



# The Politicisation of Space in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* (1965)

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**Abstract:** The research article examines the politicisation of space and ecological elements by exploring Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* (1965), exploring the complex world of cultural conflict in Kenya during colonialism. The action is set among the Gikuyu people's settlement, paying special attention to the surrounding villages of Makuyu and Kameno. The Honia river that separates them is a metaphorical symbol of the widening gap between the traditions of the Gikuyu and the emerging fabric of Christianity. The worlds of the Gikuyu are threatened and torn apart by the struggle and division emerging from the collision of the paradigms. A middle-aged conflict lies at the heart of this movement; a conflict propelled by a young man – Waiyaki – who has it at the back of his mind that he will one day be leading his people. It provides critical insight into the social, communal, and cultural complexities while portraying the representation of nature and the political situation surrounding the Gikuyu community.

This article explores the theory of Ecocriticism coined by William Rueckert in his essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*, (1978). He pioneered the study of the relationship between literature and the environment. Rueckert's work emphasized the interconnectedness of literary studies and environmental concerns. He argued that literature could provide valuable insights into ecological issues and promote a deeper understanding of humanity's place in the natural world. By examining literary texts through an ecological lens, Rueckert encouraged scholars to consider how literature reflects and shapes our perceptions of nature. The article also looks into Simon Gikandi's criticism on Ngugi wa Thiong'o as an African writer. Gikandi explores how Ngugi's characters grapple with the complexities of postcolonial identity, caught between the desire to reclaim their African heritage and the unavoidable influence of Western culture. He examines how Ngugi's novels portray the tension between tradition and modernity, and the challenges of forging a new identity in the aftermath of colonial rule.

Through an understanding of theoretical frameworks and earlier research on Ecocriticism, cultural identity, hybridity, subaltern studies, the concept of 'self' and 'other', through the critical works of William Rueckert, Stuart Hall, Homi K. Baba, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Edward Said respectively. Therefore it seeks to showcase the essence and importance of nature and its representation in literature, focusing on the politicisation of space through nature and natural elements. *The River Between* not only critiques colonial practices but also celebrates the resilience of indigenous cultures, advocating for a nuanced understanding of identity in the face of historical upheaval. As such, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's narrative remains an essential contribution to postcolonial literature, offering insights that resonate with ongoing discussions of culture, identity, and resistance in contemporary society.

**Index Terms - Ecocriticism, Cultural Identity, Colonialism, Hybridity, Environmental Representation**

## I. INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the politicisation of space and the representation of nature by focusing on the symbolism reflected in literature. It focuses on nature as an integral part of literature and its role in portraying the social, political, cultural, and regional situation. It also focuses on the effects of colonialism on Africa and how literature serves as a medium for transmitting these experiences.

### Ecocriticism

It is a cross-disciplinary initiative that aims to explore the environmental dimensions of literature and other creative media in an environmentally conscious manner that is not constrained by any particular approach or dedication. It was coined by William Rueckert in his essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* (1978). Rueckert has described ecocriticism as a vital and transformative approach that seeks to bridge the gap between literature and ecological awareness, emphasizing the necessity of integrating ecological concepts into literary studies, suggesting that literature can serve as a medium for fostering a deeper understanding of our relationship with the environment. He argues that literature should not be viewed in isolation but rather as part of a larger ecological framework that includes the natural world and human interactions with it. He states, "The problem now, as most ecologists agree, is to find ways of keeping the human community from destroying the natural community, and with it the human community" (Rueckert, 1978, p. 121).

He states, "I am going to try to discover something about the ecology of literature, or try to develop an ecological poetics by applying ecological concepts to the reading, teaching, and writing about literature" ((Rueckert, 1978, p. 107). Rueckert also emphasizes the interconnectedness of all elements within the literary and ecological realms. He invokes the first law of ecology: "Everything is connected to everything else" (Rueckert, 1978, p. 109), as he sees literature, especially poetry, as part of an interconnected system where energy is stored, transferred, and regenerated. He also suggests that literature has a regenerative power, much like photosynthesis in plants, which sustains the intellectual and emotional life of human beings, by stating that, "Poems are green plants among us; if poets are suns, then poems are green plants among us for they clearly arrest energy on its path to entropy" (Rueckert, 1978, p. 111). Rueckert argues that ecocriticism is necessary due to the growing environmental crisis. He emphasizes that literature must be engaged with ecological issues, stating, "Bringing literature and ecology together is a lesson in the harshest, cruelest realities of our profession" (Rueckert, 1978, p. 108). He believes that literary studies must move beyond aesthetic appreciation and address real-world ecological concerns.

