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Boundary-Breaking Love and The Modern Nation-State: Ngũgĩwa Thiong'o's *The River Between* and *Weep Not, Child*

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ABSTRACT

The work of Kenyan writer, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, is striking for the dominance of the intimate relationships it displays. From the first novels in the early 1960s to the novels published in the past few years, romantic love seems to play a very significant role in Ngũgĩ's understanding of the degraded society around him and his vision of a future better society. This is the case for his short fiction and plays also. Politically, Ngũgĩ identifies himself as a Marxist, anticolonialist/imperialist, anti-capitalist writer, for whom there is no contradiction between an aesthetic and political project. The paper explores the role of the romantic love relationship in Ngũgĩ's first two novels: *Weep Not, Child* and *The River Between*. It considers the specifics of the relationships presented across these two novels and the significance of these relationships. Key ideas include love as breaking boundaries of ethnicity, religion and class in the creation of a modern nation, in which traditional cultural values are still held dear by Ngũgĩ. The paper juxtaposes Ngũgĩ's attempt to conceptualize intimate relationship in the two novels to that of Sommer's study of the Latin-American romances of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century. The findings indicate that Ngũgĩ's romantic reconciliation championed in the two novels as compared to Sommer's "erotics and politics" seemed unattainable. The implication reveals that the Latin American romances brought about unity and reconciliation in building the nation while Ngũgĩ's romances seem to divide the Kenyan nation rather than bridging the gap created by education and Christianity. This paper concludes that romantic love fails as a unifier while the love of mother emerges as a saviour.

INTRODUCTION

> *He too thought of the people and what they would say now if they saw them walking together… Nyambura was not circumcised. But this was not a crime. Something passed between them as two human beings, untainted with religion, social conventions or any tradition.* (*The River Between*76)
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> *On the whole, she knew that her father must be right and Ngotho had behaved badly towards his benefactor. But she saw this only as a Jacobo-Ngotho affair that had nothing to do with her relationship with Njoroge. Her world and Njoroge's world stood somewhere outside petty prejudices, hatreds and class differences"* (*Weep Not, Child* 88).

From the outset of his career, Ngũgĩ's narratives have included important romantic love subplots that have formed a major part of the main plots of his novels. The significance of romantic love is clearly indicated in the epigraphs to this chapter, which also highlight the political weight carried by romantic love in Ngũgĩ's fiction. Both epigraphs emphasise the research problem that reveals Ngũgĩ's romantic love, in particular, which is tasked with bringing a divided people together. Throughout Ngũgĩ's novels, there is the depiction of social divisions in diverse forms. In the early novels, Ngũgĩ attempts to use education and romantic love to unite a divided people. With subsequent novels, Ngũgĩ explores love across different class lines in his bid to reconcile the nation.In *The River Between* (1965), the most significant division is between African traditional religion, particularly Gĩkũyũ beliefs, and Christianity. We read in the opening pages the pre-history to the story that will be told. We are presented with a narrative about the deadlocked "peaceful" coexistence between the two ridges, Kameno and Makuyu, with the very highly symbolic Honia River running between them, dividing but also possibly bringing them together. Depending on one's vantage point, the two ridges are either heaven-ascending parts of an idyllic landscape, or they are "sleeping lions" aroused: "They became antagonists. You could tell this, not by anything tangible but by the way they faced each other, like two rivals ready to come to blows in a life and death struggle for the leadership of this isolated region" (1). Waiyaki and Nyambura are brought together by love, and attempt to unite the division between their com-

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munities with their love. The differences between Gĩkũyũ tradition and Christianity come to be symbolised specifically by the ritual of circumcision, as the first epigraph suggests. In *Weep Not, Child* (1964), the main division that emerges is the division between different classes of Kenyans who, because of differences of status, act in contrary political ways, a factor indicated in the second epigraph. The story opens with the assured tone of the illuminated future of the protagonist, Njoroge, who enrolls in school while his brother, Kamau, opts for an apprenticeship as a carpenter. Njoroge's elation is based on the assurance that he will be able to secure his father's family land that is captured as a result of the white man's invasion. The white settler, Mr Hawlands, acquires the lands from Ngotho's family and employs Ngotho and others as labourers to work for the white settler. The most significant division that needs to be healed in the story is not the division between the indigenous people and the colonisers who occupy the land, but rather the differences between Kenyans of different classes and political persuasions. The ideas reflected in the epigraphs will be analysed in detail in the body of this chapter. Although *Weep Not, Child* was published one year before *The River Between*, as was mentioned in the introductory chapter, in terms of the order of composition and the timeline of Kenyan history, *The River Between* was the "first" novel by Ngũgĩ. This chapter will follow the latter order, analysing *The River Between* before *Weep Not, Child*.

In both these early novels, we see that the narratives have more invested in the romantic love relationships presented compared with other relationships of love, for example, the love for parents or the love for siblings. However, it must be noted that in *Weep Not, Child*, the relationship with the mother(s) prove(s) stronger than the romantic relationship. Despite this, it is clear that a major part of the tension in both novels is created by the romantic love subplot. Subsequently, romantic love is shown in these novels to play a very similar nation-building role to the one described by Doris Sommer's seminal work *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (1991), the importance of which will now be outlined.

