

Rhetoric over War: Indigenous Dialogue and Conflict Resolution in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *The River Between*

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Abstract

This paper explores how Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* presents an African-centred model of conflict resolution through culturally grounded rhetoric. Using Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis and Aristotle's theory of rhetoric, the study examines how Waiyaki, Kabonyi, and Joshua as key characters use language to negotiate power, build unity, or promote division. Ngũgĩ constructs moments of high tension that are resolved not through violence, but through persuasive speech rooted in oral tradition and communal values. The argument is that such rhetoric, when anchored in local culture, becomes a practical tool for conflict resolution. The novel stands in contrast to real-world peace efforts that often fail due to external interference and the dismissal of indigenous knowledge systems. The main recommendation is that effective conflict resolution must begin with culturally resonant forms of dialogue already present in communities. Rather than impose outside solutions, efforts should support the voices and rhetorical traditions that have long sustained African societies.

Keywords: *Ngugi wa Thiong'o, The River Between, Rhetoric, Critical Discourse Analysis, Conflict Resolution, Discourse.*

Introduction

The history of peace talks across different regions and periods demonstrates that language and negotiation can serve as powerful alternatives to violent conflict. During the Cold War, diplomatic efforts such as the 1954 Geneva Conference illustrated the intricate balancing of ideological interests, with the Soviet Union acting as a key organizer to mediate between opposing blocs. The Helsinki Final Act of 1975 further institutionalised diplomatic engagement between East and West, reinforcing the role of multilateralism and sustained dialogue in easing geopolitical tensions. In the Middle East, the Oslo Peace Process of 1993 and the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002 represented major attempts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through mutual recognition and structured negotiation. However deeply rooted issues such as historical memory and contested identity often disrupted progress over the years. Across Africa, post-Cold War peace agreements such as the Arusha Peace Accord for Burundi in 2000 and the Comprehensive Peace Agreement for Sudan in 2005 highlighted the effectiveness of African-led mediation strategies, pressing on inclusive dialogue and local ownership in resolving internal conflicts.

These diplomatic efforts, even though they have different outcomes underline a key theme: discourse matters. Whether in the negotiation of ceasefires, the drafting of treaties, or the delicate balancing of identities, language has played a crucial role in de-escalating violence and framing peace. This understanding creates an important backdrop for the literary exploration of similar dynamics. African writers, particularly those concerned with colonial and postcolonial disruption, have long reflected on the power of language not only as a cultural and political tool but also as a method of mediation. Among them, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o stands out for his sustained engagement with the intersections of language, ideology, and conflict. His early work, especially *The River Between*, dramatises moments of tension between tradition and modernity, colonial power and indigenous resistance, often leading the reader to anticipate

physical confrontation—only for such moments to be resolved through persuasion, ideological positioning, and rhetorical skill. In this way, Ngũgĩ's narrative technique echoes historical peace processes by privileging discourse over violence, thereby offering literature as a reflective mirror to real-world strategies of peacemaking.

Overview of Ngugi's Work

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's early novels—*Weep Not, Child* (1964), *The River Between* (1965), and *A Grain of Wheat* (1967)—explore the religious, cultural, and political struggles of the Gikuyu people during Kenya's colonial and early nationalist periods. While much of the earlier criticism focused on Ngũgĩ's critique of Christianity, more recent scholarship has begun to draw attention to the powerful presence of pre-colonial East African prophetic traditions woven throughout his narratives. His fiction brings Gikuyu spiritual beliefs into conversation with biblical references, not merely to compare the two but to illuminate the tension and interplay between colonial Christianity and indigenous worldviews (Mathuray, 2009). Through this layered approach, Ngũgĩ explores questions of identity, resistance, and leadership in ways that are both complex and culturally grounded.

Across these works, Ngũgĩ frequently returns to themes such as the clash between personal ambition and communal responsibility, as well as the symbolic significance of natural elements like rivers and trees. Hevešiová (2014) states that Ngũgĩ's early work shows that literature is part of history because it helps explain the complex events and unclear moments of the past. These motifs help dramatise the upheaval brought on by colonialism and the competing visions for what the future should hold. Among these novels, *The River Between* is particularly striking for how it frames conflict and resolution through a Gikuyu cosmological lens. Here, language through rhetoric emerges not simply as a tool for communication, but as a vital force in diplomacy, spiritual leadership, and reconciliation. The novel's characters represent diverging ideological and religious standpoints, and through their interactions, Ngũgĩ

shows how dialogue, persuasion, and symbolic expression can both create division and foster healing.

