

Cultural Conflict in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's "A Meeting in the Dark"

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Abstract

Throughout the world, different countries and different cultures involve in different customs, cultural practices and religions. These differences create a diverse world, and also generate cultural conflict. This paper focusses on Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, one of most influential voices in modern African literature. He is an outspoken critic of post-colonial Kenyan politics. Ngugi wa Thiong'o "A Meeting in the Dark" is a short story set in Kenya in the Kikuyu community. In this story, Ngugi wa Thiong'o explores the conflict of cultures brought about by British colonial rule in Kenya. The story is about a young man named John. He is one among the few young men in his community to have acquired the 'white man's education'. John struggles because he does not feel comfortable in either the traditional Kenyan lifestyle or the educated, colonial lifestyle. With a strict Protestant preacher for a father and a Calvinistic headmaster at school, John feels restricted. He envies both the uneducated youth of the village, who he believes have more freedom than him, and the elder tribal folk, who seem to have a clear focus. His ultimate action in the story is that he kills Wamuhu and their unborn child which leads to his emasculation. Instead of contributing to life, he has taken it. The importance of the traditional tale is emphasized at the end of the story

Keywords: colonialism, cultural conflict, alienation, tradition, lifestyle

Ngugi wa Thiong'o portrays the epic struggle of the African and Afro-American people against colonialism and the change in the Culture in his short story "A Meeting in the Dark".

Like all his other works, “A Meeting in the Dark” also holds a mirror to their personal and social visions and expose the picture of the evolution of the African society from the colonial to the independent and the post-colonial status. The theme of discord highlighted in his works, between colonialism and anti – colonialism assume accuracy on account of its width of canvas, variety and depth of its texture.

Tracing the history of Colonization, one comes to know that German imperialism and British imperialism influenced the tribal people. During colonization many missionaries entered into the land and their goal was not colonization. Their main target was to convert indigenous peoples and introduce a distinctly Christian way of life into African society. Christianity was linked to white power, and as colonial rule spread, it seemed important to many to acquire white beliefs. Thus the church also played its part in prolonging colonial control, especially in Africa. The most educated and prosperous ethnic groups, converted to Christianity and turned away from their pagan Gods. The initial part of cultural conflict thus started with the differentiation of Christians and the tribal who still clung on to their native Gods. Secondly, the language of the educated began to be English, and the native tongue slowly started to deteriorate among the educated classes. Even traditional names were not used by the educated classes. Thus the native land which was known for its unity in diversity, had to turn towards the culture of the Colonizers which alienated them in their own land. It was both inner and outer conflict. In “The Meeting in the Dark”, Thiong’O portrays the cultural conflict of the protagonist John, who is brought up in the Christian way and at the same time lives among the other tribal people. Through out the short story he is in conflict both with the outer world and his inner self.

John, the son of the Clergy man Stanley is the protagonist and the story centers around him. He is a young man who has attained a white man’s education. So he is respected and looked up in his community as a true African son. He plans to leave the country to study more. His education has inculcated in John an optimistic view of his future. But he faced one setback, by his lover, Wamuhu. Just before he could leave the country to pursue higher education, she becomes pregnant. John was deeply distraught by this, because he felt that he cannot leave if he is to be a father. He keeps his concerns to himself. But his mother, Susana, found out something is bothering him. This is because she and John have always been close, whereas John relationship with his father is an emotionally distant one.

The struggle within him is highlighted when his conscience pricks and he does not look into the eyes of his father when speaking. His father asks him,

Why do you look away? What have you done?

John shrank within himself in fear. But his face remained expressionless. He could hear the loud beats of his heart. It was like an engine pumping water. He felt no doubt his father knew all about it. He thought: "Why does he torture me? Why does he not at once say he knows? The other voice told him: "No, he doesn't know, otherwise he would have already jumped at you." A consolation. He faced his thoughtful father with courage. (56)

The inner conflict he had within him did not allow him to face his father, he was worried whether his father would know about his love affair and the pregnancy of Wamuhu. Though the emotional bond with his mother was good, he had no courage to tell out his feelings to his mother. As soon as he enters the house, his mother asks him, " 'You look unhappy.' His mother first broke the silence. John laughed. It was a nervous little laugh. 'No, mother,' he hastily replied, nervously looking at his father. He secretly hoped that Wamuhu had not blabbed" (60). His White man's education helped him to conceal his thoughts to everyone, even the very close ones. He was worried about his future education and his plans to go out of the country for his education. His education was more important to him, rather than the love of a woman. Even, when he knew she was in crises, he did not worry about her. This shows that neither his religion, nor his education gave him the courage to face life as it came and to accept the situation in which he has wronged. He readily blamed Wamuhu when he met her.

