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***The River Between* Through the Eyes of Mahatma Gandhi**

Mahatma Gandhi is revered by many as one of the most prominent political figures of the modern age. Through methods including civil disobedience and hunger strikes, Gandhi was an instrumental force in the fight between the Indian people and British colonization. As part of his fight, he wrote *Hind Swaraj*, a book where he outlines his concerns with British 'advancements' invading Indian culture. A similar colonization issue can be found in *The River Between*, a fictional novel written by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o that addresses the British settlement of the "White Highlands" of Kenya. Though Gandhi was never able to read the novel, as he passed away years before its release, it is still clear to see how Gandhi would react to the conflicts presented by Ngũgĩ. To Mahatma Gandhi, the most important conflict in *The River Between* is that between the tribal customs of the Gikuyu people, and the "new ways" of the white settlers; this conflict reflects the dangers of indulging in the advancements of an outside society, as the fast spread of new advancements jeopardize the current society's existing morals and polarizes its members. However, both Ngũgĩ and Gandhi demonstrate that a slow integration of these advancements may still be possible.

First, Waiyaki's enthusiasm for introducing education to the Gikuyu people would certainly cause alarm in Gandhi's eyes. In *The River Between*, Waiyaki becomes the main proponent of education of the Gikuyu people, specifically, Western education as he has received from Reverend Livingstone and the white settlers. As his education movement develops, he only becomes more enthusiastic. Ngũgĩ writes, "And he would go on with what he had begun: schools and more schools; get the white man's education, as his father had told him. But Waiyaki would not be satisfied with just more schools. Later he would want a college, the sort of institution that Reverend Livingstone used to talk so much about. Why, he might even get more teachers from Nairobi"

(Thiong'o, p. 80). Waiyaki has been exposed to an element of Western culture that he considers to be an advancement, and the more he uses it, the more of it he wants.

While this sounds innocent enough, to Gandhi this kind of desire can become dangerous for many reasons. In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi references several types of advancements that have been brought to India, including medicine. To describe the process of using Western medicine, Gandhi writes, "I have indulged in vice, I contract a disease, a doctor cures me, the odds are that I shall repeat the vice. Had the doctor not intervened, nature would have done its work, and I would have acquired mastery over myself, would have been freed from vice and would have been happy" (Gandhi, p. 5). According to Gandhi, having an advancement at one's disposal – in this case, access to Western medicine – actually serves to take away from the individual that is thought to be benefiting from it. Specifically, it takes away from the morals and natural strengths of the people, as they have something else to rely on instead of being self-reliant. This leaves many implications for the role of Western education for Waiyaki, and by extension the Gikuyu people; perhaps Gandhi would worry that a reliance on Western education would cause the Gikuyu people to turn away from the elements of their culture that cannot be taught in a traditional classroom setting, perhaps he would fear that the morals established in the Gikuyu tribe would be forgotten in favor of Western, Christian morals. In any case, though, Gandhi would be concerned by Waiyaki's enthusiasm for education, as it demonstrates the kind of indulgence in modern advancement that can hinder one's existing morals and strengths.

Another key issue Gandhi addresses with modernity is how the use of Western advancements can lead to a severe polarization of the members of the existing society. Gandhi is one of many who are against the customs of the British colonizers of India, and he writes in *Hind Swaraj*, "Where this cursed modern civilization has not reached, India remains as it was before. The inhabitants of that part of India will very properly laugh at your newfangled notions. ... Now you see what I consider to be real civilization. Those who want to change conditions such as I have described are enemies of the country and are sinners" (8). In India, as Gandhi explains, there is a rift between those who wish to stick with the traditional elements of Indian culture, and those who are in favor of the British ideals. Similarly, when discussing the prominence of the British in

India, Gandhi writes, “We were one nation before they came to India. One thought inspired us. Our mode of life was the same. It was because we were one nation that they were able to establish one kingdom. Subsequently they divided us” (3-4). Clearly, Gandhi represents the current culture being critical and pushing away from the new culture. In *The River Between*, the reverse of this polarization is evident with the character of Joshua, the converted Christian leader, who is so committed to Christianity that he dissociated from his daughter Muthoni. Ngũgĩ writes, “If Muthoni’s rebellion and death put [Joshua] off, he did not show it. He had, in any case, disowned her. To him she never existed. What had a man of God to do with the children of the evil one? ... All the tribe’s customs were bad. That was final. There would never be a compromise” (Ngũgĩ, p. 82). The closer he comes into Christianity, a Western advancement, the more disdain he feels for the Gikuyu people, causing the same type of deep, polarizing rift that Gandhi experiences between the Indian and British customs.