In this way, *The River Between* contributes meaningfully to current discussions on peace-building by offering a model of conflict resolution rooted in indigenous knowledge systems. It underscores how literature can open up alternative ways of thinking about and responding to conflict. These ways have to prioritise cultural authenticity, spiritual insight, and the power of rhetorical negotiation. Ngũgĩ's vision, while firmly rooted in the Kenyan experience, resonates far beyond it, speaking to broader global efforts to address conflict through more inclusive and context-sensitive approaches.

Rhetoric as a Culturally Grounded Alternative to Violent Conflict

Conflict is an inherent feature of human interaction, arising in diverse contexts, from families and communities to national and international platforms. Scholars across disciplines have explored how conflict manifests and how it may be addressed. While much of this scholarship traditionally focuses on structural and coercive approaches to resolution, an important body of work shifts attention to language and rhetoric as tools for understanding and mitigating conflict. These studies suggest that how conflict is talked about significantly shapes whether it escalates or transforms into dialogue.

Language plays a central role in shaping perceptions of conflict, and effective communication often proves pivotal in preventing violence. Medzihorsky (2017) study for instance, investigates rhetorical strategies used during United Nations Security Council debates on the Syrian war. The study reveals how political leaders frame conflict through carefully chosen language, influencing international opinion and policy responses. Medzihorsky introduces a spatial model of civil conflict rhetoric, particularly in relation to the "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P) norm. This model demonstrates how rhetorical acts, through

defining problems and proposing solutions, regulate responses to civil wars. This shows that even in diplomatic spaces, language is a tool of power and persuasion.

Equally significant is Brown's (2014) interrogation of the rhetorical grounds on which nations go to war. Challenging the notion that wars are justified mainly through appeals to values such as honour or justice, Brown argues that pragmatic rhetoric which is grounded in urgency, threat, and practicality, has historically been more influential in mobilising support for war, especially in early American political discourse. This insight underscores that rhetoric does not merely reflect political positions but actively shapes a society's trajectory toward peace or conflict. The language used during moments of tension, therefore, holds immense power in steering decisions toward war or peace.

Bibi and Shaheen (2025) investigated how Mahmoud Abbas's 2023 speeches use rhetorical strategies to resist Israeli dominance and legitimise Palestinian rights. Through CDA and Foucault's theory of power and resistance, the research reveals how Abbas's language constructs a narrative of peaceful resistance and appeals for international solidarity. The language is marked by repetition, emotive vocabulary, intertextual references, and inclusive pronouns. The findings emphasise rhetoric's potential to reshape public perception, challenge hegemonic narratives, and serve as a non-violent instrument for conflict resolution and political empowerment.

Riner (2023) discusses theorisations of "discursive violence"—the ways in which language can construct, justify, and normalise violence, as well as the potential for language to resist or transform violent structures. Linguistic anthropology has shown that culturally grounded rhetorical practices can either perpetuate or disrupt cycles of violence, depending on their framing and intent.

UNESCO (2024) underscores the centrality of culture in building peace, noting that culture—through heritage, creative expression, and recognition of diversity—can underpin

social cohesion and security. While culture has sometimes been exploited for divisive ends, it remains a powerful resource for fostering dialogue and mutual understanding. It is therefore imperative to consider culturally grounded rhetoric as a tool for sustainable peace-building efforts. This is because it incorporates diverse identities and traditions.

In the African context, research into indigenous communicative strategies offers a compelling alternative to militarised conflict resolution. Adegoju (2009), in a study on Yoruba proverbs, highlights the rhetorical potential of indigenous oral forms in managing social disputes. Yoruba proverbs do more than reflect cultural values; they encode principles of social harmony, justice, and reconciliation. These proverbs frame conflict not as an aberration but as a necessary and natural social process, which, when wisely addressed, can lead to constructive outcomes. The study positions proverbs as tools of communal negotiation, offering impartial yet persuasive guidance toward peaceful resolutions. They hold moral weight, rooted in lived cultural experiences, and thus command respect and legitimacy in conflict mediation processes.

