

Sample Essays

Margaret A. Ogola, The River and the Source

1. **“Gender imbalance only causes misery in society.” Write an essay in support of this statement, drawing your illustrations from The River and the Source. (20 marks)**

In the societies that are male dominated and male oriented, women are subjected to all forms of misery ranging from assault to emotional abuse. In The River and the Source, there are various manifestations of gender imbalance all of which reveal the suffering of women.

Preference for sons in the traditional society is evident at the onset of the story. When Akoko is born, she yells so lustily that Chief Odero Gogni thinks with satisfaction that he has got “another rock for my sling”, another son. That the chief shows open preference for a son yet he already has seven sons and not a single daughter indicates preference for the boy child, a means of ensuring continuity of the family. This bias against the girl child is also revealed when Owuor Kembo’s father fumes with silent fury because he has only two sons and twenty- two daughters, wanderers who would only depart to go and “cook” for some other clan.

A woman’s importance starts and ends with her ability to bear children especially sons. Owuor Kembo comes under great pressure from his mother, Nyar Asembo and the council of ‘Jodongo’ because Akoko has difficulties conceiving as regularly as expected. Akoko suffers

false accusations of witchcraft due to her inability to reproduce at the rate of her mother-in-law's expectations.

Gender inequality at Aluor Mission is expressed in the biased provision of education; with the girl child getting fewer chances of acquiring formal education. In a class of thirty-two pupils that Awiti joins, there is only one other girl who drops out soon after. While the boys drop out for the plausible reason of lack of three shillings levied as school fees, the girl drops out to get married. She is a victim of the traditional role assigned to women; till the land and rear children.

Injustice against women is explicitly expressed when Otieno, Akoko's brother-in-law robs her of her late husband's wealth, her hard earned wealth and her grandson of his rightful position to the chieftaincy. Nyabera also deciphers injustice against women in the institution of 'tero'. Widow inheritance by a relative who only offers minimal comfort to the widow and whose only obligation is to sire more children for his dead brother or cousin, children he has no obligation to.

Gender insensitivity is exposed at the university when Aoro, taking Wandia for granted addresses his anatomy study group as 'hey man' yet a woman is part of it. It takes Wandia's assertive nature to correct the situation by insisting that people be referred to by their names. At the end of the anatomy course when Wandia defeats all, Aoro observes offensively that it was

the first time he has been beaten by a girl and goes on to credit Wandia with the masculine quality of being tough. This insinuation makes Wandia a little disappointed.

In conclusion, forms of gender prejudice such as preference for boys, the traditional role assigned to women, biased provision of education, injustices and insensitivity indeed cause untold suffering to women. Women should come out strongly and break off to an independent and dignified existence.

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2. **“A river is as good as its source.” Drawing examples from the lives of Akoko and her descendants in The River and the source, write an essay illustrating the truth of this statement. (20 marks)**

A permanent river always has a good and reliable source. Such a river continues flowing and sustaining the lives of many generations without any fear of drying up. Akoko is symbolically the point of origin of the reliable family line (river) described in The River and the Source.

Akoko’s river starts flowing when she is born. She yells so lustily that her father imagines, wrongly of course, that he has another son. Later, he acknowledges the importance of a daughter by saying that “a home without daughters is like a river without a source”. Akoko is born to serve as the source of a great river that keeps flowing from her to Nyabera and Awiti who are strong women like her. Although Nyabera initially meanders in some form of confusion, she eventually comes to terms with her being and guides her daughter Awiti to a strong foundation just like Akoko did to her.

Akoko's "river" keeps on flowing and when it looks like it is drying up in the death of her son Obura, her husband Owuor Kembo, her only remaining son Owang' Sino and Nyabera's children in childhood, the river emerges yet again when Nyabera gives birth to a child that survives. The "river" gathers momentum in Awiti and her seven children. Most of these children such as Vera, Aoro and Tony are like Akoko. Even Wandia, Aoro's wife, who is not a blood relative of Akoko is described as the most Akoko-like by Elizabeth.

Akoko is the source of the admirable character traits that flow in her offspring. She is determined to reclaim her wealth and Owuor Sino's chieftaincy from Otieno and she succeeds through the help of "Sirikal". Akoko's determination is evident in Awiti who is said to have developed her grandmother's steely determination. It is also evident in Aoro who in pursuing Wandia says he is Akoko's grandson and therefore does not know the meaning of giving up. As a strong believer in "Were" and God of the new religion, Akoko's religious nature acts as a foundation to her offspring's religious practice one of who is a bishop (Peter), a priest (Tony) and a non-marrying member of Opus Dei (Vera).