Therefore, William Rueckert's exploration of ecocriticism underscores the critical need to integrate ecological awareness into literary studies. By advocating for ecological poetics, Rueckert emphasizes that literature can serve as a powerful tool for fostering a deeper understanding of our relationship with the environment and inspiring meaningful action. He critiques the traditional separation of literary analysis from ecological concerns, urging critics and readers alike to recognize the interconnectedness of human and natural systems, stating, "The problem now, as most ecologists agree, is to find ways of keeping the human community from destroying the natural community, and with it the human community" (Rueckert, 1978, p. 121). Also highlight the historical engagement of literature with ecological themes, drawing on the works of influential authors to illustrate how literary texts can reflect and shape our ecological consciousness. He notes, "The complex web in which all life is enmeshed, and man's place in it, are clearly—and beautifully—described in the poems of Walt Whitman, in Melville's *Moby Dick* and everywhere in Emerson and Thoreau" (Rueckert, 1978, p. 122). Rueckert envisions a future where literary discourse contributes to a more sustainable and harmonious existence within the biosphere. He emphasizes, "where there is no ecological vision, the people will perish" (Rueckert, 1978, p. 123).

### Postcolonialism and Ecocriticism

Postcolonialism as a theoretical discourse endeavour to critically assess how colonialism persists and lingers in literature and culture. These writers from places formerly colonized by an empire deal with the consequences of colonial rule, frequently taking a stand against stereotypical paradigms built during the colonial era. This discourse further assiduously analyses how literature produced by the colonies reinforced and, often, still enshrined certain specifically simplified and generally prejudiced views of the colonized "other." Reading such literature opens up possibilities for a greater comprehension of the complex dynamics of power about colonialism and postcolonialism. The central theme of postcolonial literature is that of identity, particularly the hybrid identities that arise in postcolonial societies. These are usually fragmented and complex

identities founded on cultural transmissions resulting from the intersection of the indigenous cultures and those of the colonizer. Writers often cleverly highlight the contradictions between competing cultural influences in the struggle to form a self after the colonial regime. Through their writing, authors can reclaim their histories, challenge colonial narratives, and assert their cultural identities. This resistance can manifest in various ways, from subtle acts of defiance to more overt forms of protest.

The intersection of postcolonialism and ecocriticism emerges in the recognition that colonialism has profoundly impacted the environment and ecological practices in colonized regions. Colonial powers often exploited natural resources, leading to environmental degradation and the disruption of indigenous ecological knowledge and practices. Postcolonial ecocriticism examines how colonial histories have shaped contemporary environmental issues, advocating for the voices and perspectives of Indigenous peoples and marginalized communities in environmental discourse.

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) addresses the concept of postcolonialism by examining the lingering effects of colonialism on both the colonizers and the colonized. He argues that the Western representation of the East has not only shaped perceptions during the colonial era but continues to influence contemporary views and interactions. Said emphasizes that the narratives constructed by Western scholars and artists often serve to reinforce stereotypes and maintain a sense of superiority over Eastern cultures, which can be seen as a form of cultural imperialism that persists even after formal colonial rule has ended. He notes, "The Oriental is not an innocent, but a constructed subject, a product of the Western imagination" (Said, 1978, p. 204).

When applying this concept to nature, the Self can be seen as representing a human-centric worldview that prioritizes human needs, desires, and rationality over the intrinsic value of the natural world. In this view, nature is often seen as a resource to be exploited, controlled, and dominated. The Other, in this context, can represent the natural world itself, which is frequently portrayed as wild, chaotic, and in need of human intervention or management. This relationship reflects a broader anthropocentric perspective, where humans position themselves as separate from and superior to nature. Such a viewpoint can lead to environmental degradation, as the natural world is treated as an object rather than a complex system of interdependent relationships. The exploitation of nature is often justified through the lens of progress and civilization, echoing the colonial mindset that justified the domination of other cultures. A more ecocritical approach encourages a re-evaluation of the Self-Other dynamic, advocating for a recognition of the interconnectedness of humans and nature. This perspective emphasizes the importance of understanding nature as a partner rather than an adversary, promoting a more sustainable and respectful relationship. By acknowledging the Otherness of nature, societies can begin to appreciate its intrinsic value and the wisdom embedded in indigenous ecological practices.

Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994), he describes postcolonialism as a complex interplay of cultural identities that emerge from the historical context of colonialism. He emphasizes that postcolonial identities are not fixed but are instead characterized by hybridity, ambivalence, and the negotiation of cultural differences. He states, "Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and its contradictions" (p. 112), focusing on how colonialism generates new cultural forms and identities that emerge from the interaction of different cultural influences. Bhabha also addresses the ambivalence inherent in postcolonial identities, highlighting the complexities of cultural representation. He notes, "The ambivalent identification of the racist world turns on the idea of man as his alienated image" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 5). This statement reflects the dual consciousness experienced by individuals in a colonial context, where their identities are shaped by both their own cultural heritage and the imposed identities of the colonizers.

Homi K. Bhabha's concept of identity in relation to nature is intricately tied to his exploration of cultural hybridity and the complexities of postcolonial identity. He challenges the traditional dichotomies of nature versus culture, suggesting that identity is not a fixed essence but rather a fluid construct shaped by historical and social contexts. Bhabha argues that the colonial experience disrupts the notion of a singular, authentic identity, leading to a more nuanced understanding of how identities are formed and expressed. He emphasizes that identity is often constructed through the interplay of various cultural influences, which can be seen as a form of "cultural translation." He states, "The act of cultural translation is a process of negotiation, where the meanings of identity are not simply transferred but transformed" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 135).

Bhabha also critiques the essentialist views of identity that often associate it with a specific cultural or natural heritage. He posits that such views can lead to the marginalization of hybrid identities that emerge in postcolonial contexts. He writes, "The boundaries of identity are not fixed; they are constantly being redefined through the experiences of individuals who navigate multiple cultural landscapes" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 219). This perspective highlights the importance of recognizing the fluidity of identity and how it is influenced by both cultural and natural elements.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *Can The Subaltern Speak* (1985) articulates a critical perspective on the complexities surrounding the notion of the "subaltern" and the ability to speak from that position. She emphasizes that postcolonialism must engage with how Western intellectuals often extract and present narratives about the colonies, frequently without allowing those who are marginalized a space in which to articulate their own experiences. Spivak asserts, "That inaccessible blankness circumscribed by an interpretable text is what a postcolonial critic of imperialism would like to see developed within the European enclosure as the place of the production of theory" (Spivak,1985,p.13). Moreover, she encapsulates the project of epistemic violence that constructs colonial subjects as Others, describing it as "the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other" (Spivak,1985,p.7).

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the subaltern exploring how representations of marginalized voices intersect with ecological concerns. By criticizing the dualism often present in Western thought that separates humanity from the natural world and argues for an understanding of the interconnectedness of these domains. She suggests that the traditional narratives of subjectivity in the West obscure their geopolitical determinations and ecological realities. In her analysis, Spivak contends, "Curiously enough, the self-sacrifice of gods is sanctioned by natural ecology...rather than by self-knowledge" (Spivak,1985,p.16). She elaborates on the idea that societal constructs, such as family and community structures rooted in cultural practices, often rely on an interconnected relationship with nature. Spivak states, "...implicitly defining the family and the mother tongue as the ground level where culture and convention seem nature's way of organizing 'her' own subversion" (Spivak,1985,p.6). This duality is evident in her assertion that for women, "...room is made to sanction suicides that cannot claim truth-knowledge" (Spivak,1985,p.16), underscoring how the subaltern experience often activates deeper relationships with both cultural traditions and natural environments.

### **Nature's relation to African Literature**

Anthony Chennells in his article *Essential Diversity: Post-Colonial Theory and African Literature* (1999), describes African Literature as a critique of colonialism, Chennells notes that figures like Chinua Achebe emphasize the necessity of representing African cultures authentically, challenging the idea that Africa's past was merely "one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans... delivered them"(Chennells,1999,p.12). This assertion places African voices at the forefront of historical narratives, countering colonial depictions. Postcolonial African writing springs from the perplexing histories of colonization, resistance, and struggle for independence. This literature emerges from societies ensnared in their colonial institutions, which often included reassertment of foreign identities and disruption of established traditional systems or cultures. Implicit in this discourse, some writers are engaged in an arduous task and grapple with issues of identity and displacement, providing a reflection of the complicated realities that individual lives and communities faced following the end of colonial rule.