Such insights from indigenous epistemologies resonate with contemporary critiques of externally imposed peace-building strategies in Africa. Breslowski et al. (2024) demonstrate that rhetorical and diplomatic interventions can often be more effective than coercive ones. Their study examines ECOWAS's use of public statements, condemnations, and appeals for cooperation as early warning tools in regional conflicts. These acts of rhetoric, though sometimes dismissed as symbolic or performative, are shown to carry internal consensus among member states, signalling shared political will. Crucially, they shift the cost-benefit calculus of warring parties by raising the perceived risks of continuing violence and revealing viable non-violent alternatives. This rhetorical influence, therefore, acts as a deterrent, nudging actors toward dialogue rather than escalation.

The collective value of these studies lies in their recognition that culturally grounded language is not simply a vehicle for negotiation but a form of action itself. In many African

societies, oral traditions, communal storytelling, and symbolic speech have long served as vehicles of moral reasoning, peace-making, and justice. These traditions centre consensus, participation, and the reaffirmation of shared values..

However, this raises a critical tension that demands further investigation: why do these rhetorical strategies succeed in fictional representations, such as in African novels where dialogue prevails over bloodshed, yet often falter in real-world peace efforts led by international actors? What elements in indigenous discourse allow fictional characters to resolve their ideological differences through talk, and why is this potential diminished or disregarded in actual peace-building initiatives?

This study enters that gap, exploring not only how rhetorical strategies rooted in African oral traditions promote peace, but also interrogating the broader socio-political dynamics that hinder their application in contemporary conflict mediation. This work aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of sustainable, locally resonant alternatives to violent conflict. This will be done by the foregrounding of the cultural legitimacy of African rhetorical tools,

Theoretical Framework

This work is guided by two main theoretical approaches: Aristotle's classical theory of rhetoric and Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of CDA. These frameworks offer a combined lens for examining how persuasive language in *The River Between* is used to manage ideological tension and promote non-violent resolution.

Aristotle's theory of rhetoric, first developed in *Rhetoric* (circa 4th century BCE), identifies three primary means of persuasion: *ethos*, the credibility and moral standing of the speaker; *pathos*, the emotional appeal to the audience; and *logos*, the logical reasoning presented in the argument (Aristotle, trans. 1991). These rhetorical strategies are central to how characters in the novel construct authority, build emotional connection, or argue for specific actions. Waiyaki appeals to communal logic and unity (*logos*), earns trust through service

(*ethos*), and connects to his audience's fears and hopes (*pathos*). Kabonyi and Joshua use similar tools but toward more divisive or rigid ends. Aristotle's framework helps clarify the impact and effectiveness of each character's rhetoric.

To understand how these rhetorical acts function within broader structures of meaning and power, this study applies Fairclough's (1992) model of CDA. Fairclough identifies three dimensions for analysing discourse: the textual level, which focuses on language structure, vocabulary, and rhetorical features; the discursive practice level, which looks at how discourse is produced, circulated, and interpreted; and the social practice level, which situates the discourse within larger ideological, historical, and institutional contexts. This model allows for an integrated reading of how language in the novel reflects, negotiates, or resists dominant power relations, particularly in a colonial and postcolonial setting.

Together, these frameworks make it possible to explore both the micro-level strategies of persuasion and the macro-level conditions that give those strategies meaning. Aristotle helps unpack how characters speak persuasively, while Fairclough's CDA shows how those speeches are shaped by and shape broader cultural and political struggles. This approach reflects the view that language is not neutral. It is always active, shaping thought and social action.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis approach, grounded in the principles of CDA. The aim is to explore how language is used to construct, negotiate, and disseminate ideological positions within literary discourse. Excerpts were purposively selected from the primary text based on their rhetorical significance and discursive density. These passages reflect moments where language is deployed strategically to persuade, assert authority, or challenge existing norms. The process began with the identification and extraction of key textual instances characterised by rhetorical force. These excerpts were then mapped

thematically to determine how they function within the broader narrative structure. Attention was paid to recurrent patterns, stylistic features, and the interplay between language and power.

The framework of CDA, as conceptualised by Norman Fairclough, guided the analysis. This involves examining texts at three interconnected levels: the textual level, which focuses on rhetorical devices; the discursive practice level, which considers the processes of production, distribution, and interpretation; and the social practice level which situates discourse within broader socio-cultural and historical contexts. This model enables a comprehensive understanding of how discourse shapes and is shaped by structures of power and ideology.

Textual analysis, within this framework, does not isolate language from its social functions. Rather, it treats discourse as a form of social practice that both reflects and contributes to larger ideological formations. The selected data were therefore subjected to close reading and contextual interpretation, with particular emphasis on how rhetorical acts contribute to meaning-making and identity construction within the narrative.