Akoko is the source of the fight against male domination which is later embraced by her descendants. Her journey to Kisumu is said to have "opened up new vistas for her family. Soon after, we see Nyabera breaking from "chik" and seeking a new way of life in the new religion. Awiti, an only girl in the examination class of eleven candidates beats all of them and wins herself a place in a teachers training college from where she graduates

successfully in spite of all odds against her. Akoko's fight against unreasonable domination therefore leads

her female offspring to the liberal society in which they find themselves in later years. In a nutshell, Akoko is indeed the source of her lineage that exactly resembles her in terms of deeds and character traits.

Akoko's descendants such as Nyabera, Awiti, Peter, Aoro Vera and Tony resemble Akoko in many aspects.

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3. "As far as marriage is concerned, change is for the best." Write an essay to justify this statement. Refer to Ogola's The River and the Source for your illustrations. (20 marks)

Most people in our contemporary society fear change. They are not sure whether it will have a negative or positive impact. I will use The River and the Source to justify the fact that the institution of marriage has undergone positive changes over time.

Change is witnessed in matters to do with the choice of a husband. In the traditional society, it was the girl's father who decided the man who would marry his daughter. Chief Odero Gogni chose Owuor Kembo after sending away twelve other suitors who had come to seek Akoko's hand in marriage. Akoko had completely no say over the man to marry her and could only watch the proceedings from her mother's hut. This practice changes when Awiti chooses

Mark and merely informs Nyabera and Akoko about him. Radical change is witnessed later when Wandia proposes to Aoro when she feels that he is taking long to do so.

Traditionally, a boy sent a “jawan’gyo” to inspect the girl he intended to marry in order to find out her antecedents and character; if there were traces of witchcraft, madness, theft, laziness or any other undesirable traits among her relatives. Owuor Kembo’s “jawan’gyo” had told him that Akoko had “a most beautiful neck...”With time, young men do not find it necessary to send any spy to inspect the girl. Apart from the little information Mark and Elizabeth pick from each other during their courtship, they hardly know each other’s relatives at the time they decide to get married. All that Mark knows is that Elizabeth’s mother is called Maria and her grandmother Akoko. Awiti does not even know the names of Mark’s parents.

Bride price, previously deemed as a source of wealth at Akoko’s time when Owuor Kembo pays thirty head of cattle for her is reduced to a token bull, two cows and six goats at Awiti’s time. However, Mark Sigu’s relatives take this “minimal” bride price with misgivings. They had readied twenty-four head of cattle, double the normal amount, and were ready to pay even more. Further change is witnessed when Wandia’s mother tells Aoro that the only thing she wants from him is for him to live in peace with her daughter.

Tradition dictated that after bride price had been paid, young men from the village of the husband-to-be “steal” the bride to her husband’s home. There was a mock fight between the “thieves” and the young men of the bride’s village. The bride resisted the attempt to be carried away from her parents by letting out one piercing yell after another. All these happen at Akoko’s marriage. In place of these traditional practices comes the church wedding.

Mark and Elizabeth marry in a simple wedding at Aluor Parish presided by the newly ordained Fr.

Peter Owuor Kembo. Likewise Aoro and Wandia wed in church and everybody chips in to make their wedding a resounding success.

Initially, one was expected to marry within the tribe. During Awiti's betrothal, Mark's deceptive light complexion made the hosts to wonder if their daughter had decided to marry a "ja-mwa", a foreigner as marriage to even a Luhya from across the border was considered a catastrophe. This attitude changes when inter-ethnic marriages take place. Aoro, a Luo young man readily marries Wandia a Kikuyu from Murang'a and the marriage works perfectly well. Inter-racial marriage is also evident when Becky, an African marriage John Courtney a Canadian. This marriage would have succeeded had it not been for Becky's promiscuity because John is said to be a very nice man.

The polygamous marriage of the traditional society changes to a monogamous relationship. This change begins with Owuor Kembo when he finds love and fulfilment in Akoko that he loses interest in all other women. He sticks to his one wife in spite of immense pressure from his mother and the "Jodongo" to marry a second wife and at a time when a monogamous man is an "unknown animal". With the coming of Christianity, monogamy is cemented as seen in Elizabeth-Mark's marriage as well as that of Wandia and Aoro. These marriages are characterized by love and respect that are missing in Otieno's polygamous marriage for he treats his wives as sluts.

To conclude, marriage indeed changes for the better as time progresses. This is in matters to do with choice, bride price, departure of the bride from her parents' home, ethnic considerations and the relationship that exists between the husband and the wife.

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- 4. The novel is rich in oral literature devices. Write an essay describing three such devices and indicate how they contribute to The River and the Source. (20 marks)**

Writers use stylistic devices to advance various messages in their texts. Being an African writer, Margaret Ogola borrows from the oral literature of her people in order to effectively write the story of The River and the Source.