Sommer's study of the Latin-American romances of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century suggests that romance novels played a very important role in consolidating an idea of modern Latin-American nationhood. Romantic love achieved this through the ways in which its representation in novels broke boundaries in the love relationships of "star-crossed lovers" across lines of "regions, races, parties, economic interests, and the like" (Sommer 5). In this way, eros challenged both colonialist and ethnic and/or religious practices. Sommer uses the word "romance" to suggest both a love story but also, in its earlier medieval sense, romance is used as a term for a genre "more boldly allegorical than the novel" (5). In Ngũgĩ's novels also, we see this double sense of romance emerging where the romance plots also play a strongly allegorical role. Both James Ogude's and Simon Gikandi's monographs highlight the powerful allegories of romance in Ngũgĩ's novels. The many Latin-American love stories analysed by Sommer highlight the connection between the nation and the family; in other words, domestic romances draw an analogy between the family and the nation, stressing unity and "fruitfulness" through growing the family in the next generation. Drawing on Foucault's work on the history of sexuality and on Benedict Anderson's study of the imagined community of the modern nation (32–40), Sommer's study suggests that there is a relationship between modern ideas of love and patriotism. Erotic relationships that are freely chosen by individuals from backgrounds that are in opposition to each other are employed in the novels and novellas to transcend differences. In other words, they are used to facilitate a project of national coherence. Sommer argues that sex and nation are not inseparable, and that transformations in ideas about intimate relations are deeply tied up with transformations in ideas about social collectivities, especially the modern nation-state. Reconfigured love relationships thus form an "erotics of politics" (6) that show "how a variety of novel national ideals are all ostensibly grounded in 'natural' heterosexual love and in the marriages that provided a figure for apparently nonviolent consolidation during internecine conflicts" (6).We see romantic love playing a similar role in Ngũgĩ's novels generally, but especially in the early novels of Ngũgĩ's Christian humanist phase.

Although the nuances of Sommer's analysis of the Latin-American novels are not applicable to the analysis of Ngũgĩ's novels, nevertheless the main argument, as outlined above, is very relevant. For this reason, Sommer's work is alluded to also by Simon Gikandi, but his exploration, in my view, does not proceed sufficiently deeply to explore all the nuances of the connections between romantic love and politics in the novels. In the early novels, as the close analysis below will show, Ngũgĩ's narratives attempt to bring regions, religions, and classes together through passionate alliances. But, unlike the Latin-American novels, Ngũgĩ's novels cannot be called "romances" since they do not reflect the wish-fulfilment of true romance novels that end happily in the marriage of the protagonists. Ngũgĩ's early novels end with love unrequited, unconsummated, or blocked by other social forces. In other words, the novels' conclusions are complexly open-ended as far as the main plots are concerned, but the *romance* subplots end unhappily. Ngũgĩ, we see, employs romantic love as part of an exploration of his socio-political vision but in the two early novels the utopia of a Kenyan nation symbolically united through romantic relationships is not achieved as it is in the Latin-American romance novels analysed by Sommer. Like in the Latin-American novels, Ngũgĩ attempts to "locate an erotics of politics" (Sommer 6) in his early fiction as part of national development but, for complex reasons to be explored further in the chapter, Ngũgĩ does not succeed in the two early novels.

A NATION DIVIDED: NGŨGĨ'S "THINGS FALL APART" IN THE EARLY NOVELS

Symbolically, romantic love in the early novels of Ngũgĩ appears potentially as the unification of a divided nation. In this respect, Ngũgĩ adopts an idea of Africa and of the African nation that only came into existence with the arrival of

colonialism. As the East African scholar Ali Mazrui suggests, the idea that "we are all African" is a concept that came into being only in relation to European imperialism in Africa. Mazrui writes that "it took colonialism to inform Africans that they were African" (Mazrui 90), and similarly it took colonialism to produce the concept of the modern nation-state united across tribe, clan and cultures. Thus, rather than writing the future of a particular ethnic group, Ngũgĩ tries to write a future Kenyan nation into being, and by projecting an African continental alliance, as a form of united resistance to the colonialism he documents very carefully in his novels. Since his narratives have local specificity, he writes his stories mainly through Gĩkũyũ culture, a factor that some critics have found problematic (Gikandi 60). But, despite the Gĩkũyũ overtones, from the beginning of his career, Ngũgĩ's concern is with the modern Kenyan nation, and by extension Africa, both of which are concepts that emerge as a response to colonialism.

As was noted above, the order of writing, rather than publication, of the novels follows the historical timeline of colonialism, of which Jomo Kenyatta's *Facing Mount Kenya* (1961) provides one of the most readable histories. Kenyatta's *Facing Mount Kenya* is an exploration of the tribal life of the Gĩkũyũ, including the peasants and their farmlands, preparation before and after marriage, and the sexual life style of the youth after initiation. According to Kenyatta, the tradition of the Gĩkũyũ was regarded as sinful in the perception of the European missionaries. However, traditionally the Gĩkũyũ man was trained "to develop the technique of self-control in matters of sex" (159). The book is widely read and is cited in almost all the scholarly works on the history of Kenya. Gĩkũyũ territories witnessed intrusion from European missionaries during the early days of colonisation. For Kenyatta, Africans were deprived of their customs. More importantly, they were detached from their families and tribal traditions and "expected to follow the white man's religion without questioning whether it was suited to his condition of life or not" (Kenyatta 270–71). Not long after the coming of the European missionaries, the colonial administration and British settlers followed. As a consequence of these incursions, a large population of Gĩkũyũ natives became squatters on farms on European lands in various districts of Kenya. These are the *muhoi* or squatters, repeatedly referred to in Ngũgĩ's novels. To a large extent, Kenyatta's work influences Ngũgĩ. Kenyatta, like Ngũgĩ, gives an account of missionaries and colonisers and their effect on the Gĩkũyũ. Kenyatta, unlike Ngũgĩ, includes a consideration of indigenous sexual customs and personal relations, and European perceptions of, and effects on, them. Both Kenyatta and Ngũgĩ explore the transformation that ensued in the lives of Gĩkũyũ natives that created great disruption among the people. But it is only Kenyatta who critically compares indigenous and colonial conceptions of personal relationships, especially as they pertain to marriage.