Data Analysis

In *The River Between*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o presents several key moments where physical conflict looms large but is ultimately defused through dialogue, persuasion, or symbolic acts. These scenes illustrate the novel's central concern with how rhetoric can serve as a powerful tool for peace-building. Table 1 shows some significant instances:

Table 1

Conflict Situation	Anticipated conflict	Resolution Through Dialogue	Significance
1. Circumcision Controversy	Introduction of Christianity challenges Gikuyu traditions, especially	Chege urges understanding; Waiyaki avoids taking sides and	Shows how intergenerational wisdom and rhetorical caution

	female circumcision; converts and traditionalists are at odds.	promotes unity through education. Elders maintain dialogue to prevent violence.	can prevent violence, emphasizing cohesion over ideology
2. Waiyaki's Schools and Ridge Rivalries	Waiyaki's rising influence via education alarms both Christian missionaries and conservative elders. Suspicion brews.	Waiyaki holds public gatherings (kiama), delivers persuasive speeches rooted in Gikuyu values, and emphasizes education as empowerment.	Demonstrates the use of traditional orature for leadership and peaceful negotiation, channeling conflict toward progress.
3. Trial by the Kiama (Kabonyi vs Waiyaki)	Kabonyi incites the crowd, accusing Waiyaki of betrayal and suggesting punishment. Hostility threatens to erupt	Waiyaki speaks honestly and appeals to tribal unity, defusing immediate anger through moral clarity and calm rhetoric.	Highlights the power—and limits—of speech in deeply fractured communities; dialogue averts violence but cannot erase mistrust.
4. Final Speech and Arrest	Tensions peak between Christians and traditionalists. Waiyaki's romance with Nyambura intensifies the rift.	Waiyaki makes a final, heartfelt plea for unity, promoting reconciliation. Despite his arrest, his words echo as a last attempt at peace.	Reflects the fragile hope in language as a unifying force. Even when silenced, the effort to reconcile through speech is honored.

Kabonyi's Rhetoric: Language as Ideological Weapon

Kabonyi speaks with purpose. In *The River Between*, he uses language not just to express ideas but to fight ideological battles. He challenges Waiyaki's vision of progress by

appealing to tradition, fear, and pride. From the moment he opens his mouth, Kabonyi treats speech as combat. Ngũgĩ signals this clearly when the narrator says, “the battle was on.” For Kabonyi, words are weapons, and the public space is a battlefield.

He carefully crafts his language to stir emotion. His speeches rely on rhetorical questions, proverbs, and cultural references that trigger nostalgia and tribal pride. When he says, “Do not be led by a youth. Did the tail ever lead the head, the child the father or the cubs the lion?” he isn’t just insulting Waiyaki. He invokes a worldview where elders lead and youth follow. In that world, Waiyaki has no place. Kabonyi positions himself as the rightful voice of tradition. But Kabonyi does more than protect custom, he also manipulates it. He uses rhetorical questions like, “Were the people afraid? Were there no warriors left?” not to seek answers, but to accuse. He implies that anyone who follows Waiyaki is weak. These lines shame the crowd into siding with him. He uses fear to build pressure and loyalty.

Kabonyi also speaks to real struggles. He points to poverty, hunger, and taxes—issues people feel every day. He links these problems to Waiyaki’s priorities, accusing him of caring more about teachers and schools than about the community’s pain. This tactic makes Kabonyi sound grounded and relatable. It’s a populist move. He says: reject modern education, return to your roots, and reclaim your pride. He draws heavily from oral tradition. He uses proverbs and cultural phrases that resonate with elders. This gives him credibility and connects him to ancestral wisdom. But this strategy also draws hard lines. Kabonyi does not welcome debate. He builds a world where only those who follow the old ways belong. Everyone else becomes an outsider.

Fairclough’s ideas help make sense of Kabonyi’s language. Kabonyi does not speak in a vacuum. His words reflect deeper social struggles. He reacts to colonialism but he also resists change, hybrid identities, and anything that challenges his idea of purity. Ironically, while he fights colonial ideas, he mirrors their logic. He divides, excludes, and controls just like the

colonisers he claims to oppose. Kabonyi's most dangerous quality is his emotional power. He taps into pride, fear, and anger. He calls for unity, but only under his terms. His language leaves no room for compromise. Ngũgĩ allows this tension to unfold in words but keeps it from turning violent. In the end, Kabonyi loses not in a public clash, but when his own son, shaped by Waiyaki's vision, leads him away. This moment signals the defeat of Kabonyi's rigid ideology.

