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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### INTERDISCIPLINARY DYNAMICS IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM THROUGH N'GUGI WA THIONG'O'S *THE RIVER BETWEEN* AND CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *THE THING AROUND YOUR NECK*

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#### ABSTRACT

This paper uses N'gugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *The Thing around your Neck* to explore the ongoing changes brought about by interdisciplinarity in some African education systems. Its main quest is to find a successful model of learning that reflects intercultural realities. To achieve this, it uses Zilberberg and Fontanille's tensive modelization, to analyse the intensity and extensivity of the values contained in the phenomena observed in educational systems. Through the life of the characters in the corpus, it draws up a traditional and modern representation of learning process and analyses the variations in interdisciplinary relations. As a result, it offers a broad institutional understanding of multidisciplinary education systems, including diverse cultural values.

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## INTRODUCTION

In a world where humans are gradually moving closer together, living in isolation is becoming an increasingly difficult reality. The cultural models of societies, in which education plays an important role, are deeply affected by both internal and external influences. Authors like N'gugi wa Thiong'o and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, address the question of interdisciplinarity in education with a particular interest. Their corresponding novels *The River Between* (1965) and *The Thing around your Neck* (2009), highlights the involvements of fluctuations, interferences and interactions between individuals with sometimes different backgrounds, upbringings and educational principles. Given this mosaic of cultures, how can we establish a hybrid education system that provides consensus-based learning? This paper will address this question by referring to the tensive modelization method originated from tensive semiotics, a branch of Greimasian semiotic theory. Developed by Jacques Fontanille and Louis Herbert Zilberberg the tensive modelization method helps to analyze and represent the dynamics of meaning, particularly emotional or affective intensity, within texts, images, or other semiotic systems. In relation to the scope of our work, Tensive modelization will help identify when and why hybrid learning fails or succeeds, by decoding the affective and semantic dynamics of the student experience. It will shift the focus from

just content delivery to how learning is felt and experienced — which is critical in a fragmented, flexible system like hybrid education. More, it will permit to examine the different events caused by interdisciplinary impact on the characters 'educational systems and help to figure out how a society can favour learning adapted to the prevailing realities despite different cultural values.

However, in order to carry out this study, we shall firstly discuss the traditional and modern representation of education in the learning system, and secondly focus on the changes experienced by disciplinary systems in the educational process.

**Patterns of Traditional and Modern Educational System in the *The River Between* and *The Thing around your Neck*:** Addressing the issue of interdisciplinarity in learning systems requires some clarification to better understand the implications surrounding the relationships between different characters in novels. For David Algonzalez, interdisciplinarity is :

When two or more disciplines converge in a given field, as they would.....their convergence can lead to a practical integration of the disciplines involved, which would be

unified. Paradoxically, these convergences on many occasions give rise to new independent and sovereign disciplines, at least when they are considered in terms of their academic institutionalization. (2011:392-393)

However, some questions remain: how does this concept impact the educational systems and how are modern and traditional educational systems represented in *The River Between* and *The Thing around your Neck*? Indeed, the characters evolve in a particular learning system inherited from cultural codes. Two major cultural patterns are clearly identified as they overlap through interactions between characters: the traditional learning system and the European one. The native African's structural organization is based upon initiation rites that are the flogging and the circumcisions. As for the European one, it is through missionary schools where catechism and western lifestyle are taught. Furthermore, clarifying the transfer of methods from one discipline to another, highlights the need to identify certain principles. Indeed, an examination of the way in which traditional and modern education systems are debated in the novels shows a series of values promoted in each of them. In *The River Between*, for example, *Ngugi wa Thiong'o* depicts a society in which the notion of belonging is based on respect for a certain fundamentals such as courage, respect, submission and resilience. These fundamentals should be demonstrated during initiation ceremonies, as the flogging and circumcision endured by Waiyaki:

...Everywhere candidates for the initiation were gathering...Waiyaki was one of the candidates...Waiyaki's absence from the hills had kept him out of touch with those things that most mattered to the tribe...But he knew that he had to go through the initiation. And he did not like to disappoint his father...Not that he disliked the idea of circumcision. On the contrary, he looked forward to it. It was his boy's ambition to test his courage at the ceremony ( Ngugi 1965:39) and Muthoni during the excision rites:

I want to be a woman. Father and Mother are circumcised...How could I be outside the tribe when all the girls born with me at the same time have left me?...Yes-I want to be a woman made beautiful in the manner of the tribe..(N'gugi 1965 :39-44)

In addition, there is the instruction on the part of the community that takes place through the transmission of knowledge, generally from father to son, as is noted in the scene of Chege, Waiyaki's father, and Waiyaki himself. The latter happily took his son to the mountains to show him the family possession by teaching him the history of the clan:

Do you see all this land, this country stretching beyond and joining the sky? His voice was deep and calm. Waiyaki realized that it was charged with strong feeling. Chege stopped but continued with his steadfast look... 'that is the seat of Murungu. He made Gikuyu and Mumbi' (N'gugi 1965 :17) and The old man shifted his gaze and looked at his son 'You understand that Gikuyu and Mumbi set their footsteps here...Chege paused for a while as if to gather his breath...' 'We are his off springs. His blood flows in your veins' Waiyaki stood as if dumb. The knowledge that he had in him the blood of this famous

seer, who had been able to see the future, filled him with an acute sense of wonder... (N'gugi 1965:18-19).

In *The Thing around your Neck*, a collection of short stories by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the text entitled 'The Headstrong Historian' describes a model of learning similar to that evoked in the first novel. The sense of responsibility is emphasised through the assignment of roles. Within the community, the status held depends on the educational model received by the young people in the clan. The learning system is based on the young girl being taught to make pottery in order to support her man, while the boy is taught the trade of weaving, which enables him to take on the responsibilities of a future head of household. Grace's grandmother's visit to the Mission's school gives an idea of this: "But when the girls were separated ...Nwamgba found this silly ; in her clan girls learned to make pottery and a man sewed cloth." (Adichie 2009:208)

These different social patterns highlight the apparent duality represented in the combination of the cultures and the individuals of the novels. In fact, the analysis of the intercultural relationships in each of the novels shows some relevant leads. Ngugi wa Thiong'o examines the tensions and other crises between traditional Gikuyu culture and colonial influence, particularly through education. The book depicts a community divided between those who embrace Western education and those who cling to tradition. Schools run by missionaries are often seen as instruments of cultural assimilation, seeking to eradicate traditional practices. The characters who undergo traditional initiation are, sometimes expelled or persecuted by the missionaries, thus illustrating the conflicts between traditional and Western education. The intercultural influence in the model of instruction is perceived through the contrasting stances adopted by Joshua and his daughter Muthoni, In reality, while Muthoni pleads for traditional education as seen in her statement:

..I also want to be initiated in the ways of the tribe...I knew that my father would not let me and so I came...I want to be a woman. Father and Mother are circumcised. But why are they stopping me, why do they deny me this? How could I be outside the tribe? (Ngugi,1965: 43-44),

Joshua, on the contrary, sides with an advocacy for Western instruction:

Joshua was sitting outside his house when the two girls came...he looked at them, at the way they were working...and felt a father's pride...His house had a strong Christian foundation and he wanted his daughters to wax strong in faith and the ways of God...The elders of Kamen...collected and gave sacrifice to Murunga under the sacred tree....Joshua was against such initiation rites, especially the female circumcision...To Joshua, indulging in this ceremony was the unforgivable sin... (Ngugi 1965 30-31)