The River Between presents the earliest period of British colonial history in Kenya and *Weep Not, Child* a later period when Britain had already established its disputed control. Even though Ngũgĩ is often regarded as romanticising the pre-colonial past (Ogude 110), we see in *The River Between* that the divisions that develop as a consequence of colonialism are already there before the colonists arrive. There is a rivalry between the two ridges and the people who live on them that is explained by Gĩkũyũ mythology. The people of Kameno believe that Gĩkũyũ and Mumbi, the Gĩkũyũ mythological mother and father, stopped near Kameno where the boundaries of Gĩkũyũ country were established by the high god, Murungu. So near Kameno, "a sacred grove had sprung out of the place where Gĩkũyũ and Mumbi stood; people paid homage to it" (2). The sacred grove acquires a new importance in relation to the personal story of the love of the main protagonists in the story, who themselves are subtly presented as modern-day embodiments of Mumbi and Gĩkũyũ. Furthermore, most Gĩkũyũ heroes are believed to have originated in Kameno — "heroes and leaders" like Mugowa Kibiro, the great seer of old, who first prophesied the coming of the "white men" (2) as "many butterflies, of many colours, flying about over the land, disrupting the peace and the ordered life of the country" (19). The next hero from Kameno was Kamiri, the great witch and magician, "whose witchery" astonished the white men, but who was made powerless when lured by the white men with "smiles and gifts" (2). Another important leader, Wachiori, a great warrior from Kameno, prevented a defeat by the Maasai but he was later killed by a white man. Thus what we see is that in one way or another, the importance of Kameno is linked to the transformation that begins with the white men's invasion. Both the protagonist, Waiyaki, and his father, Chege, carry the legacy begun by earlier Kameno heroes. These claims to pre-eminence are disputed by Makuyu. Thus, the struggle for leadership between Kameno and Makuyu pre-dates the arrival of the colonists, but it takes on a new form and a new intensity after the influence of Christian religion and British colonialism. In the context of these intensified divisions, the love between the hero, Waiyaki, and the heroine, Nyambura, becomes a kind of magical charm that will bring the ridges together again, much like the river Honia, which divides but also brings the two peaks together.

The divisions that exist are intensified during the period of colonial rule when the ethnic groups in Kenya experience land losses, with different groups responding in politically different ways, as we see with Ngotho and Jacobo in *Weep Not, Child*. Most of the natives from Kikuyu and Maasai territories were displaced, since they began losing their lands to white settlers around 1934. The people became squatters with the white settlers as landlords. George Bennett and Alison Smith's "Kenya: From 'White Man's Country' to Kenyatta's State 1945-1963*"*in *History of East Africa* consider historical records indicating that the European settlers became dominant in the Kenyan lands and they note that "following the end of the [Second World] war some 8,ooo white immigrants came out to join them [settlers], actively encouraged by the British government" (Bennett and Smith 112). Fred G. Burke's study on the "Political Evolution in Kenya" discusses the effects of European encroachment on the Kenyan lands and the benefits the Europeans derived from the employment of Africans to work as peasants on lands (Burke 197). *Weep Not, Child* covers the period of Kenyan history where British colonial administration is secure and the land is largely in the hands of British settlers.

As with *The River Between*, in *Weep Not, Child* it is the question of leadership and ownership of the land that results in the greatest divisions. The divisions emerge from social class, politics, religion and education. The most significant division that needs to be healed in the story is not the division between the indigenous people and the colonisers who occupy the land. The division that is the main focus of the complexities of the narrative is the division between the people themselves, especially the people who have been made homeless or *muhoi*, by the treachery of the indigenous comprador class. It is this tearing of the social fabric that Njoroge and Mwihaki, the romantic hero and heroine in *Weep Not, Child*, have to stitch together.

For the most part, scholarship on the early novels does not really focus on the passionate alliances that this thesis proposes are crucial to an understanding of Ngũgĩ's writing. Scholarship on *The River Between* and *Weep Not, Child* reveals a number of trends, none of which deeply considers the importance of the romantic love relationships represented. A few studies consider the question of leadership in *The River Between* very closely (Lovesey; Williams; Cook and Okenimkpe). Oliver Lovesey carefully explores the repeated historical confrontations that lead to the leadership struggle between Waiyaki and his rival, Kamau, the son of Kabonyi. For Patrick Williams, this leadership struggle is the thing that ultimately destroys Waiyaki, rather than any of the other challenges he faces — it is the "nub of power struggle which destroys Waiyaki" (25). Cook and Okenimkpe indirectly use the analysis of the novels to present a vision of ideal leadership — how young readers should become responsible leaders. They advise that "leadership must not become distanced from the throng" and that the leader ought to cooperate with all (30). A number of studies also closely centre on the antagonism and potential reconciliation between the ridges of Makuyu and Kameno, which generates into serious tension between the tribe, on the one hand, and Christianity, on the other (Narang 46; Killam 21). Patrick Williams suggests further that the geographical separation, historical rivalry and growing contemporary antagonism between the ridges of Kameno and Makuyu are paradigmatic of the organisation of the novel (23). Elleke Boehmer's study of *The River Between* foregrounds the representation of women in the novel and highlights the politics of Muthoni's attitude to circumcision (181). Similarly, Clifford Robson suggests that the clash between the old and new, which is geographically represented by Kameno and Makuyu, is brought out at a "symbolic level by the custom of circumcision" (8).