Kabonyi fails because his message can't grow. He speaks for the past but offers no path forward. His rejection of education and his fear of change leave him behind. The younger generation sees more promise in Waiyaki's inclusive message. In the end, Kabonyi shows how language can both resist and destroy. Ngũgĩ uses him to warn readers: tradition can be powerful, but in the wrong hands, it becomes a tool of division. Kabonyi never draws blood but he draws sharp boundaries. His downfall reminds us that meaningful change needs more than passion. It needs dialogue, openness, and a vision that includes everyone.

Waiyaki's Rhetoric: A Language of Conviction and Collective Responsibility

Waiyaki's rhetorical approach is grounded in quiet conviction rather than confrontation. When the parents gather from across the ridges, his thoughts are not of dominance or personal gain, but of service and unity. He enters the scene not as a political agitator, but as someone who believes in the transformative potential of education. Although he is uncertain about where he will find teachers or how he will fund the expansion of schools, he is driven by a firm belief that education is essential to the survival and progress of his people. He sees that unless Kamenno and Makuyu overcome their historical divisions, any attempt at building a sustainable educational future will be crippled from the start. For him, the meeting is not just an event; it is a chance to present his moral stance and to voice what he believes is a shared responsibility.

When Waiyaki finally addresses the crowd, he speaks plainly and sincerely. He outlines the needs of Marioshoni with urgency and clarity, listing the most basic requirements for a

functional school: desks, tin for the roof, pencils, and paper. Then he moves beyond the immediate, calling for the construction of more schools and the recruitment of more teachers. His speech is not polished in the traditional sense; it lacks dramatic flair and rhetorical ornamentation. Yet it resonates deeply. Although he worries that his message has not landed, the enthusiastic applause reassures him that sincerity and purpose have reached the audience in a way that rhetorical tricks might not. What he offers them is not a performance but a shared vision of development rooted in service.

Kabonyi's sharp, accusatory rhetoric follows immediately after, filled with pride, nostalgia, and a combative tone. He ridicules Waiyaki's priorities, portraying them as misaligned with the people's urgent needs. He evokes the barrenness of the land, the pain of hunger, the theft of ancestral territory, and the increasing burden of taxation. His questions are rhetorical but pointed, asking if people should concern themselves with education when their basic survival is under threat. He challenges Waiyaki's credibility by questioning the relevance of Western education and appealing instead to tribal pride, casting himself as the one who will restore purity and honour to the Gikuyu people. In this moment, Kabonyi manipulates cultural identity, urging the crowd to reject change and return to a mythic, untainted past.

Waiyaki's response does not mirror Kabonyi's aggression. Instead, he embodies humility and collective respect. The narrative voice likens his tone to that of his father and even to the great Gikuyu leaders of the past, positioning Waiyaki within a lineage of wisdom and dignity. Rather than attacking Kabonyi's speech, he chooses a more inclusive rhetorical path, refusing to provoke division. He reminds the elders and the crowd that he is their child and they are his parents. His aim is not to lead in isolation or to claim power, but to be guided by the wisdom of the community. In this way, Waiyaki subtly redefines leadership—not as domination but as service to the people and the land. His tone is pastoral rather than militant; he appeals to shared values rather than individual pride.

Crucially, Waiyaki argues that the ridges cannot afford to isolate themselves from the broader transformations taking place beyond their borders. His appeal to education is not merely practical—it is symbolic of the need for the community to evolve, to embrace knowledge without abandoning identity. By anchoring his message in both tradition and the necessity of progress, Waiyaki positions himself as a bridge between generations. He does not reject the cultural heritage of the people, but insists that education and wisdom—whether indigenous or acquired through formal schooling—must coexist if the community is to thrive. This rhetorical strategy resonates most powerfully with the youth, who see in Waiyaki not only a teacher but a symbol of hope and continuity.

The people's spontaneous chant for "The Teacher" confirms Waiyaki's rhetorical success. Unlike Kabonyi, he does not demand allegiance through fear or defiance. Instead, the people offer their support willingly, moved by the calm authority and selfless conviction that defines his speech. His ability to draw admiration without spectacle affirms that effective rhetoric, particularly in a time of social uncertainty, does not depend on confrontation or manipulation but on trust and emotional resonance. Waiyaki becomes not just a speaker but a moral voice, one whose authority is granted by the community rather than seized through rhetoric.

