desecrated, Ezeulu is imprisoned and Ulu is made to be spat upon.

Decolonization Compared in *Arrow of God* and *The River Between*

As these colonial tensions rage in these two societies, the rivalry between the characters of Waiyaki and Kabonyi in *The River Between* and Ezeulu and Nwaka in *Arrow of God* heighten. The people gradually come to a common agreement that evil had come to their societies as a result of the actions of the missionaries. Ngugi writes that:

In the past few years things were changing; the pattern of season was broken. It no longer rained regularly. The sun seemed to shine for months and the grass dried. And when it fell, the rain water carried away the soil, no longer carried the prayers of the people. Perhaps it had to do with the blaspheming men of Makuyu. (80)

Achebe bemoans this too in *Arrow of God*. The natives in both societies begin to seek for more meaningful ways of reclaiming what has been deprived of them.

Firstly, when Muthoni died as a result of the cut during circumcision, the Christian faithful were convinced that circumcision which is central to the peoples' culture is bad and barbaric. They expel all those who belong to the church and still practices circumcision. The tribe and all those who still practice

the custom of the land perceive Muthoni's death as a reprimand from the angry Murungu, the peoples' ancestor, to the Christians. Lands belonging to the natives were ceased by the missionaries especially those around the Christian mission. These acts spark off strife in the natives and set the stage for decolonization.

Unlike the above scenario, even though Ezeulu and the leaders of the villages know that there was need to fight the white man, they felt handicapped by Ezeulu's 'cordial' relationship with the white man. They rather see the punishment on Ezeulu as merited. Ezeulu, on the other hand is so distracted by Nwaka's hatred, the peoples' disrespect for Ulu and his revenge plans that he fails to see the need to form a uniting force to wage further omen by the colonialists. Most importantly, Umuaro is ruled by the fear of the white man. Achebe reveals this in these words "the white man has a gun, a machet, a bow and carries fire in his mouth. He does not fight with one weapon alone" (85). This is also evident in the violent treatment meted on the people by the police sent to arrest Ezeulu, wiping of Obika and so many other instances in the novel. Laying credence to this, one of the characters, Nweke Ukpaka says "I know that many of us want to fight the white man. But only a foolish man can go after a leopard with his bare hands" (AG, 85).

Secondly, Waiyaki, the Teacher seemed to imbibe education as a strategy for the unification of the tribe. Kabonyi forms the Kiama. In *Arrow of God*, Ezeulu desires to have a peaceful society with the white man, since he has come to stay. Let peace exist between the white man and the six villages. Ulu worshippers should be allowed to worship and respect Ulu, the white man and those from the villages who had decided to abandon the deity should also be allowed to do so.

Decolonial dissimilarity continues to emerge in the two novels. As the need to ward off the colonial presence becomes paramount in the minds of the people, there arises in them a need to form a formidable force in the fight against the colonial masters. In *The River Between*, Waiyaki, promises to save the people through acquiring education for the tribe. This was the wisdom of the white man which is needed to fight him back. Kabonyi forms the Kiama, a secret society with the sole intent of promoting the interest of the tribe and recovering the confiscated lands. Even though Kabonyi means well, the underlining motive is to remove Waiyaki from the leadership struggle. Even though Kabonyi's selfish interest creates disunity between him and Waiyaki, the need to fight the white man, wipe him off the land and recover the lost land, becomes a uniting force to the people.

Ogbuefi Nwaka and Ezeulu's rift begins to widen in *Arrow of God*. As the need to fight the white man unifies the tribe in *The River Between*, it creates disunity in *Arrow of God*. Ezeulu's pride leads him to wanting to be an arrow in the hands of Ulu. He wishes to punish the people for his imprisonment by not announcing the date for the new yam. The people however wish to have the festival, without which their yams will roast in the earth and heavy famine upon the land. Mr. Goodcountry, the Christian catechist sees this disagreement as an avenue to get converts. He quickly convinces the people to sacrifice their yams to the Christian God, creating division between some like Ezeulu who continues to wait for Ulu to punish the detractors and the others like Nwaka who spits at Ulu, projecting it as a dead god.