Wamuhu was the most beautiful girl in Limuri. It was hard for him to answer whether he loved her or not. Even when talking to her, he did not see her, before him was the image of his father – "haughtily religious and dominating" (63). He blamed Wamuhu and he knew very well he was telling a lie. He was in a dilemma. John felt that she was blackmailing him. He felt weak and lost strength. The conflict between his religion and the tribal religion arose within him. He was the son of a Calvinistic Clergy man, and was educated in the Calvinistic Mission School. So he had a cultural conflict of praying to the Gods of the tribe. Though his roots were in the tribe, he had gone far away from the roots. Everything in the native land was familiar, but his western education and the Christian religion alienated him with his own land. The culture of his own tribe seemed to conflict with his Christian and educated culture. He was not ready to defy all expectations of future and marry a girl he loved. Wamuhu was uneducated

and circumcised and so he came to a conclusion that marrying her will ruin his life. He consoled himself saying if she was learning and uncircumcised he would rebel and get married. He was then ready to push her out of his life.

Wamuhu's father, the old man was against the educated men of his tribe. He remembered his old days, how virginity was given importance.

The old man was remembering his own day. He had found for himself a good virtuous woman, initiated in all the tribe's ways. And she had known no other man. He had married her. They were happy. Other men of his Rika had done the same. All the girls had been virgins, it being a taboo to touch a girl in that way, even if you slept in the same bed, as indeed to many young men and girls did. (62)

As the father of a daughter, he did not believe anyone out of the tribe. When John visited his hut, he tried to link it with the behavior of his daughter, and he feared that something would happen. He notices a difference in his daughter's behavior and worries about her future. He reluctantly goes around, worrying about the roots being lost and the new faith has turned their people fake.

Then the white men had come, preaching a strange religion, strange ways, which all men followed. The tribes code of behaviour was broken. The new faith could not keep the tribe together. Those coated with the white clay of the white man ways are the worst. They have nothing inside. Nothing nothing here. The old man trembled and cried inside mourning for a tribe that had crumbled. The tribe had nowhere to go to. And it could not be what it was before. (63)

John perceives the life of the tribe where he no longer belongs to. People around him stopped to speak to him and respected him. Everyone had hope in him that he would not betray his tribe as he was humble and quite. He was not proud and arrogant like the other educated class of the tribe. He wondered at the happiness of the woman who spoke to him, "What made such a woman live on day to day, working hard, yet happy? Had she much faith in life? Or was her faith in the tribe? She and her kind, who had never been touched by ways of the white man, looked as though they had something to cling to" (59). Not only the woman, many in the village greeted him with kindness.

As a result of his education he has lost his roots. But his new religion offered him no alternative. Here, Ngugi implies that there is no way back to the tribe, as the tribe itself has been changed irrevocably by the white colonizers, leaving those unwilling to or incapable of adopting the colonizers way of life behind.

John was sure that because of the pregnancy, he will have to marry Wamuhu and cancel his plans for his education and his future. He worried about what his father would think, since Wamuhu is considered the daughter of an unbeliever. John's solution to his troubles is to keep the news of Wamuhu's pregnancy quiet, till he leaves the country. Since John had shared his abroad trip with his community, Wamuhu came to know that he was leaving soon.

All of his plans for his education and his future were crumbling in the face of Wamuhu's pregnancy. John lost control and grabbed Wamuhu by the neck. Wamuhu struggled and gasped for air as he strangled her, and only after she collapsed, dead, does he come to his senses and realize that he's murdered Wamuhu—and their unborn child. Ngugi wa Thiong'O concludes "...he had created then killed." (70)

The conflict between cultures is conveyed through a variety of techniques. The characters names suggest the contradiction between cultures. John and his parents have the habit of using Western names, while Wamuhu and her family use the traditional African names. Ngugi considered names so important because in 1970's he himself changed his name from James Ngugi to the traditional name by which he is known now.

In this story, the theme of British rule in Kenya is a significant undercurrent driving character decisions and the desire for change. The character John, who embraced British religion and culture, considered Wamuhu not only as a hindrance to his educational endeavors, but also to his identity. She is the daughter of an 'unbeliever'. At the same time, John feels stifled by his position in the community. This creates a lot of tension in his relationship with Wamuhu, and also with her pregnancy. She represents the spirit of the village. At the same time, he knows his father would view his connection to her as beneath him. John's murder of Wamuhu in the dark is about more than the pregnancy—it is also about his loss of control over the trajectory of his life. His fear of losing his tribal culture, and the crack between the British and Kenyan traditions and expectations is the reason behind this.

An African traditional way of life is complete and reasonable in organization and structure, when compared to the European way of life. The acceptance of both spheres is the way to an evocative upcoming.

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