Fairclough's critical discourse theory allows us to view Waiyaki's rhetoric not simply as a response to Kabonyi's challenge, but as a discursive act that enacts and sustains a vision of collective identity. Waiyaki reshapes what leadership and wisdom mean in a time of cultural transition. By refusing to exploit traditionalism or fear, he offers a discourse that is both ethically grounded and politically transformative. In the final image of Kabonyi being led away in silence by his own son—who now belongs to Waiyaki's vision—the power of Waiyaki's words becomes unmistakable. His speech does not end in applause alone. It initiates a subtle but decisive shift in the hearts and minds of the people.

Joshua's Rhetoric: The Voice of Divine Authority and Rigid Moral Absolutism

Joshua's rhetoric is infused with a deep and unwavering conviction, rooted in his passionate belief in the authority of the Bible. Whenever he preached, his voice had an almost hypnotic intensity, commanding attention and respect. It was not merely the tone or volume of his speech that drew people in, but the absolute certainty with which he spoke. He did not hesitate, question, or reflect. Instead, he proclaimed. His voice carried the weight of divine judgment, echoing through the packed church with verses that blended seamlessly with his own condemnations and exhortations. His charisma lay in this merging of biblical scripture and personal authority, creating a voice that seemed to channel a divine presence. To those who followed him, he was not simply a preacher but the undisputed shepherd of the new faith, a man set apart to deliver the Word and guide the chosen through a valley of moral decay.

In his preaching, Joshua demonstrated a skilled and deliberate use of rhythm, tone variation, and scriptural interweaving. He would thunder a line from Romans, "There is none righteous, no, not one," then lower his voice to a solemn warning or rise again to stir the emotional energy of the crowd. These shifts were not arbitrary but carefully orchestrated to drive home theological truths and manipulate the emotional rhythm of his listeners. His speech followed the structure of a spiritual performance, one that married moral certainty with performative urgency. Joshua knew the Bible intimately, and this knowledge gave him rhetorical ammunition. He quoted both the Old and New Testaments with ease, but always framed them in ways that served his mission: to separate the new Christian order from what he condemned as tribal darkness. For Joshua, there was no in-between. His language left no room for ambiguity or negotiation.

Joshua's rhetoric operated on the logic of moral binaries. Good and evil, light and darkness, the new faith and the old ways—these were the irreconcilable opposites that defined his discourse. He cast all tribal customs as sinful relics, to be rejected in totality. His voice

became the instrument through which spiritual battle was waged, not only against Satan but also against any hint of cultural compromise. “There is no compromise,” he declared, and this line became more than a personal conviction; it was the foundational ethic of his ministry. Even Jesus, he argued, had refused to mix the two ways. Joshua’s rhetorical strategy, therefore, was not only to warn but to polarise, to compel people to choose a side without hesitation or fear. In doing so, he presented Christianity not as a spiritual journey but as a form of moral warfare.

Perhaps most compelling about Joshua’s style is how his religious fervour intersects with emotional manipulation. He coaxed, condemned, pleaded, and warned—often within the same sermon. He conjured vivid images of Satan whispering in the ears of the weak, not only in fields or homes but even inside the church itself. The battlefield was everywhere. This strategy of omnipresent threat helped him establish psychological control, encouraging constant vigilance and loyalty. His appeal to the image of Jesus on the Cross—betrayed, deserted, yet unwavering—placed moral burden directly on the listener. To hesitate, to doubt, to look back, was to deny Christ as Peter once did. It is through these emotional appeals that Joshua ensured his message was not only heard but internalised.

The climax of his rhetoric lies in the eschatological vision he offers: a place in the Father’s house, prepared for the faithful few who endure trials and resist temptation. This vision of the “new Jerusalem,” of mansions prepared in heaven, operates as both reward and bribe. It is Joshua’s promise of eternal comfort that anchors the struggle he demands in the present. In this way, his rhetoric is sustained by deferred gratification. Earth is the place of hardship, temptation, and testing; heaven is the space of reward. The use of familiar scripture—“Let not your heart be troubled... in my Father’s house are many mansions”—serves not just as comfort but as ideological reinforcement. Those who stray from the path, who walk “with their feet on two roads,” are not only disobedient but traitors to this divine promise.