Most studies of *Weep Not, Child* do not consider romantic love either, but tend to read the novel as a novel of development or education. According to Lovesey, the narrative of *Weep Not, Child* is an "autobiographical coming-of-age" novel with mythic dimensions (34). G.D. Killam, for example, explores the tensions of an education that is bound up with the Christian religion (36–37). Brendon Nicholls, among other critics, foregrounds a gender analysis of this novel, concluding that patriarchal forms of oppression persist in Ngũgĩ's vision.

Although the studies enumerated above offer exegeses and critical insights of the two novels, *The River Between* and *Weep Not, Child*, examinations of intimate relationships in the two novels is sometimes alluded to, but do not form a dedicated focus. Eros is a major part, however, of the reading of these two novels in the monographs by Ogude and Gikandi, which will be detailed further later. It is also a strong focus in Apollo Amoko's article "The Resemblance of Colonial Mimicry: A Revisionary Reading of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *The River Between*". Amoko argues that "Waiyaki's romantic relationship with Nyambura is a problematic allegory for the eventual reconciliation and reunification of Makuyu and Kameno" (36). He further describes the love between Waiyaki and Nyambura as a "union of gendered unequals" (48) since Waiyaki is described as "an articulate, educated visionary" while Nyambura is presented as a "rather less articulate, less educated [partner]" (48). Elias Bongmba also offers a similar view in his article "On Love: Literary Images of a Phenomenology of Love in Ngũgĩwa Thiong'o's *The River Between*". He focuses on the subject of love between Waiyaki and Nyambura as "an expression of eros which can be considered an alternative path for resolving conflicts imposed by the colonial experience" (388). He describes the intense passion that exists between Waiyaki and Nyambura as a love that involves a "vision for their future and the future of their people" (388), which is more than simple sexuality. The reading of romantic love in the two early novels in this chapter draws on the analyses of other scholars, but will go significantly further in its consideration of eros. I agree with Amoko's and Bongmba's assertions on the crucial role romantic love play in resolving conflicts between a divided people. The thesis as a whole will also track the developments and transformations of the conception of romantic love across Ngũgĩ's career.

The significance of romance has been identified by both Ogude and Gikandi in their monographs on the work of Ngũgĩ. Ogude focuses mainly on the allegorical nature of the romance plots in the novels, especially the allegorical representation of female characters. Ogude thus presents a gender studies approach to romantic love. Gikandi also focuses on the romance dimension in the two early novels, citing Sommer's *Foundational Fictions*. Gikandi uses the romance plots to show up the contradictions in the political and individual desires of the male characters. This chapter, by contrast, explores romance in more detail than in the monographs by Ogude and Gikandi, and will show the centrality of the romantic plot to the deeper construction of the novels, rather than a focus only on female characters and the internal divisions of the male characters.

The River Between foregrounds the main character, Waiyaki, who may be the "black messiah" (38, 103) who will lead the Gĩkũyũ to unity, purity, peace and prosperity. As was noted above, Waiyaki thus continues the line of great epic heroes who come from Kameno. Waiyaki is brought into contact with his beloved, Nyambura, through her sister, Muthoni, who rebels against their father, Joshua. Joshua is an early convert to Christianity who becomes quite fanatical in abandoning the traditional ways. Muthoni's rebellion is of the worst possible kind, which cuts Joshua to the core. Muthoni insists on being circumcised since this is what ritually and spiritually can bind her again to the people from

whom her father, in his Christian zealotry, has separated her. When she falls ill, Waiyaki is instrumental in her care and informs her sister, Nyambura, of her critical condition. It is through the rebellious sister that the more cautious Waiyaki and Nyambura meet and fall in love. Their relationship meets obstacles in the division that exists between the ridges, which takes the form of a division between traditional religion, represented by Kameno, and Christianity, represented by Makuyu. There is also a personal obstacle in the form of a rival for the attention of Nyambura, namely, Kamau, who is the henchman of his father Kabonyi, who resents the ascendancy of Chege and his son, Waiyaki.

The River Between covers the period with the gradual encroachment of missionaries and colonial education while *Weep Not, Child* covers the next period of Kenyan history where the British have complete control over the colony and British settlers themselves have established deep roots in the Kenyan land. Njoroge, the boy-protagonist of the novel, does not have the deep attachment to the land that his father, Ngotho, does. Although Njoroge's attachment is primarily to formal education, the question of land shapes his fate. As a result of colonial policies, Ngotho loses his land to the puppet and sell-out Jacobo, on whose pyrethrum farm Ngotho is a *muhoi* (13). Ngotho works on the farms of the British settler, Mr Howlands, who, like Ngotho, reveres the land. Ngotho's connection to the land goes back through the ancestors to the mythological origins of the Gĩkũyũ as a people. He tells Njoroge stories about how they came to find their home on the land: "God showed Gĩkũyũ and Mumbi all the land and told them: 'This land I hand over to you. O man and woman/ It's yours to rule and till in serenity sacrificing/Only to me, your God, under my sacred tree'" (24). Ngotho is at odds with both Jacobo and Howlands, who are the legal, but not moral, occupants of the land. As a consequence of his self-interest, and willingness to betray his people to the British, Jacobo is able to profit and become wealthy, while Ngotho becomes poorer and poorer and, at one stage, when Njoroge goes to high school at Siriana, his family is even driven out of their home. In a plot reminiscent of *Romeo and Juliet*, Njoroge comes to fall in love with Mwihaki, the daughter of Jacobo, since she acts as his protector and defender when he first starts school. There is an obvious class difference between the families, but the tension becomes even more pronounced when Ngotho is seen as the leader of a strike against the big farmers because he does not want to be regarded as a coward in allowing the lands to be occupied by exploiters. Ngotho is arrested for threatening Jacobo. Jacobo later is killed by one of Ngotho's elder sons who has joined the Mau Mau rebellion, and Ngotho confesses to the crime to protect the son whom he thinks is responsible, when, in fact, it is the other son that has committed the deed. Against this backdrop, Njoroge proposes to Mwihaki, telling her they can escape to Uganda. When Mwihaki realistically turns down his desperate appeal, Njoroge tries to commit suicide, saved finally by his mother, Nyokabi.