The intricate relationship between nature and culture is a dominant theme in postcolonial African literature. Nature is not merely a backdrop against which human activities unfold; rather, it is imbued with meaning, serving as a powerful symbol that reflects the complexities of identity, colonization, resistance, and resilience. The representation of nature in this literary tradition often oscillates between the romantic idealization of the natural world and a critical engagement with the socio-political realities imposed by colonial powers. In many postcolonial African texts, nature is a key element in the affirmation of cultural identity. Authors frequently invoke the natural landscape—forests, rivers, mountains—as symbols of belonging and heritage. Nature embodies the collective memory of communities, reminding characters and readers alike of ancestral ties and cultural roots.

Different elements of nature carry distinct symbolic meanings within postcolonial narratives. Rivers often symbolize life and sustenance, while mountains can represent both obstacles and aspirations. In many works, the act of farming and cultivating the land becomes intertwined with themes of agency and autonomy. The cyclical nature of agricultural practices is portrayed not just as a means of survival but also as an assertion of cultural identity and continuity amidst colonial forces that seek to disrupt traditional practices.

In the realm of resistance literature, nature serves as both a metaphor and a battlefield. Authors like Ayi Kwei Armah and Mariama Bâ depict the struggle against colonial and post-colonial oppression through vivid representations of natural landscapes. In these narratives, the elements often reflect the prevailing mood of the characters, acting as agents of change or regression. The use of stormy weather, dry land, or flourishing gardens can signify social upheaval or the promise of renewal, thereby mirroring the internal conflicts faced by individuals and communities in their quest for empowerment.

Moreover, the reclamation of nature becomes an act of rebellion against colonial narratives that sought to silence indigenous voices. In this context, the portrayal of lush, fertile landscapes post-colonization serves to reinforce the idea of regeneration, highlighting the resilience of communities that, despite historical traumas, continue to nurture their connections to the land.

## II. The Politicisation of Space in *The River Between* (1965)

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* presents a detailed portrayal of colonial Kenya, where cultural conflict and ecological symbolism intertwine to shape the socio-political landscape. The novel is set during the early years of British colonial rule in Kenya and highlights the deep-rooted struggles faced by the Gikuyu people as they navigate through the tension between their traditional values and the imposed Western ideologies. The setting of *The River Between*, particularly the two opposing villages of Makuyu and Kameno, symbolizes the ideological split within Gikuyu culture. This divide is further reinforced through the Honia River, which functions as a metaphor for both unity and separation. The river represents a sacred space—one that carries the memories, traditions, and spirit of the Gikuyu people—while also serving as a physical and ideological divide between those who embrace colonial influence and those who resist it. . As it also stands as an potent symbol, representing the traditional Gikuyu values that are being threatened by colonial influences. As Ngugi writes, "The river was a living thing that had seen time... it held secrets of people who laid their lives on its banks" (Ngugi, 1965).

One of the central themes of the novel is the conflict between tradition and modernity, particularly as it pertains to identity formation and the preservation of indigenous knowledge systems. The central conflict in the novel arises from the collision of traditional Gikuyu beliefs and the imposition of Christianity. This tension is embodied in the character of Waiyaki, who struggles with the expectations placed upon him as a leader while navigating his allegiance to both worlds. Waiyaki embodies this struggle as he seeks to educate his people while remaining respectful of their cultural heritage. His commitment to the tribe is evident when he states, "He had taken the oath of loyalty to the purity of the tribe" (Ngugi, 1965,p.45).

Space is frequently viewed in postcolonial discourse as a locus of resistance where indigenous cultures oppose imperial domination. This battle is reflected in Waiyaki's attempts to create an autonomous Gikuyu educational system since, he viewed education as the future light. His idea of a hybrid space is one in which indigenous emancipation, not servitude, may be achieved through Western education. His inability to completely identify with any group, however, highlights how challenging it is to negotiate identity in a colonised area. The text raises ecological consciousness by highlighting the interconnectedness between the characters and the natural world, aligning with Rueckert's emphasis on fostering ecological awareness and representing the environment when he states, "We must formulate an ecological poetics" (Ngugi, 1965,p. 118) The novel effectively uses the physical landscape to symbolize internal and external conflicts faced by the characters, aligning with Rueckert's emphasis on analyzing the symbolism of nature and ecological imagery in literature when he states, "Properly understood, poems can be studied as models for energy flow, community building, and ecosystems" (Ngugi, 1965,p. 104). In *The River Between* nature is rich with symbolism, representing various themes such as cultural identity, spirituality, and the interconnectedness of the characters with their environment like the forest symbolizes the ancestral heritage and spiritual connection of the Gikuyu people, representing a sacred space that is threatened by colonial influences. "The forest was the abode of the spirits of the ancestors." (Ngugi, 1965,p.42). The land and crops symbolize fertility, resilience, and the cyclical nature of life, reflecting the community's connection to the earth and their agricultural traditions.