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *The Thing around your Neck*, though not exclusively focused on education, gives an insight of the issue related to influence in learning systems. Through the case of Nwamgba, resilience and hope appear to be deeply rooted in the way she faces her difficulties. When favoring interdisciplinary approach by allowing her descendants, to go to the white man's school, Nwamgba had no other purpose than to signify her determination to face her in-laws after the death

of her late husband. Interdisciplinarity appears to be the key to unlocking Nwamgba's expectations. In fact, from the traditional learning system, in which he had his age group, to the missionary school, Anikwewna (the son of Nwamgba), ended up with an eclectic picture of a character shaped by the various educational models. He was going through traditional education when his mother transferred him to the missionaries' school. His final attitude, after settling the expropriation dispute with his uncles, confirms his status as the product of a mixture of educational systems he passed through. Indeed, he decided to stay in the Western system while keeping family link with his mother.

Fortunately for Nwamgba, her granddaughter Grace, despite the hegemony of Western education in her upbringing, returned to her African roots. Contrary to her father, she takes back her original name, Afamefunna, the one her tribe's alliances and beliefs had given her. The internal conflicts experienced by each of the characters in their search for identity, which guide their actions, are the result of the intercultural present in 'The Headstrong Historian'. Interdisciplinary acquisitions from the learning systems have determined the final attitudes of the individuals.

In short, the analysis of the intercultural learning systems provided by these works highlights the tensions and exchanges observed in the relationship between traditional African cultures and Western influences in education. This reality is undoubtedly shaping and redefining the relations between cultures, which were initially based on domination, but are now becoming a culture of dialogue thanks to intercultural penetration.

**Variations of disciplinary systems in the educational process in *The River Between* and *The Thing around your Neck*:** With regard to the evolution and changes in the modes of knowledge in the world, the main characters are affected by the confrontation resulting from the meeting of cultures. African and Western systems of learning are engaged in a competition for hegemony in the education process. An examination of the mutual influences arising in the behaviours of Waiyaki, Muthoni, Anikwemna and Grace, shows the intensity of cultural transactions in educational systems. In fact, the way in which the characters move between cultures, identities, traditional norms and values raises the question of the permeability of the traditions and customs contained in education systems. Using the operative concepts of the tensile modelization, we can better analyse the disciplinary variations experienced by the characters inside the novels.

These operative concepts are determined by the values attributed to the phenomena at work in a literary work; they are the extensity and the intensity (Herbert, 2016:210). The intensity deals with the variations of the strength of the phenomena while the extensity covers the spatial extent of the phenomenon. Both valences relate to quantity and variety help to experience variations ranging from zero force to maximum force. However, how do we analyse variations in the phenomena involved in the learning process inside *The River Between* and *The Thing around your Neck*?. The most visible phenomenon, which is relevant to the subject of the study, is the dynamism experienced by the learning systems involved. In reality, the traditional and Western systems are undergoing upheavals due to the behavioural fluctuations of the characters in our corpus. These variations concern both the intensity of

the changes undergone and their ability to expand. The following table enables us to draw up a tensile modelization of the dynamism experienced by the competing educational systems.

**Variations in forces relating to the confrontation of education systems**

Extensity \ Intensity	Low	High
High	2- Large change of educational systems in a small population. <i>Ascendancy and inverse relationship</i>	4- Large evolution of educational systems on a large population <i>amplification and converse relationship</i>
Low	1- Low evolution of educational systems on a low population <i>Decadence and converse relationship</i>	3- Low evolution of educational systems in a large population <i>Attenuation and inverse relationship</i>

It is worth pointing out that the values carried by the characters lay in the four zones mentioned in this tensile modelization. These are the zones of high force with increased intensity of dynamism (tone and tempo), and the zones of low force relating to low dynamism (temporality and extension or broadening). This dyadic structuring (two zones of high force and two zones of low force), emphasises the type of evolution or dynamism of the interdisciplinary relationships of the education systems on the populations. They will be assessed according to the strength of the variation (intensity) and its duration or degree of expansion (extensity). Waiyaki's desire to preserve tradition makes no secret of his attachment to modern education. He shares similar values with Nwamgba (Grace's grandmother) and Grace herself, including those concerning intercultural relations. Inversely, Joshua, representing Western education through the Catholic mission in *The River Between*, and Michael (also known as Anikwenwa), Nwamgba's son and father of little Grace in *The Thing around your Neck*, share attachments that differ from traditional learning norms.