In the midst of this polarization between Christian and Gikuyu, Muthoni, Joshua’s daughter, plays an interesting role: she stands directly in the middle of it. Circumcision, a tradition in the Gikuyu tribe to symbolize emerging into adulthood, is harshly shunned as a sin in Christianity. Though she has been raised Christian throughout her life, Muthoni wishes to be circumcised and live as both a Christian and Gikuyu woman. She explains, “I am still a Christian, see, a Christian in the tribe. Look. I am a woman and will grow big and healthy in the tribe.’ ... ‘tell Nyambura I see Jesus. And I am a woman, beautiful in the tribe....’ She had died clinging to that image” (51). Ultimately, her desire to be between both of her cultures leads Muthoni to her untimely death. Though this is a tragedy within the novel, to Gandhi this is a symbol of how far the polarization between the traditional and Western cultures goes; they are so far apart that there is no true way for a middle ground to survive.

Although Gandhi does not believe in a true middle ground, it is important to note that both him and Ngũgĩ represent the possibility of a slow integration between traditional customs and these new advancements. In some ways, Gandhi appears to be an almost hypocritical writer; to write *Hind Swaraj* he only quotes Western sources, and as the ‘reader’ represented in the work points out, his work that criticizes the use of machinery is being printed. However, in approaching this point Gandhi writes, “This is

one of those instances which demonstrate that sometimes poison is used to kill poison” (Gandhi, 10). Ngũgĩ approaches his writing in similar ways – a Kenyan book written about the consequences of British, Christian settlement was written in English, and Ngũgĩ was still practicing Christianity when he wrote it. Clearly, even if there are consequences to the embrace of Western culture, both authors demonstrate that there is some benefit that comes from a slight or slow integration of Western culture into existing culture. The way Gandhi describes his own use of machinery – poison used to poison – can be perfectly seen in Waiyaki and his initial mission. As a young boy, Waiyaki is taken by his father Chege to an area that overlooks the ridges of Kameno and Makuyu, where he is told that he is a descendant of the prophet Mugo wa Kibiro, and that it is now Waiyaki’s duty to protect the Gikuyu people from the white settlers. Chege explains, “Mugo often said you could not cut the butterflies with a panga. You could not spear them until you learned and knew their ways and movement. Then you could trap, you could fight back.’ ... ‘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” (Ngũgĩ, 20). The act of learning the ways of the white people in order to fight against them is a very close parallel to fighting poison with poison. Though it is debatable whether Waiyaki’s enthusiasm for education comes from him staying true to this mission, it is undeniable that for Ngũgĩ, as it is for Gandhi, the integration of Western culture as a means to take away their power is a benefit that allows the existence of both traditional cultural elements and some slow use of Western advancements.

Across several decades and two different cultures, Gandhi’s and Ngũgĩ’s work are able to capture similar ideas about the problems of developing into the modern world. The conflict between the traditions of the Gikuyu tribe and the advancements brought by Western settlers is a key example, to Gandhi, of the dangers of indulging in advancement, as they separate the culture’s members from their traditions and from each other. However, a slow integration does not bring the same dangers as indulgence; if anything, slow integration is a path to fight the oppressive system from within. The co-existence, or lack thereof, between cultures in India or Kenya is vastly different to the endless blend of cultural backgrounds that exists in America today. Here,

integration occurs all the time, and though historically they have certainly found their ways, it is much harder for one culture's advancements to dominate over the others. Perhaps in such a culturally-integrated place, Gandhi and Ngũgĩ would be advocates for cultural awareness; at least we can make sure we always understand where we started.