Proverbs are used mainly in the first two parts of the novel. "Yesterday is not today and today is not tomorrow for each day rises fresh from the hands of "Were" is used by Akoko when she goes to encourage her daughter Nyabera, who has just lost her two sons to a ferocious attack of measles. This proverb serves to console Nyabera that one day "Were" will give her a child that will survive. The proverb also reveals Akoko as religious and optimistic. During the negotiation for Akoko's return to her matrimonial home, Aloo K'Olima, Akoko's family spokesman, uses the proverb, "After all who knows the goodness of a tree but he who sits under its shade and eats its fruit?" This proverb is used to convince the audience about a woman's worth to her husband. This is in reference to the successful and

fulfilling monogamous marriage between Akoko and Owuor. The proverb therefore highlights the

theme of the importance of love in marriage. The proverb, “How can you know where you are going if you do not know where you come from?” is used by Akoko during the reconciliation talks to emphasize the values of the Luo society. It serves to explain her upbringing, her self- pride and respect thus it underlines the society’s disapproval of impropriety, self disgrace and disrespect. It summarises the fact that has been brought up well and her past has been free from witchcraft and use of charms and spells

Another oral literature device used in the novel is song and chants. While driving cattle into Chief Odero Gogni’s homestead for Akoko’s bride price, the young men from Sakwa chant their personal praise names, one of them bragging that he is Ochieng Suna, the mosquito who although tiny, when he bites even the great elephant flaps his big ears. Another young man, Oloo Polo claims that he is the sky and that when he rumbles and sends signs and wonders, even the brave tremble. This chant is mainly a source of humour. The young men praise themselves in very comical ways. A happy relaxed atmosphere is also created through the self- praises. In addition, the chant reveals the young men’s logical thinking as they are able to link some qualities that they have with the power of some animals or force of nature. The author also uses a song, the dirge that Akoko sings when her beloved husband dies. In the dirge, Akoko recognizes Owuor Kembo as an exemplary man different from what other women have given birth to. She appreciates the friendship that had existed between them which she contrasts with men who live with their wives like cats and dogs, ravens and chicken. She even reveals how her heart

was smitten by his “nyadhi”. This song makes vivid the sombre atmosphere caused by Owuor Kembo’s death. It expresses Akoko’s sense of loss of her

husband who was loving. It ridicules men who do not value their lives and by extension encourages harmony in the family.

Oral narratives are also used in the novel. On their epic journey to Kisumu, Akoko as an adult takes her role responsibly to inculcate knowledge of the history of the tribe by narrating to the younger generation, Opiyo and Odongo myths and legends of the Luo. She narrates to them the story of “Were”, the creator of the father of the tribe Ramogi and his wife Nyar Nam who had many children. These offspring settled around the lake tilling land, taming animals and fishing. She goes ahead to mention legendary figures who have risen from Ramogi’s children such as the super-human warrior Lwanda Magere, Gor Mahia, the wily one as well as renowned women like Lela Kabanda the mighty warrior, Nyamgodho of mighty wealth and many others. This myth educates not only Opiyo and Odongo but also the reader about the origin and culture of the Luo tribe. Legendary figures provide heroes for emulation.

All in all, the author’s use of proverbs, songs and oral narratives lend the text the rich African culture that it deserves. It is through the use of these oral literature devices that the authentic geographical setting of the text is captured.

5. **“It requires a strong character to survive in a male-dominated society.” Write an essay illustrating the truth of this statement with reference to Akoko in The River and the Source. (20 marks)**

In a patriarchal society, women have to come out forcefully, upset the old order and liberate themselves from the oppressive forces of men. In order to pioneer this uphill task, one has to have a strong character like that of Akoko in The River and the Source.

Akoko is determined, a quality that is noticed in her right from childhood and enables her to make several achievements at that stage. She sits earlier than expected; at four months, cruises around with the help of objects at seven months, walks without support at seven and half months and speaks her first words, “dwaro mara”, at ten months. On watching her grow, villagers correctly say that she would be a very determined person some day. Indeed this determination is evident throughout her adult life especially in her struggle to get back her husband’s property, her hard-earned wealth and Owuor Sino’s right to become chief all of which had been grabbed by Otieno. As an overly determined woman in a male dominated society, she travels all the way to Kisumu, a place she has never been to before in order to seek justice from the colonial administration.

Akoko’s courageous nature also enables her to fit in her patriarchal society. Her first words are “dwaro mara”, want mine, to claim what rightly belongs to her that her older brother Oloo dares to take away. In her relationship with her husband, Akoko wins Owuor Kembo over

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with her confidence, her ability to make her opinion on any subject known. It is Akoko's boldness

that enables her to brave Otieno's arrogance and male chauvinism. When Otieno calls her a "she wolf" and threatens to teach her a lesson for having addressed the villagers about Nyar Asembo's accusation of witchcraft, Akoko looks at him in the face and dares him to try making Otieno to quickly retreat. Similarly, when Otieno, whip in hand, threatens to whip, kill and send her back to her village for having reported him to "Sirikali", Akoko dares him to a fight, calls him a village fool and her boldness makes Otieno's fear to take the better of him upon which he retreats once again.