If we look at the relationships between the values contained in the zones of disciplinary variations, we see different levels of change as we move from one zone to another. Analysis of the data shows that in zone 1 of our diagram, the disciplinary systems experience a slow progression and therefore a decadent variation. In reality, N'Gugi introduces us to a world in which the education provided by the missionaries, and promoted by Joshua, meets with fierce resistance from the local Gikuyu community. Chege, Waiyaki's father and an advocate of traditional education or the transmission of knowledge from father to son, takes care to teach his son about the history and land of his tribe, «...Do you see all this land, this country stretching beyond the and joining the sky?...You descend from those few who came to the hills...» (N'gugi 1965:17-18).

Furthermore, Chege's commitment to preserving the Gikuyu tradition created the conditions for rejecting the instruction provided by the missionaries of whom Joshua is the guardian. His recommendations still remain firm: « Arise, Heed the prophecy. Go to the Mission place. Learn all the wisdom of all the secrets of the white man. But do not follow his vices. Be true to your people and the ancient rites ... » (N'gugi 1965:20). Thus, he creates hostile environment to the spread of Catholic

education led by Joshua. The following passage testifies to the inhospitality of Joshua, who, noting the hardship of his mission of planting, came to think of leaving the area, just as was the case with the Jews in Egypt:

The elders of Kameno, and all over the country of sleeping lions, collected and gave sacrifice to Murunga under the sacred tree. All these was a prélude to such rites which will be performed....by the others ready for initiation ceremonies. Joshua was against such initiation rites, especially the female circumcision, which was taking on a new significance in the relationship between Makuyu and Kameno.....Had he not been told to take up everything and leave Egypt? He would journey courageously, a Christian soldier, going on to the promised land. Nobody would deflect him from his set purpose... (N'gugi 1965:30-31)

In addition, it is important to stress that the intercultural effects that consist in collaboration, highlight the issue of otherness in the education system. In reality, the aspect relating to the being, as an individual, plays a decisive role in shapping a person's character. Factors linked to the perception of the world and experience of the environment influence the individual's relationship with the educational provision and justifies his attitude. The zone 2 of our diagram introduces a notable change in the learning process for the characters. The latter, from now on, fully adhere to the educational offer. In doing so, they encourage, through the evolution of the intensity of intercultural collaboration, an ascendancy of the variation of learning models, albeit still restricted to a few individuals. The attitudes of Muthoni in *The Rivers Between* explain the relationship with otherness. First of all, Muthoni, Waiyaki's friend, despite having been brought up in the Catholic education system, opts for allegiance to the traditional educational institution. In the present passage, she tries to convince her sister of her decision to embrace the traditional system:

I know, but I want to be circumcised...Look, please,I-want to be a woman...I want to be a real girl, a real woman, knowing all the ways of the hills and ridges...Father and mother are circumcised...Are they not christians? Circumcision did not prevent them from being christians.I too have embraced the white man's faith. However, I know 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. My life and your life are here, in the hills, that you and I know... (N'gugi 1965 :25-26).

Anikwenwa, Chimamanda's character whose Christian name is Michael, is used by his mother Nwamgba to resist family pressure from his uncles after the death of his father. His case, contrary to Muthoni and Waiyaki of *The River Between*, is the perfect example of the proven failure of African conservatives. Indeed, the latter, with his enrolment in the missionary school, saw in him the opportunity to preserve and promote the achievements of traditional education. Unfortunately, his time at the white man's educational system, which his mother thought would be temporary, turns into a permanent one. Both the traditional system and the modern system of learning undergo an intense evolution through the characters Muthoni and Anikwenwa:

She knew that Anikwenwa did not want to go to school, and she told him that it was only for a year or two, so that he would learn English...Anikwenwa's attitude to school slowly changed...Her pride turned to a vague worry when she noticed that the curiosity in his eyes had diminished...She felt her son slipping away from her, and yet she was proud that he was learning so much...Her proudest moments was when he went to his father's cousins Okafo and Okoye and asked for his father's ivory tusk back. And they gave it. (Adichie 2009 :210-211).

