



Female Characters' Resistance in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's Early Novels

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Abstract:

*This research paper explores the representation of female characters in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's early novels *Weep Not, Child* (1964) and *The River Between* (1965). The study critically examines how Ngũgĩ portrays women in the context of colonialism and societal transformation, analysing their roles, and relationships within their socio-political environments. By focusing on the female characters in these novels, the paper investigates how they navigate the challenges of a patriarchal, colonial society and embody resistance, resilience, and cultural identity. These characters reflect not only the personal struggles of women but also symbolize broader societal tensions and transformations in Kenya during the colonial period. Through a feminist and postcolonial lens, this research sheds light on the intersection of gender, colonial oppression, and national liberation, contributing to ongoing discussions in feminist and postcolonial literary scholarship.*

Keywords: *Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Weep Not, Child, The River Between, female characters, colonialism, patriarchy, resistance, cultural identity, feminist theory, postcolonial analysis, gender.*

Introduction:

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, a renowned Kenyan writer and intellectual, has made profound contributions to African literature, particularly in his critique of colonialism, exploration of African identity, and advocacy for African languages. His decision to write primarily in Gikuyu, rather than in colonial languages like English, reflects his commitment to decolonizing African thought and asserting the significance of indigenous languages. Through his works, Ngũgĩ confronts the enduring legacy of colonialism, reflecting on its impact on both personal and societal dimensions of African life. Among his early and influential novels, *Weep Not, Child* (1964) and *The River Between* (1965) stand as seminal texts that reveal the complexities of colonial Kenya. These novels are not only about male protagonists but also feature

female characters who play significant, though often overlooked, roles in the unfolding of these stories.

In *Weep Not, Child*, Ngũgĩ introduces Njoroge, a young boy whose personal aspirations and dreams are constrained by the larger political realities surrounding the Mau Mau Uprising. The novel portrays the devastating impact of colonialism on individual and national identity. In contrast, *The River Between* explores the tensions between two Kikuyu villages: one committed to traditional customs and the other influenced by colonial Christianity. Both texts examine the intersection of personal identity, culture, and the forces of colonialism, capturing the delicate balance between modernity and tradition. Although much scholarly attention has been focused on the male protagonists, the female characters play essential roles

that reflect broader societal struggles during the colonial period. This research paper will focus on the representation of female characters in *Weep Not, Child* and *The River Between*, emphasizing their symbolic roles in resistance, transformation, and survival within patriarchal and colonial structures.

The primary objectives of this study are:

- To analyze the role of female characters within the narrative structure of Ngũgĩ's *Weep Not, Child* and *The River Between*.
- To explore how these female characters challenge or conform to the gender roles and societal expectations of the colonial period.
- To investigate how female characters symbolize political and social change, as well as the intersection of these transformations with broader national struggles for independence.
- To examine the intersectionality of gender, class, and ethnicity in shaping the experiences of women in these novels.

This research will employ a combination of literary analysis and feminist theory to critically evaluate the representation of women in Ngũgĩ's works. By applying a feminist lens, the study will assess how female characters either resist or conform to patriarchal structures and how colonialism and neocolonialism affect their lives. The research will also examine how these characters contribute to national liberation and political struggle, considering how gender, class, and ethnicity intersect to shape their experiences.

The importance of focusing on the female characters in *Weep Not, Child* and *The River Between* lies in their capacity to serve as key agents of both personal and collective transformation. Although the male protagonists dominate the central narrative arcs, the women in these novels embody critical societal forces, demonstrating resilience, agency, and potential for social change within oppressive colonial systems.

Through these women, Ngũgĩ critiques both the patriarchal and colonial forces shaping Kenya during the colonial period.

This paper will contribute to a deeper understanding of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's critique of colonialism, with a focus on how female characters in *Weep Not, Child* and *The River Between* reflect both the intersectionality of gender and colonial oppression, and the pivotal roles women played in resisting colonial rule. The research aims to provide a critical and nuanced perspective on the role of female characters in Ngũgĩ's works, enriching our understanding of the gendered and colonial dimensions of his writings and their relevance in the broader socio-political context of postcolonial Kenya.

Literature Review:

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's early novels, *Weep Not, Child* (1964) and *The River Between* (1965), provide significant portrayals of the roles and struggles of women in a colonial context. While male protagonists dominate the narratives, female characters such as Nyokabi and Muthoni play essential roles that reflect the intersection of gender, colonialism, and tradition. Scholars have explored how these characters symbolize both personal and societal challenges faced by women during this period.

Nyokabi in *Weep Not, Child* is viewed as a symbol of the traditional African woman, caught between colonialism and patriarchy. Gikandi (2002) asserts that Nyokabi's passive role reflects the silent suffering of African women under colonial oppression. In contrast, Muthoni in *The River Between* actively challenges colonialism and patriarchy by choosing to undergo circumcision, symbolizing the struggle between tradition and colonial influence. Irele (2001) interprets Muthoni's defiance as an act of resistance, emphasizing

the conflict between indigenous cultural practices and colonial structures.

Ngũgĩ's female characters embody the dual oppressions of colonialism and patriarchy. Spivak (1988) argues that colonialism and patriarchy intersect to marginalize women, a dynamic reflected in the limited agency of characters like Nyokabi and Muthoni. Yet these women demonstrate various forms of resistance, with Muthoni's actions symbolizing a more active assertion of cultural identity against colonial forces. As Gikandi (2002) notes, these characters symbolize the persistence of African cultural identity despite colonial and patriarchal subjugation.