Another important decolonizing strategy was used by the characters of Muthoni, Waiyaki and Nwambura in *The River Between*. Muthoni says "I want to be a woman... the Christian god does not satisfy me... I want to be a woman made beautiful in the tribe" (44). "I want to be circumcised. Father and mother

are circumcised....why are they stopping me?” (77). Muthoni wants to remain a Christian and as well as a woman made beautiful in the manner of the tribe with circumcision. Waiyaki on the other hand attends the white man’s knowledge. He intends to unify the tribal customs with Christian beliefs. Ngugi says “Joshua’s center was Makuyu while Kamenno was seen as the centre of the tribe. The Teacher came from there. Waiyaki did not want to be identified with either side. He was now committed to reconciliation” (110).

Nyambura, Muthoni’s sister and a daughter to Joshua belongs to the Christian faith in the tribe. She hadn’t the courage of her sister but when human emotions begins to well up in her, she begins to revolt against her father whom she had hitherto adored. She realizes that she can only attend human satisfaction and salvation by accepting Waiyaki’s love. Christian belief just like her sister did not satisfy her either. She craves for Waiyaki’s love and against what her father and Christian teaching uphold decides to follow Waiyaki.

Muthoni, Waiyaki and Nyambura by these acts wish to unify Christian faith and tribal customs. Unfortunately, these forces are polar opposites. One must give way for the other to occupy. Muthoni dies but she attends satisfaction for even in her dying bed she tells Waiyaki “tell Nyambura, I see Jesus” (80). She realizes that she could only attend this perfect maturity by this unification. Waiyaki earns rejection from the tribe who views his unification motive as betrayal. Nyambura rebels against his father and Christianity. She feels happy only at Waiyaki’s side. Even though these characters met tragic end in the type of unification and decolonisation they tried to initiate, one only notices that Christian faith is incapable of satisfying an African soul. Joshua whose soul depends on Christian belief for satisfaction meets sorrows and destruction.

In *Arrow of God* such courage as that of Muthoni and Waiyaki is doused by the fierce colonial powers of Winterbottom and Mr. Clark. Greater colonial tension is experienced in *Arrow of God*. Intra village rivalry gives it an emphatic undertone and as such personal interest and motives rule out any attempt at unification. In *The River Between*, the need to get back the lands becomes a strong force for unification but in *Arrow of God* disunity is sown in the community by the colonial government, culminating in Ezeulu wanting to be an arrow in the hand of Ulu.

Conclusion

At one time in history, African continent witnessed colonization. It however becomes a recurrent theme and a driving force in most African literatures. The colonial experiences and responses however are different in these cultures. Different African writers have therefore used the medium of literature to highlight these in their works as we see in *The River Between* and *Arrow of God*. Having compared the two texts it is necessary to state that there are strong cases of colonisation in the two texts studied. In *The River Between*, the colonial presence becomes stronger and severe with the death of Muthoni leading to the white man regarding circumcision as barbaric. There was imposition of taxes and confiscation of lands as well. In *Arrow of God*, Umuaro drags in the colonial presence. With the direct imposition of their government leading to taboos and desecration of authorities and god, the colonial masters set the stage for agitation and friction. In the two novels, the atmosphere is tense and charged depicting a colonial setting.

While decolonization process heightens in *The River Between* with the people devising many proactive ways of regaining the lost ideals, *Arrow of God* witnesses a crippled decolonizing process because of the rivalry between Ezeulu and Umuaro instigated by Ogbuefi Nwaka. Umuaro has her dislike for Ezeulu

because of his association with the white man while Ezeulu has his reservations for Umuaro for not according Ulu proper respect. Ezeulu despises the missionaries for the taboos they have committed in the land. These actions need to be resolved for struggle against the colonial masters to be a reality. Furthermore fear for white man's attack and reprisal disarms the people. While decolonizing process records great success in *The River Between*, it fails in *Arrow of God*.

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