In zone 3, the interdisciplinary variation in knowledge shows an attenuated relationship. The intensity of the mechanism is declining, or even slowing down, due to the large proportion of the target population that is not impacted. In fact, the educational process, driven by the changes, seem to be undergoing effects of personal introspection. These feelings result from an in-depth examination of the individual as we can read it in Muthoni's conversation with her sister Nyambura (1965:43-44). As a result, characters undertake to reconsider their approach, with both the traditional and modern learning system. The learners adopt a new posture leading thus, to a break in the interdisciplinary dynamism. (zero extension and low intensity). The force of variation returns to zero because a large number of subjects remain in their original cultural condition. Grace for example reached the top of western instruction, but she returns to her roots by taking up the traditional name given to her by her grandmother Nwamgba:

It was Grace who as she received faculty prizes, as she spoke to solemn-faced or conference about the Ijaw and Ibibio and Igbo and Efik people of Southern...would imagine her grandmother looking on and chudding with great amusement. It was Grace who, feeling an odd rootless ness in the later years of her life, surrounded by her awards, her friends, her garden of peerless roses, would go to the courthouse in Lagos and officially change her first name from Grace to Afamefuna.(Adichie 2009 :217-218)

Like Grace, Waiyaki in *The River Between* goes through a period of transition in his educational process. In fact, his departure from the village to the missionary school in Siriana, has not prevented him from returning to his roots. His status as the son of the former guardian of customs meant a lot to him. And so, he set about doing his initiation to complete his traditional training. This step would earn him the esteem of his peers. With the changes in Waiyaki's learning experience, he no longer appears as a vehicle for promoting European education. On the contrary, his return to his tradition puts an abrupt halt to the evolution of the Western system. This stagnation attenuates the variations in the learning system, as shown in Zone 3 of our tense diagram:

In this, Chege did not see it as a contradiction that he, the embodiment of the true Gikuyu, should have sent his son to the very missionary centre whose existence he had always opposed....The boy was doing well at Siriana. He had early gone through the second birth. And this season he would be initiated into manhood. This would help him to absorb the white man's wisdom more quickly and help the tribe. (N'gugi 1965 :38)

Zone 4 of our tensive modelization shows an amplification of the changes. In fact, the variations in learning methods simultaneously intensifies and spreads over a larger population. Waiyaki succeeded in convincing a large number of villagers of the merits of modern education at the school results presentation ceremony (Ngugi 1965:96-97). This relationship, is qualified as a converse one by the indications inside the diagram. It is also like Zone 1, which bears simultaneously zero extensity and intensity because of the immobility of the changes. In contrast, to the amplification and decadence in Zone 1 and 4, Zone 2 and 3 describe an attenuated and ascending activity of the educational process. Indeed, the intensity of the interdisciplinary process does not follow the pace of propagation. This state is qualified as an inverse relationship because, while Waiyaki (*The River Between*) and Ankwenwa (The son of Nwamgba in *The Thing around your Neck*) were accepting modern instruction, the majority of their village compatriots were rejecting it.