"The peas and beans, bursting into life, gave color and youth to the land." ( Ngugi, 1965,p.67), the sacred grove represents a space of spiritual significance and cultural tradition, embodying the community's resistance to external influences. "This place she was in was sacred too" (Ngugi, 1965,p.123) and the Honia River symbolizes the meeting point of tradition and change, reflecting the characters' internal conflicts and the impact of colonialism on their cultural identity. "The Honia river was the symbol of life and death, of purity and pollution." (Ngugi, 1965,p.81)

Waiyaki's character He embodies the hybrid identity discussed by Homi K. Bhabha, "Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and its contradictions" (Ngugi, 1965,p. 112), caught in the "third space" between tradition and modernity. Waiyaki's dilemma highlights the tension in postcolonial identity formation, where individuals must navigate inherited traditions and imposed foreign influences. His role as a mediator is further complicated by the deep-seated mistrust of both factions, who view his attempts

at unity with suspicion, reflecting Bhabha's idea of the ambivalence, "The ambivalent identification of the racist world turns on the idea of man as his alienated image" (Ngugi, 1965, p. 5). Which inherent in hybrid identities and Muthoni embraces aspects of Western culture while trying to maintain her Gikuyu roots. The characters in the novel embody this hybridity as they navigate the complexities of their cultural identity. They are neither fully traditional nor fully Westernized, but rather occupy a space in between, reflecting the multifaceted nature of identity in a postcolonial society.

*In The River Between*, Christianity and colonial education are depicted as tools of ideological control, reinforcing the perception of African traditions as "backward" and in need of salvation. The novel challenges these imperialist assumptions, asserting the legitimacy of indigenous knowledge systems. The representation of Joshua, the Christian convert, exemplifies how colonialism not only imposes foreign values but also cultivates internal agents who perpetuate colonial ideologies within their own communities. The portrayal of characters who embrace colonial influence reveals the internalized oppression and divisions created by the colonizers, further complicating the struggle for autonomy. Said's theory contributes to postcolonial critique by highlighting the impact of Orientalist representations on non-Western societies and the complexities of cultural negotiation and resistance. In the context of the novel engages with postcolonial critique by foregrounding the experiences of the Gikuyu community and offering a critical perspective on the Orientalist construction of the "other." As Said states "The white man had put a knife on the things that held us together and we had fallen apart." reflecting the disintegration of indigenous culture and community due to colonial influence. (Said, 1978, P.123)

Spivak's critique of the subaltern's voice is particularly relevant in *The River Between*. The Gikuyu people, though vocal, find their resistance systematically undermined by colonial narratives. Waiyaki, as a leader, attempts to bridge the gap between the subaltern (his people) and the colonial authority, yet his inability to fully integrate both perspectives ultimately leads to his downfall. The Gikuyu resistance is further fragmented by internal divisions, demonstrating how colonialism exacerbates existing fractures within indigenous societies. Spivak's concept of "epistemic violence" is evident in how colonial powers impose their worldview, silencing indigenous knowledge systems and rewriting history to serve imperial interests. By stating "The clearest available example of such epistemic violence is the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other." (Spivak, 1985, p.76)

### III. Conclusion

In conclusion, the examination of the politicisation of space in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* reveals a profound interplay between colonial histories, cultural identity, and ecological awareness. The narrative serves as a critical lens through which we can understand the complexities of postcolonial identity formation. The impact of colonialism is evident in the characters' struggles, reflecting the fragmented identities that arise in societies grappling with their colonial past. This aligns with the postcolonial discourse that critiques the oversimplified representations of the colonized "other," emphasizing the hybrid identities that emerge from the intersection of indigenous cultures and colonial influences. It is not merely a backdrop but an integral part of the narrative that symbolizes the socio-political landscape. The representation of nature highlights the characters' struggles and aspirations, reinforcing the idea that literature can serve as a medium for understanding our relationship with the environment. This perspective resonates with ecocriticism, which advocates for the integration of ecological concepts into literary studies, suggesting that literature can foster a deeper awareness of environmental issues.

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