

# EXPLORING CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND IDENTITY IN NGUGI WA THIONG'O'S *THE RIVER BETWEEN*

## Abstract

This research paper aims to explore the theme of cultural diversity and identity in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's novel *The River Between*. The novel is set in colonial Kenya and explores the clash between traditional African customs and the influence of Western colonization. This novel is highlighting the tensions between traditional Kikuyu customs and the introduced Western ideals and practices brought by colonialism. This analysis encompasses the various characters' perspectives and their grappling with the changes and conflicts arising from the collision of cultures. This novel also expresses the various cultural elements including language, religion and gender roles, their impact on the characters and their communities. This paper seeks to shed light on the complexities of cultural diversity, identities and the challenges faced by individuals and societies in navigating their identities in a rapidly changing world.

**Keywords:** Culture, diversity, customs, identity and tradition.

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Cultural diversity is an essential aspect of human society. It reflects the richness and complexity of different traditions, beliefs and practices. It is through the exploration and understanding of diverse cultures that foster tolerance, respect and appreciation for one another. In literature, cultural diversity is often a central theme, allowing authors to delve into the intricacies and challenges of different cultural identities.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o is an acclaimed Kenyan writer and activist. He mostly focused on issues of cultural diversity, identity and the impact of colonization in his works. One such novel that exemplifies his exploration of cultural diversity is *The River Between*. It is set in colonial Kenya during the early 20th century. It presents a narrative that delves into the clash between traditional African customs and the influence of Western colonization.

In *The River Between*, Thiong'o presents a rich tapestry of cultural elements including language, religion and gender roles that shape the lives of the characters and their communities. This novel presents a vivid portrayal of cultural diversity through its depiction of two neighboring villages Kameno and Makuyu. These villages were divided by the river Honia. Kameno represents the traditional African customs and beliefs, while Makuyu embraces the new Western ideas brought by the missionaries. Through the protagonist Waiyaki, Thiong'o explores the complexities and challenges faced by individuals in navigating their cultural identities amidst the clash of these two worlds.

The complexities of cultural diversity is Waiyaki, the protagonist of the story. Waiyaki is a young man who embodies the struggle between tradition and modernity. He is torn between his loyalty to his native village of Kameno, which upholds traditional African customs and his exposure to the new Western ideas brought by the missionaries in the neighboring village of Makuyu. Stuart Hall is a prominent cultural diversity theorist. In his book *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, he states that

"Cultural identity is a matter of becoming as well as of being. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history, and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation."

In the above quotes, Stuart Hall argues that cultural identity is not fixed or static; instead, it is a dynamic and evolving process. He suggests that cultural identities are shaped by historical, social, and cultural contexts and are subject to constant change and transformation over time.

Waiyaki's journey reflects the challenges faced by individuals in preserving their cultural heritage while adapting to the changing world. He grapples with the conflict between his desire to uphold his African identity and the pressure to conform to the expectations of the Western-influenced society. Through Waiyaki's character, Thiong'o explores the internal struggle of individuals caught between different cultural worlds and the impact it has on their sense of self.

"He was torn between two worlds. The world of his forefathers beckoned him to uphold the traditions and customs of his people. But the world of the white man promised him progress, education, and a new way of life." (TRB 33)

In the above lines, he refers to the character Waiyaki. This line illustrates the internal conflict faced by Waiyaki, the protagonist, as he grapples with the clash between his cultural heritage and the allure of Western education and modernity. It reflects the complexities and challenges of navigating cultural diversity within an individual's identity.

Another character that highlights cultural diversity is Nyambura, a young woman who challenges the traditional gender roles within her community. She defies societal expectations by actively engaging in education and expressing her desire for equality between men and women. Her character represents the evolving role of women in a patriarchal society and the tensions that arise when cultural norms clash with individual aspirations.

The clash between traditional African customs and Western influence is further depicted through the interactions between the villages of Kameno and Makuyu. Kameno represents the traditional African cultural practices, language, and beliefs, while Makuyu symbolizes the intrusion of Western colonization and the adoption of Western customs and religion. The conflicts between the two villages reflect the broader tensions and struggles faced by communities in preserving their cultural heritage in the face of external pressures.

Through the characters of Waiyaki, Nyambura and the contrasting villages of Kameno and Makuyu, Thiong'o presents a nuanced exploration of cultural diversity and identity in *The River Between*. The novel highlights the complexities, challenges and tensions that arise when different cultural identities come, shedding light on the importance of understanding and respecting cultural diversity in a rapidly changing world.

In conclusion, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* offers a profound exploration of cultural diversity within the context of colonial Kenya. This research paper reveals the struggles faced by individuals in preserving their cultural heritage and their identities while adapting to a rapidly changing world. Waiyaki's internal conflict between tradition and modernity exemplifies the challenges of navigating cultural identities in the face of external pressures. Nyambura's defiance of traditional gender roles highlights the evolving role of women within a patriarchal society and the tensions that arise when cultural norms clash with individual aspirations. This novel serves as a powerful reminder of the richness and complexity of diverse cultures and the need to respect and appreciate cultural diversity to foster a more inclusive and harmonious global society.

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