The plot summaries above make clear the social divisions identified in each of the two early novels. In *The River Between*, the division is between traditional religion and Christianity. In *Weep Not, Child*, the division is between classes — the middle class that betrays itself to the colonisers and the exploited working class or peasantry who suffer at the hands of both. Although the task of romantic love to bring the Kenyan nation together across these divisions is clearest in the two early novels, it remains a feature of Ngũgĩ's novels throughout his career. In Ngũgĩ's next novel, *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), again a love relationship is presented across different social backgrounds. In this novel, Gikonyo, a poor carpenter from a single-parent family, falls in love with Mumbi, the daughter of a wealthy man of standing. Similarly, in *Petals of Blood* (1977), where there are three protagonists rather than one, we see numerous instances of relationships across social boundaries. Perhaps the most interesting of these is the relationship of Munira, one of the main male characters with his wife, Julia. Munira, who comes from a Christian family, enters a relationship with Julia, a "pagan", mainly to rebel against the hypocrisy of his father, Ezekiel. Ironically, Julia becomes a Christian and goes on to be her father-in-law, Ezekiel's, favourite daughter-in-law, while Munira enters adulterous relationships as a form of rejection of his wife who betrayed him. The relationship between Warĩĩnga and Gatuĩria in *Devil on the Cross* (1980) also crosses class lines since Warĩĩnga is a poor young woman whose circumstances were made even more desperate by her teenage pregnancy when she was taken advantage of by the wealthy father of Gatuĩria, a fact that becomes known only at the end of the novel. The pattern continues in *Wizard of the Crow* (2006), Ngũgĩ's last novel, where Nyawĩra the well-to-do female protagonist chooses a poor suitor who exploits her in opposition to her father's desire that she marries a man of similar social position. Nyawĩra finally falls in love with the poor Kamĩtĩ regardless of his social standing. Although the romantic relationship that bridges boundaries occurs in all Ngũgĩ's novels, the focus in the first two novels is exclusively on the ways in which eros can forge connections across divides. In the later novels, the social differences are one aspect of the relationships, other dimensions of which become a stronger focus, as we shall see in later chapters.

In *The River Between*, all of the divisions that exist between the ridges of Kameno and Makuyu come to cohere around the ritual of circumcision. The importance of circumcision in the cultural context of which Ngũgĩ writes is apparent from its centrality in Jomo Kenyatta's *Facing Mount Kenya*. Here Kenyatta suggests that initiation of both boys and girls is an important custom that gives them the status of manhood or womanhood in the Gĩkũyũ community (133). These ideas are reiterated in other studies, for example H.E. Lambert's *Kikuyu: Social and Political Institutions*. Lambert suggests that circumcision is an important ritual that "confers the right of marriage and procreation on persons of both sexes and is of more importance in regard to procreation than marriage" (66).

Circumcision in *The River Between* is both that which brings the lovers together and that which finally tears the lovers apart. The significance of circumcision for men and women is foregrounded right at the beginning of the novel when Waiyaki, as a boy, is told by a friend that he cannot play the part of a Kikuyu hero in their game since he is not

circumcised: "'You cannot be Demi [the masculine giants of the tribe]'… 'You are not ready for circumcision. You are not born again'" (10). He goes home to his mother and encourages her to hasten his second-birth ceremony, after which he keenly anticipates his initiation, which will fully incorporate him into the tribe. Waiyaki looks forward to his initiation even though it is despised by Livingstone, the leading missionary in the area. Waiyaki, encouraged by his father, Chege, nevertheless recognises that the future lies in understanding the ways of the coloniser through getting an education, to which Livingstone is key.

The fateful circumcision of Muthoni, Nyambura's sister is also introduced early in the novel. It is introduced when the sisters go to the Honia river that literally and metaphorically unites and divides the ridges. In this sense, the Honia river is much like the role played by the ritual of circumcision, and the role of romance, which paradoxically unites and divides. Muthoni tells her sister that she desperately wants to be circumcised even though her Christian father regarded it as a pagan rite that came from the devil: "Look, please, I — I want to be a woman. I want to be a real girl, a real woman, knowing all the ways of the hills and the ridges … it is beautiful, oh so beautiful to be initiated into womanhood. You learn the ways of the tribe. Yes, the white man's God does not quite satisfy me. I want, I need something more" (26). Muthoni then steals away from her family to be secretly circumcised.

