

NGUGI WA THIONG'O: A MEETING IN THE DARK

The sun had already gone to rest and now darkness was coming. The evening meal was ready. His tough father was still at the table reading his Bible. He did not look up when John entered. Strange silence settled in the hut.

5 'You look unhappy.' His mother first broke the silence.

John laughed. It was a nervous little laugh. 'No, Mother,' he hastily replied, nervously looking at his father. He secretly hoped that Wamuhu had not blabbed.

'Then I am glad.'

10 She did not know. He ate his dinner and went out to his hut. A man's hut. Every young man had his own hut. John was never allowed to bring any girl visitor in there. Stanley did not want 'trouble'. Even to be seen standing with one was a crime. His father could easily thrash him. He feared his father, though sometimes he wondered why he feared him. He
15 ought to have rebelled like the other educated young men. He lit the lantern. He took it in his hand. The yellow light flickered dangerously and then went out. He knew his hands were shaking. He lit it again and hurriedly took his big coat and a huge Kofia which were lying on the unmade bed. He left the lantern burning, so that his father would see it
20 and think he was in. John bit his lower lip spitefully. He hated himself for being so girlish. It was unnatural for a boy of his age.

Like a shadow, he stealthily crossed the courtyard and went on to the village street.

He met young men and women lining the streets. They were laughing,
25 talking, whispering. They were obviously enjoying themselves. John thought, they are more free than I am. He envied their exuberance. They clearly stood outside or above the strict morality that the educated ones had to be judged by. Would he have gladly changed places with them? He wondered. At last, he came to the hut. It stood at the very heart of the
30 village- How well he knew it- to his sorrow. He wondered what he should do! Wait for her outside? What if her mother came out instead? He decided to enter.

'Hodi!'

'Enter. We are in.'

35 John pulled down his hat before he entered. Indeed they were all there – all except she whom he wanted. The fire in the hearth was dying. Only a small flame from a lighted lantern vaguely illuminated the whole hut.

The flame and the giant shadow created on the wall seemed to be
mocking him. He prayed that Wamuhu's parents would not recognize
40 him and made themselves busy on his account. To be visited by such an
educated one, who knew all about the whiteman's world and knowledge
and who would now go to another land beyond, was not such a frequent
occurrence that it could be taken lightly. Who knew but he might be
interested in their daughter? Stranger things had happened. After all,
45 learning was not the only thing. Though Wamuhu had no learning, yet
she had charms and could be trusted to captivate any young man's heart
with her looks and smiles.

'You will sit down. Take that stool.'

'No!' He noticed with bitterness that he did not call her 'Mother'.

50 'Where is Wamuhu?'

The mother threw a triumphant glance at her husband. They exchanged
a knowing look. John bit his lip again and felt like bolting. He controlled
himself with difficulty.

'She has gone out to get some tea leaves. Please sit down. She will cook
55 you some tea when she comes.'

'I am afraid ...' he muttered some inaudible words and went out. He
almost collided with Wamuhu.

In the hut: 'Didn't I tell you? Trust a woman's eye!'

'You don't know these young men.'

60 'But you see John is different. Everyone speaks well of him and he is a
clergyman's son.'

'Y-e-e-s! A clergyman's son! You forget your daughter is circumcised.'

The old man was remembering his own day. He had found for himself a
good virtuous woman, initiated in all the tribe's ways. And she had
65 known no other man. He had married her. They were happy. Other man
of his Rika had done the same. All the girls had been virgins, it being a
taboo to touch a girl in that way, even if you slept in the same bed, as
indeed so many young men and girls did. Then the white men had come,
preaching a strange religion, strange ways, which all men followed. The
70 tribe's code of behavior was broken. The new faith could not keep the
tribe together. How could it? The men who followed the new faith
would not let the girls be circumcised. And they would not let their sons
marry circumcised girls. Puu! Look at what was happening. Their young
men went away to the land of the whitemen. What did they bring? White
75 women. Black women who spoke English. Aaa – bad. And the young

men who were left just did not mind. They made unmarried girls their wives and then left them with fatherless children.

'What does it matter?' his wife was replying. 'Is Wamuhu not as good as the best of them? Anyway, John is different.'

- 80 'Different! Different! Puu! They are all alike. Those coated with the white clay of the whiteman's ways are the worst. They have nothing inside. Nothing – nothing here.' He took a piece of wood and nervously poked the dying fire. A strange numbness came over him. He trembled. And he feared; he feared for the tribe that had crumbled. The tribe had nowhere
- 85 to go to. And it could not be what it was before. He stopped poking and looked hard at the ground.

Source:

Ngugi wa Thiong'o: A Meeting in the Dark. In: Charles R. Larson: African short stories. A collection of contemporary African writing. New York: Collier Books 1970

Vocabulary:

line 18 Kofia – typ of African hat

line 33: Hodi – Swahili: Hello, may I come in?

line 66: Rika – same age group