What Joshua offers is a totalising vision, a closed system of moral logic in which there is no room for hybridity, negotiation, or cultural pluralism. This rhetorical rigidity is precisely what gives his message its potency among those seeking certainty in a time of social transition. His Sunday rally in Kamenno, attended by Christians from distant hills, became not just a religious gathering but a declaration of conquest. The people sang, prayed, and worshipped with a sense of fervour that suggests religious ecstasy and social movement. Some claimed an angel had visited Joshua, while others believed it was the Virgin Mary who had spoken to him. These claims reveal how deeply people had come to associate Joshua's rhetoric with divine revelation. His voice was no longer merely persuasive—it had acquired a prophetic quality.

The conversion of even a few people in Kamenno, a stronghold of tribal tradition, was seen as a breakthrough. Joshua had planted a seed. The power of his rhetoric was not only in what was said but in how it mobilised religious identity against cultural continuity. His growing influence posed a direct challenge to the elders and the institutions they defended. Joshua did not merely preach salvation. He preached rupture. His rhetoric sought to dismantle the past and erect in its place a spiritually pure, culturally alien moral order. In this, he was less a spiritual healer than a cultural revolutionary, using biblical language to erode traditional structures and reframe the future.

Viewed through the lens of critical discourse analysis, Joshua's speech functions as an ideological apparatus, reinforcing the hegemony of colonial Christianity through internalised guilt, moral absolutism, and charismatic performance. His sermons are discursive battlegrounds where conversion is not simply spiritual but political, where rejection of tradition is equated with the embrace of divine truth. He performs the role of the new spiritual patriarch, one who replaces tribal elders and rituals with a scripturally bound authority. And while he may not wield political power in the conventional sense, his sermons reshape the terrain on which moral and social legitimacy are contested.

DISCUSSION

Rhetoric Before Blood: Indigenous Dialogue as Conflict Prevention

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* does not just tell a story of ideological division. It constructs moments where violence seems inevitable, yet the narrative repeatedly chooses rhetorical negotiation over physical confrontation. These moments are not accidental. Ngũgĩ builds them through layered tension between Christianity and tradition, youth and elders, colonial values and indigenous knowledge. His characters confront these tensions through speeches, debates, and moral persuasion.

Waiyaki, for example, constantly turns to communal discourse. At key moments, he calls public meetings, not to impose decisions but to explain, persuade, and unify. His speeches are direct but emotionally charged. He draws on *ethos* by positioning himself as a servant of the people. He uses *logos* when outlining practical needs for education, and appeals to *pathos* when urging unity. Fairclough's CDA helps us see this not just as literary technique, but as ideological work. Waiyaki's speeches are texts shaped by oral tradition. They are produced in communal spaces, interpreted through shared cultural values, and situated in the broader resistance to colonial fragmentation.

Kabonyi responds with a different rhetorical strategy. He weaponizes language to incite fear and division. His use of rhetorical questions, tribal proverbs, and historical references is strategic. He reclaims tradition, but selectively. Through Fairclough's model, we can see his discourse operating at the level of social practice: it resists cultural change and uses the past to justify exclusion. His public accusations against Waiyaki are not just plot points. They reveal how language can entrench ideology and silence opposition without a single weapon being raised.

Joshua, meanwhile, offers a third style. His rhetoric is biblical, absolutist, and rigid. His sermons blend scripture with condemnation. He uses his voice to draw moral boundaries and

frame conflict as spiritual warfare. Through CDA, Joshua's sermons can be read as aligning with colonial religious discourse, even while resisting tribal customs. He offers certainty, not dialogue. His version of peace demands submission, not negotiation. This shows that not all rhetoric builds peace. It depends on how it is used, and for whose benefit.

Together, these characters illustrate an indigenous model of conflict resolution that privileges speech over violence. But it is not just any speech. It is culturally embedded, shaped by oral performance, communal listening, and the moral weight of tradition. Ngũgĩ does not romanticize this model. He shows its limits. Yet he uses it to model how African societies have long used language to manage tension, govern disagreement, and prevent collapse.

Studies such as Adegoju's (2009) work on Yoruba proverbs reinforce this. They show how African communities have always encoded values of peace and justice into everyday speech. Similarly, Bibi and Shaheen (2025) show how rhetorical resistance, when rooted in local realities, can gain legitimacy and inspire solidarity. What Ngũgĩ offers, then, is not just "talk over war," but *talk with meaning*—talk that draws power from the people's voice and cultural roots.

Fictional Success, Real-World Failure? The Problem of External Mediation

While Ngũgĩ's fictional world offers powerful scenes of rhetorical resolution, the same strategies often fail in real-world conflicts. Why does speech succeed in *The River Between* but falter in practice? The answer lies partly in who controls the dialogue. In the novel, characters speak from within the community. Even when they disagree, their language is shaped by shared references, histories, and spiritual frameworks. Waiyaki can appeal to communal values because he is seen as a product of the land and its traditions. His ethos is local and rooted.