Muthoni's circumcision is presented in the text in such a way that it foreshadows the relationship between Waiyaki and her sister, Nyambura, and in a way that presents Waiyaki's desire as being divided between Muthoni and her sister, Nyambura. When the time for initiation comes, Waiyaki's mind is "unsettled" (40) not only by the importance and the excitement of the huge dance and the rituals to come, but also by Muthoni's revolt: "All the time Waiyaki kept on wondering 'Why should she do it?' And he felt a desire to speak with her and hear it from her own mouth" (40). When she is pointed out to him at the dance, he notices her hips "swinging from side to side" (40) sensually among the group of dancing women. He is amazed that Muthoni should have the courage to disobey her father, a thing that he could not contemplate doing to his father, Chege. Waiyaki's gaze becomes even more eroticised such that he even seems to achieve a kind of ecstasy and consummation that he does not achieve later in his relationship with Nyambura:

> And then Muthoni appeared on the scene. The singing increased in volume and excitement. And she was a wonder. Where has she learnt this? Waiyaki wondered as he watched from the side. She danced, sang; describing love; telling of relationships between a woman and a man; scenes and words of love-making.… Waiyaki gazed at her. Something slightly stirred in him. In the yellow light she appeared beautiful and happy, a strange kind of elation.… And suddenly he felt as if a hand soft and strong had held his soul and whipped it off. It was so strange that he felt his emotions and desires temporarily arrested in a single timeless moment; then release. Waiyaki was nothing. He was free. He wanted only this thing now, this mad intoxication of ecstasy and pleasure. Quick waves of motion flashed through his flesh, through his being.… Muthoni's secret was out. You did not have to learn. No. You just gave yourself to the dream of the rhythm. Within a few seconds he found himself face to face with Muthoni. Both had been thrown into the centre. (42–43, ellipsis added).

The communion Waiyaki experiences here is a response to the mysteries of initiation, but it is a response that is provoked by Muthoni's presence. Muthoni's presence and Waiyaki's feelings for her allow a unity of purpose that Waiyaki had not experienced for some time.

This description of the initiation ceremony comes just a few pages after we are told about Waiyaki's attendance at Siriana Secondary School, which forces him to keep away from home for long periods at a time. However, he comes back especially for the initiation ceremony. The narrative suggests that Waiyaki's "absence from the hills had kept him out of touch with those things that mattered most to the tribe. Besides, however much he resisted it, he could not help absorbing ideas and notions that prevented him from responding spontaneously to these dances and celebrations" (39). Gikandi identifies this tension as Waiyaki's "ambivalence towards tradition" which "becomes apparent in "Waiyaki'sromance with Nyambura" (Gikandi 66). For Gikandi, the contradiction in Waiyaki's desire lies in his wanting cultural purity through a romantic union with a woman who is uncircumcised and therefore "impure". However, as will be argued later, Waiyaki uses the idea of Gĩkũyũ cultural purity to represent the strength of the Kenyan nation rather than the pre-eminence of a single ethnicity. We see thus that Waiyaki has become alienated from the way of life and the traditions to which his father had bound him even more securely through his suggestion to his son some years before at the sacred grove that he was the black messiah come to deliver his people from oppression. Chege's message to his son, however, is different from the task of the prophets before him. Chege says to Waiyaki: "Arise. Heed the prophecy. Go to the Mission place. Learn all the wisdom and all the secrets of the white man. But do not follow his vices. Be true to your people and the ancient rites" (20). It is thus through Muthoni, who represents cultural autonomy, that Waiyaki is able to realise his father's vision. He comes back to the initiation ceremony cloaked with the wisdom of modernity, the wisdom of the white man, and he is able to connect this wisdom to the wisdom of the tribe. In this unity Waiyaki is able through combining individual and group knowledge to find freedom: "Waiyaki was nothing. He was free"(42). This fleeting moment is the only moment in the novel where this triumph is achieved, and it is significant that it is achieved through an amorous interest in Muthoni, who gets circumcised, rather than Nyambura, who is not.

Muthoni, through her daredevil abandonment of her father and the stern Christianity he represents, also attempts this reconciliation in her act of rebellion. After the moment of communion experienced by Waiyaki, he recognises what Muthoni represents to him. She appears to be the spark that brings him back from anxiety and doubt to a full life. He thinks he is attracted to her laughter. He thinks "there was magic in it because it rang into his heart, arousing things

he had never felt before" (43). But the magic does not last. He runs behind Muthoni into the shelter of some trees as night falls to ask her about her defiant act. She says: "No one will understand. I say I am a Christian and my mother and father have followed the new faith. I have not run away from that. But I also want to be initiated into the ways of the tribe" (43). Muthoni's belief that in her action she will reconcile Christianity and traditional religion becomes even more apparent in her delirium when her circumcision wound does not heal. She declares to her sister who has come to visit her in her final illness: "I am still a Christian, see, a Christian in the tribe" and "… I see Jesus … I am a woman, beautiful in the tribe …" (53). Waiyaki is physically drawn in when Muthoni says further that she wants to be a "woman made beautiful in the manner of the tribe" (44). But since Muthoni's commitment is to this ideal and not to Waiyaki, she walks away thereafter, leaving Waiyaki abandoned and alone: "That night a feeling that he lacked something, that he yearned for something beyond him, came in low waves of sadness that would not let him sleep" (44). Waiyaki attempts to fill the lack left by Muthoni through her sister, Nyambura.

Circumcision brings Waiyaki and Muthoni close, but it is circumcision also that finally makes the division between the ridges deeper. Muthoni's death leads to a hardening of attitudes so that the missionaries, represented by Livingstone, announce that no person who has been circumcised will be able to attend Siriana. It also leads Kabonyi, a longstanding rival of Waiyaki's father, Chege, to abandon the church and return with great vehemence to the ways of the tribe.