Furthermore, it is important to specify that training as perceived in such a context is no longer a closed process, but rather the fruit of a transformation brought about by interdisciplinary influences. Repeatedly exposed to the incursions of the effects of foreign educational systems, learners end up showing openness and flexibility. They adapt to the new cultural and social realities contained in the heterogeneous learning model. It is also useful to explain that the observation of the effects of intercultural penetration, through the analysis of the actions of the characters, states with acuity the need to rethink educational systems. In this way, taking into account contemporary educational and cultural realities will encourage the emergence of a new type of learner. Grace, Chimamanda N'gozi Adichie's character (*The Thing around your Neck*), demonstrated a remarkable educational record which, despite strong presumptions, did not allow her to be definitively accepted as a successful candidate in European learning systems. She broke her marriage with her husband because of strong intellectual incompatibilities on the question of African tradition:

It was Grace who, in a conversation about the early manuscript with her fiancé, George Chikadibia...knew that the marriage would not last when George told her she was misguided to write about primitive culture instead of a worthwhile topic like African Alliances in the American-Soviet Tension.....She would strangle him to death if she had to listen to one more raptuous monologue about his Cambridge days. (Adichie 2009 :217)

In addition, interdisciplinary collaboration in the educational process, is having a significant influence on the attitudes of those involved, be they teachers, pupils or communities. In fact, the content of training is being turned upside down, not only through attitudes but also through a new perception of things. As a result, the mentalities and attitudes of the people involved are being transformed, and the training curriculum is being recomposed. Waiyaki demonstrates this perfectly in the following passage:

Waiyaki told them that he was their son . They all were his parents. He did not want to lead. The elders were there to guide and lead the youth.....All he wanted was to serve the ridges, to serve the hills....So he spoke on, pointing out the importance of learning, of acquiring all the wisdom that one could get. People wanted him to go on, on telling them

the sweet words of wisdom.....And some shouted ;'Our children must learn. Show us the way. We will follow...An inter-ridge committee was elected to look after the education of all and see to the building of new schools in the country... (N'gugi 1965 : 96-97).

Furthermore, faced with the multiple conflicts and crises underway in certain communities, the question of the impact of education systems highlights the failure of the various learning methods applied up to now. In reality, individuals, whether they live in harmony or not, turn out to be the result of an educational model that is closed to the outside world and impervious to the offers on offer. The challenge of opening up to the outside world in order to achieve a more inclusive learning system appears to be a major quest for the education and training sector:

Children knew him and hailed him as 'Our Teacher'. Old men and women also called him the Teacher....Another thing was coming into his mind. Every day he is becoming convinced of the need of unity between Kameno and Makuyu. The ancient rivalry would cripple his efforts in education...Now was the time to show his stand. This was not a plan but a conviction.. (N'gugi 1965:91)

Grace and Waiyaki, the interface between different cultures, illustrate the completed formula of inter- and transdisciplinarity in learning systems. The analysis of epistemic dynamism through the orientations of the tensive modelization reinforces the idea according to which, the diversification and richness of school and pedagogical programs are reflected in the intellectual quality of learners passed through the mold of inter and transdisciplinarity. So, with a curriculum that is more eclectic, up-to-date and respectful of current educational standards, we find ourselves with individuals who are well trained and qualified to meet the challenges of their time. That's what we see in Grace's attitude in *The Thing around your Neck*.

## CONCLUSION

This study has provided an issue of the analysis of interdisciplinary variations in learning systems driven by repetitive upheavals in a changing world. The relevance of the subject, which opens up the debate on the quest to establish a completed model of learning that includes the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary epistemic paradigm, has attracted the interest of authors such as N'Gugi wa thiong'o and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Using the main characters in their works, Waiyaki and Muthoni in *The River Between* and Grace in *The Thing around your Neck*, a description of both the traditional and modern educational systems and their variations enabled us to assess the intensity (forces and tensions) and extensity (propagation) of epistemic dynamism in models of learning, as allowed by Zilberberg C. and J. Fontanille's tensive modelization.

An examination of the changes observed in interdisciplinarity at the level of education systems, encourages a popularisation in the various training entities, both institutional and private, of multidisciplinary education systems. It includes diverse cultural values, encouraging openness and tolerance towards other cultures, and is geared towards the needs of the moment. In other words, it invites international organisations such as

Unesco to introduce or strengthen curriculum design modules that are representative of the inter/trans epistemic paradigm.

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