While critics acknowledge that Ngũgĩ critiques colonialism, some argue that his works reinforce patriarchal structures, with female characters remaining passive and symbolic rather than active agents of political change (Achebe, 1977). Feminist and postcolonial readings offer deeper insights into how Ngũgĩ's female characters navigate personal autonomy and societal expectations, revealing their resistance within a colonial patriarchal society.

Female Characters in *Weep Not, Child* (1964):

In *Weep Not, Child*, female characters embody hope and despair within both the family and broader socio-political struggles. Njoroge, the protagonist, is heavily influenced by the women around him—his mother, Nyokabi, and his girlfriend, Mwihaki.

Nyokabi – The Archetypal Mother Figure:

Nyokabi, Njoroge's mother, represents the traditional Kikuyu woman who holds deep faith in education as a means of societal upliftment. Despite financial difficulties, she strives to send Njoroge to school, believing it will provide him with a better future. Her devotion to her son's education highlights the role of women

as caregivers and bearers of hope. In the context of colonial oppression, Nyokabi's insistence on education as a tool for resistance is significant, though her role remains constrained by traditional expectations of women.

Mwihaki – The Voice of Female Conflict and Resistance:

Mwihaki, Njoroge's love interest, reflects the internal conflict of the younger generation. Torn between her love for Njoroge and the political divisions caused by colonial rule and the Mau Mau Rebellion, she hesitates to marry him. Mwihaki's character reveals how women in colonial societies are caught between personal desires and the larger political forces shaping their lives. Her lack of active political engagement underscores how women's voices were often silenced during this period.

The Silence of Female Voices in *Weep Not, Child*:

While Nyokabi and Mwihaki are central to Njoroge's life, their roles are largely confined to domestic spaces. Neither woman engages directly in the political struggles of the time, illustrating how colonialism and patriarchy silenced women's voices. By portraying these women primarily as caregivers and passive participants, Ngũgĩ reveals the broader marginalization of women in the socio-political sphere, even though their lives are deeply affected by colonial oppression.

Female Characters in the *River Between*:

In contrast to *Weep Not, Child*, *The River Between* presents a more active role for female characters who engage directly with the cultural and political changes brought about by colonialism. The novel centres on two communities—the Kameno and Makuyu ridges—and the cultural conflict between traditional Kikuyu beliefs and Christianity. Women in *The River*

Between play significant roles in the narrative, with their struggles reflecting wider societal transformations during the colonial period.

Muthoni – The Tragic Heroine of Cultural Resistance:

Muthoni, the daughter of Joshua, defies both colonial Christian values and traditional Kikuyu customs by insisting on undergoing female circumcision, a practice that marks the transition from girlhood to womanhood in Kikuyu culture. Muthoni's decision to undergo circumcision, despite her father's objections, is an act of resistance against colonial values. Her death shortly after the procedure symbolizes the destructive consequences of cultural conflict and the painful outcomes of resisting both colonial and traditional forces.

Nyambura – The Symbol of Feminine Suffering and Change:

Nyambura, another pivotal female character, is caught between traditional Kikuyu faith and Christianity. She is torn between her loyalty to her father's beliefs and the influence of Waiyaki, her love interest, who represents new ideas in her community. Nyambura's inner conflict embodies the generational tensions experienced by many African women during the colonial period—caught between the old and the new, she struggles to find her place in a rapidly changing society.

The Role of Women in Colonial and Patriarchal Systems:

Both *Weep Not, Child* and *The River Between* depict female characters constrained by colonial and patriarchal systems. While women like Nyokabi and Mwihi in *Weep Not, Child* are relegated to domestic roles, their agency is limited by colonial oppression and gendered societal norms. In *The River Between*, women characters, though operating within traditional gender frameworks, engage more

actively in cultural and political spheres. Muthoni's resistance to colonial Christianity through circumcision highlights women's agency in their own cultural practices, even as they face painful consequences.

Analysis of Female Resistance and Empowerment:

Ngũgĩ's female characters navigate the constraints of patriarchal structures and colonial oppression, revealing their struggle for agency. While women like Nyokabi in *Weep Not, Child* are limited by gendered roles, Muthoni in *The River Between* symbolizes active resistance against colonial and cultural imposition. Her tragic death underscores the painful consequences of asserting one's identity in a colonial context.

Motherhood emerges as a pivotal role, linking women to the survival of cultural traditions. Nyokabi's commitment to her son's education in *Weep Not, Child* symbolizes hope for future generations, while in *The River Between*, Nyambura and Muthoni represent generational divides in the struggle for cultural survival.

Ngũgĩ's female characters play essential roles in social and political change, subtly resisting colonial and patriarchal systems. Their resistance underscores the crucial role of women in Kenya's liberation movement, demonstrating that the fight for independence and cultural preservation was not solely a male endeavor.

Conclusion:

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's portrayal of female characters in *Weep Not, Child* and *The River Between* critically examines the intersection of colonialism and patriarchy in Kenya. Through characters like Nyokabi, Mwihi, Muthoni, and Nyambura, Ngũgĩ reveals the complexities of gender roles and the strategies women use to assert their agency within oppressive colonial systems. These early works offer a powerful critique of colonialism's gendered impact,

emphasizing women's struggles for cultural survival and political independence.

This study contributes to postcolonial feminist discourse by highlighting the often-overlooked roles of women in the liberation struggle. Future research could explore Ngũgĩ's later works to examine how female characters evolve in their roles in societal transformation. Further comparative studies could enrich the understanding of female agency across postcolonial African literature. Ultimately, this study underscores the importance of recognizing female characters' resistance in shaping both colonial history and postcolonial identity.

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