Muthoni's death as a result of the circumcision wound also ironically leads Waiyaki to try to find what he lacks in Muthoni's sister, Nyambura, whom he meets when he arranges for her to visit her dying sister who has been rejected by their father. Later, he comes to recognise that the freedom through reconciliation that he longs for takes the shape of the woman, Nyambura. He comes to this recognition one night when he cannot sleep and goes for a walk full of deep thoughts. He "coincidentally" meets Nyambura on his moonlit walk that takes him in the direction of Joshua's village after this epiphany: "Suddenly he thought he knew what he wanted. Freedom. He wanted to run, run hard, run anywhere. Or hover aimlessly, wandering everywhere like a spirit. Then he would have everything …" (73). The relationship with Nyambura thus becomes invested with a lot more for Waiyaki than a simple affair. The love that he perceives he has for Nyambura becomes charged with the task of bringing him freedom through allowing him to reconcile the divisions he begins to see in himself, which reflect the divisions between the ridges, between Christianity and the ways of the tribe. For the task of reconciliation between the ridges, circumcision again becomes highly symbolic. On another moonlit walk, Waiyaki thinks to himself that, unlike himself, Nyambura is not circumcised, "[b]ut this was not a crime" (76). Furthermore, to reiterate the epigraph, "[s]omething passed between them as two human beings, untainted with religion, social conventions or any tradition" (76).

The courtship between Waiyaki and Nyambura is presented in great detail in the narrative using the formula of the romance tradition, which details their meetings and the personal and social obstructions to declaring their love. Obstructions in the path to love have been identified as the defining feature of the romance tradition in Western literature, highlighted in Denis de Rougemont's major study *Love in the Western World* (1983).Guides to writing popular romance also recommend numerous obstructions to generate the necessary tension: "Conflicts, obstacles and misunderstandings … You really can't have too many" (Moorcroft 100). However, since Ngũgĩ's interest in romance constitutes an "erotics of politics" (Sommer 6), even the obstacles to love have a political overtone. The main obstruction in the relationship between Waiyaki and Nyambura comes in the form of a rival, namely the son of Kabonyi, who was Waiyaki's father's rival before his death. The son, Kamau, also loves Nyambura. Kamau believes that had it not been for Waiyaki's intervention, Nyambura would have "agreed to run away with him to Nairobi" (108). In the same way that love relationships are part of a political vision, obstructions to love are similarly political. Kamau is not just an incidental suitor. Kamau symbolically represents a politics opposed to the politics represented by Waiyaki. Waiyaki, as messiah and carrying on Muthoni's legacy, is inspired to bring together the opposing factions represented by the two ridges. As the "gulf" between them widens, Waiyaki wants to be the "instrument of their coming together" (91). However, there is more at stake than simply the two ridges representing Christianity and traditional culture. Having attended Siriana where Waiyaki meets boys of different ethnicities from all over Kenya, the ultimate mission is the unity of all Kenya and its freedom from colonial rule. We see that a "novel national ideal [is] ostensibly grounded in 'natural' heterosexual love and in the [potential] marriages that [provide] a figure for apparently nonviolent consolidation during internecine conflicts …" (Sommer 6).

Kamau, as delegate of his father, Kabonyi, represents instead a reactionary throwback to a stifled idea of tribal unity and strength. Kabonyi dominates the Kiama, or tribal council, set up to protect the "purity" of the tribe (87). Thus, while Waiyaki sees a "tribe [Kenya] great with many educated sons and daughters, all living together, tilling the land of their ancestors in perpetual serenity, pursuing their rituals and beautiful customs"(87), Kamau represents a narrow tribalism in which education plays no role. When Nyambura agrees to marry Waiyaki and escapes her father's home with him, she is abducted by Kamau, to obtain leverage in the battle against Waiyaki.

At the Kiama (tribal assembly) where Waiyaki is tried for betraying the unity and the purity of the tribe through going to a church meeting and through wanting to marry an uncircumcised woman, the fate of Waiyaki and Nyambura is left open-ended. However, the general tone of the conclusion is pessimistic, suggesting that their union is thwarted at the end since the differences are too great and the political power-play and rivalry too keen. Thus a fully realised "erotics of politics" (Sommer 6) cannot be located on Kenyan soil as it was in nineteenth-century Latin-American romance novels, since Ngũgĩ's narrative cannot conquer "the antagonist[s] through mutual interest or 'love' rather than through coercion" (Sommer 6). In discussing the parallels between

Sommer's study and that of *The River Between*, Gikandi writes that, through patriotism (public function), Waiyaki tries to overcome ""personal frustration and hardships" (his inability to marry Nyambura in the face of opposition of his political allies)." (68). Gikandi notes the correlation between reconciliation and romance: "[r]econciliation can be represented in a language of romance that appears to be above partisan politics" (Gikandi 68). "Romance" and "republic" are shown to be connected by Ngũgĩ in this early novel, since the tensions and possibilities of romance are an analogy of the tensions and possibilities of republic.However, romance cannot create the republic since the differences run too deep. Unlike the novels studied by Sommer, Ngũgĩ's novels are not able to develop "a narrative formula for resolving … conflicts" (Sommer 12). This is because Ngũgĩ's narratives usually end with tensions/conflicts which are heightened and unresolved. The early novels in Ngũgĩ's hands do not become "a postepic conciliatory genre that consolidate[s] survivors by recogni[s]ing former enemies as allies" (12). This is the consequence of differences in the visions of the parties to the romance, differences that Ngũgĩ is able to reconcile only in the final novel, *Wizard of the Crow*, where the each of the beloveds is committed to the same political vision. The tensions are not so pronounced, or so difficult to negotiate, in the novels studied by Sommer because of the difference of genre. The Latin-American novels are popular romances, which follow the formula of romance that requires a happy ending through the fulfillment of wishes and desires. Ngũgĩ's novels, by contrast, are more literary and realistic in the dynamics they present.