In contrast, real-world peace efforts, especially in postcolonial Africa, are often mediated by international actors who lack this cultural proximity. Studies like Breslowski et al. (2024) highlight how international organisations use diplomacy, public statements, and threats

of sanctions as rhetorical tools. These may deter violence, but they rarely build trust. The language used is technical, often legalistic, and disconnected from the moral frameworks of the communities in conflict. As Fairclough would argue, such discourse reflects dominant global ideologies rather than local needs.

Furthermore, international peace rhetoric often imposes binaries—peace or war, government or rebels, win or lose. But as Joshua’s sermons show, rigid language can close off dialogue. Real peace requires what Waiyaki attempts: open-ended speech, listening, and shared responsibility. Yet these are difficult to achieve when outside actors shape the terms of negotiation. The fictional success of rhetorical resolution in Ngũgĩ’s world also depends on the power of audience. In the novel, listeners participate in meaning-making. They chant, question, and decide. But in international interventions, local voices are often marginalised. Rhetoric becomes performance for donors and global institutions, not genuine community engagement. This gap explains why indigenous rhetorical strategies work in literature but struggle in real life. They require more than words. They demand cultural legitimacy, trust, and time which top-down interventions rarely allow.

Toward Culturally Rooted Peace: A Practical Way Forward

This analysis supports one core argument: *sustainable peace cannot be imported*. It must grow from within. Rhetoric can resolve conflict when it speaks in the moral language of the community. Ngũgĩ’s novel reminds us that dialogue, persuasion, and symbolic speech are not just artistic choices. They are practical tools with deep cultural roots in African societies.

Fairclough’s CDA shows us how language operates across texts, practices, and structures. Aristotle reminds us that persuasive speech is not accidental. It requires ethical standing, emotional connection, and clear reasoning. But these tools only work when people recognize their legitimacy. That is what Waiyaki has, and what international actors often lack.

Peace-building must move away from imposing solutions and instead focus on enabling dialogue. International actors should play a supportive role by empowering local mediators, elevating indigenous perspectives, and engaging meaningfully with oral traditions. Forms such as proverbs, storytelling, and communal discussions are not barriers to peace. These are tools that have long sustained peace-building. When these are ignored, peace agreements often collapse, and conflict resurfaces.

This is not to suggest that international involvement is unnecessary, but rather that it should be grounded in humility and cultural sensitivity. The task is not to replace existing frameworks, but to reinforce them. It is crucial to recognise and uplift the Waiyakis of today rather than silencing them with external models that do not resonate. *The River Between* is a work of fiction but its message is strikingly relevant. It presents a world where dialogue prevents violence, where tradition and modernity engage, and where authority listens before it leads. This vision need not remain confined to literature. It offers a blueprint for real-world conflict resolution. A blueprint that is deeply African, profoundly human, and urgently needed.

Conclusion

This work has shown that *The River Between* models an African-centred approach to resolving conflict through culturally rooted language. Ngũgĩ creates scenes where violence is likely, yet his characters rely on rhetoric, not weapons. Their speech draws from oral tradition, shared beliefs, and moral reasoning. The argument is that peace is possible when language reflects the values of the people. Waiyaki unites through inclusive speech. Kabonyi divides through fear and pride. Joshua commands through rigid faith. Their words do more than persuade. They shape identity, power, and direction. Fairclough's CDA helps reveal how these forms of speech are connected to wider social meaning. Aristotle's rhetoric explains their persuasive force. Together, these tools show how Ngũgĩ's narrative offers a serious, practical alternative to violence.

One clear lesson emerges. Sustainable peace cannot be imposed from outside. It must grow from within. Real progress depends on listening to communities, trusting local knowledge, and using forms of dialogue that people already understand and value. The main recommendation is that peace-building efforts must prioritise indigenous communication methods. Proverbs, storytelling, communal dialogue, and spiritual language should be treated as active tools for resolving conflict. Not as symbols, but as strategies. This work joins the wider search for practical and context-based approaches to peace especially in the current world where conflicts are sprouting everyday. It argues that rhetoric is not just a literary device. It is a foundation for real change. What Ngũgĩ imagines in fiction has deep relevance for reality. It is time peace-builders take that seriously.

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