A similar trend where there is a desire for unity that is thwarted may be observed in *Weep Not, Child*. Culturally, land unites people in the Kenyan context through ritual attachment. This is often dramatised in *Weep Not, Child* and is introduced in the early pages. But it is education that has the most significant symbolism for the protagonist, Njoroge. When Njoroge is told by his mother that the collective family resources will allow him to go to school, his first reaction is to compare himself with Mwihaki, the daughter of the local landowning family: "Njoroge's heart had felt like bursting with happiness and gratitude when he had known that he, like Mwihaki, the daughter of Jacobo, would start learning how to read and write" (12). Njoroge immediately develops a special relationship with Mwihaki at school since she protects him as a newcomer, or *Njuka*. She says to the bullies who pick on him that "He is my *Njuka*. You cannot touch him" (14). It is made clear that the class difference between himself and Mwihaki is apparent to Njoroge from the time that he is a boy: "It was sweet to play with a girl and especially if that girl came from a family higher up the social scale than one's own" (15). Thus the differences that are emphasised in this novel are largely class differences; but class differences in the colonial context are also linked to political differences. Mwihaki's father, Jacobo, can get ahead only since he betrays the Kenyan cause to the British. The differences between the families are heightened as a result of political resistance that sees Njoroge's father, Ngotho, labelled a troublemaker and a threat to Jacobo. The comfort that the young couple find in each other leads Mwihaki at one point to suggest that they "marry" and run away together: "Suppose you and I go from here so that we come back when the dark night is over … I could be such a nice sister to you and I could cook you very tasty food and …" (95). Njoroge immediately responds that family responsibility, and by extension responsibility to the nation through the family, would make this dream impossible: "No, no, how can we leave our parents alone?" (95). Roles are reversed towards the end of the novel, when Jacobo has been killed by one of Njoroge's brothers, and Ngotho is arrested since he tries to protect the other brother whom he thinks did the deed. Now Njoroge pleads with Mwihaki for them to elope to Uganda and escape the tension and tragedy:

> And Njoroge went on whispering to her appealing to her with all his might.
> "Mwihaki, dear, I love you. Save me if you want. Without you I am lost."
> She wanted to sink in his arms and feel a man's strength around her weak body. She wanted to travel the road back to her childhood and grow up with him again. But she was no longer a child.
> "Yes, we can go away from here as you had suggested when—"
> "No! no! she cried, in an agony of despair, interrupting him. "You must save *me*, please Njoroge. I love you."
> She covered her face with both hands and wept freely, her breast heaving.
> Njoroge felt sweet pleasure and excitedly smoothed her dark hair.
> "Yes, we go to Uganda and live—"
> "No, no." She struggled again.
> "But why?" he asked not understanding what she meant.
> "Don't you see that what you suggest is too easy a way out? We are no longer children," she said between her sobs.
> "That's why we must go away. Kenya is no place for us. Is it not childish to remain in a hole when you can take yourself out?"
> "But we can't. We can't!" she cried hopelessly. (133)

In the dialogue above, we see again how Ngũgĩ's narratives rely on romance conventions at the same time that he departs from them. Throughout the novel, Njoroge is presented as a "feminised" male hero who is not distinguished by his looks or physique. In fact, as mentioned earlier, the heroine is his protector when as a boy he gets bullied at school. Njoroge also lacks the decisiveness of the more masculine hero, the "alpha" male of popular romance fiction (Moorcroft 10). However, Njoroge is transformed into the ideal romance hero and Mwihaki the ideal heroine in this clearly erotic scene. Mwihaki desires to "sink in his arms and feel his arms around her weak body". Where Mwihaki has always been the stronger and more assertive partner, she now wants to be saved by Njoroge with her bosom heaving in despair and rapture. But here again Ngũgĩ's failed "erotics of politics" (Sommer 6) dictates the conclusion of the scene. The emotion and the sexual charge between the hero and heroine cannot bring them together. Instead, it forces them apart since the more mature Mwihaki recognises that in Emergency Kenya the relationship across the class and political divide is difficult— in fact, it is inconceivable in the

narrative frame. It is interesting that the dream of elopement is now considered 'childish' (a rejection of a certain romantic convention by Ngũgĩ).

After this rejection by Mwihaki, Njoroge contemplates suicide by hanging: "He knew the tree well. He had been there a number of times for the voice had spoken to him many times after his father's death. The only thing that had restrained him was the hope that he might find an anchor in Mwihaki … he had prepared the rope" (135). We see that "the counter-productive social constraints that underline the naturalness and inevitability of the lovers' transgressive desire" (Sommer 18) are so great that they push Njoroge to this desperate end. Initially, the love relationship, which begins as friendship between Mwihaki and Njoroge, was based on sincerity and certainty. Njoroge is unable to "imagine their ideal relationship through an alternative society" (Sommer 18). The narrative then decisively shifts from foregrounding the volatile relationship of romantic love that challenges kinship relations. Njoroge is saved from killing himself when he hears his mother crying out his name. He is then led by his biological mother into the further security represented by his social mother, his father's second wife.

CONCLUSION

The study has shown that the possibility for a romantic reconciliation of class and political enemies is thus even more elusive than reconciliation across a religious divide in *The River Between*. In the context of heightening contradictions, at no point do the lovers even entertain the thought of the families and society sanctioning their union. Even though Ngũgĩ clings to the idea of nation-building through the volatile and productive possibilities of romantic love, in both of the early novels the unity aimed for remains unobtainable through an "erotics of politics" (Sommer 6). Instead, salvation is found in the figure of the mother who as the title of the later collection of essays, *In the Name of the Mother* (2013), shows is a very important figure in Ngũgĩ's philosophy. However, the importance of the mother is not specifically highlighted in the later novels; but the romantic love subplot endures throughout in the fiction.

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