Akoko is wise. She knows that being not only a woman but also a widow and a sonless mother in this male dominated society, she has no chance against her brother-in-law Otieno when it comes to reclaiming her husband's property, her personal wealth and her grandson of his right to become the chief of Sakwa. She wisely seeks the assistance of the colonial government and succeeds when the DC rules the case in her favour. When she comes back from Kisumu and finds that the "plunder of her cattle had reached major proportions", Akoko's first impulse is to confront Otieno but reason soon reasserts itself and she wisely thinks that there is no advantage is knocking one's head against a tree trunk as at best one may chip off a bark but in return get a large bruise on the head. She bids her time, approaches the robbery cautiously and wisely and eventually gets all her property back.

Akoko survives male dominance because she is responsible. She takes up her role as a mother seriously and ensures that her children grow up to be hard-working and intelligent. Under her

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tutelage, Obura learns that “the sun should never rise and find a man asleep” and Nyabera

learns to be hard-working. Akoko always stands by Nyabera in very difficult times like the death of her children and teaches her how to overcome suffering. Akoko plays the role of both father and mother to her grandchildren Owuor Sino and Awiti. She looks after Owuor Sino when his father dies and his mother Alando"nyar" Uyoma abandons him. She looks after Awiti when Nyabera goes to Aluor in search of the new religion. She further ensures that Awiti has fees for school and organizes Awiti's wedding according to "chik". Fully aware that there is no one else to protect her family, Akoko assumes a strong sense of responsibility and makes an epic journey to Kisuma to protest against Chief Otieno Kembo's excesses.

In summary, Akoko is determined, courageous, wise and responsible. These traits make her a strong character who cannot be put down in the male dominated society she is born and lives.

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6. **“Gender imbalance should not be an impediment to a woman’s success.” Write an essay in support of this statement, drawing your illustrations from The River and the Source. (20 marks)**

A society in which gender inequality is rampant disadvantages women in almost all aspects of life such as the economy, education and politics. In The River and the Source, we encounter strong-willed women who break the barriers imposed on them and make several achievements.

Akoko's assertive nature enables her to overcome male domination right from childhood. Her first words are "dwaro mara", want mine, which she screams at her elder brother Oloo when

he dares to take away what she is playing with. She fights aggressively to survive in a household consisting of nine brothers and she succeeds because she is physically fearless. She also succeeds in winning her father's affection at a time when the Chief's attention should be focused on sons. She is an irresistible and precious child. Later, when Otieno her brother-in-law robs her of her late husband's property, her hard-earned wealth and her grandson of the chieftaincy, Akoko takes a bold step and makes a journey to Kisumu to seek the intervention of "sirikal". She succeeds when the DC rule that Otieno should forcibly be removed from the chief's stool and be made to return all he was grabbed from her.

Nyabera's fighting spirit enables her to resist tradition and fate that threaten to shutter her life. Having lost her husband and all her children except Awiti, she decides to break from "chik" which degrades and suppresses sonless widows. When she realizes that she might never have a surviving son with her inheritor, she resolves to seek a new way of life in the new religion. She is said to equal her mother in making ruthless decisions. She embarks on a long journey alone through the bush from Yimbo to Aluor Mission following Pilipo's directions. She succeeds because Christianity gives her, together with Akoko and the children Awiti and Owuor Sino who join her later, spiritual satisfaction and a place to settle and earn a living away from the atrocities of tradition in their male dominated society.

Awiti makes a break through in education despite the bias against the girl child at Aluor Mission. In a class of thirty-two that she joins, there is only one other girl who drops out soon after in order to get married. Awiti, motivated by her grandmother's and mother's pioneering

and daring spirit, hangs on as Akoko and Nyabera struggle to raise three shillings levied per year. Awiti is even derided for being bright at this time when education is considered superfluous for girls but she ignores all these, puts all her effort in her studies and succeeds in an extraordinary manner. She becomes top in a class of eleven who sit for the final examination beating all the boys. This wins her a place at the teachers training college from where she graduates successfully. Gender imbalance in the society does not prevent her from being a teacher as well as a proud mother of seven children.

At the university, Wandia breaks barriers of gender imbalance. She rejects gender insensitivity by insisting that people be referred to by their names and not their gender when Aoro, taking her for granted, addresses his anatomy study group as “hey man”. She and Aoro are the first to courageously make ago at the cadaver when the other members of table six are yet to overcome their nervousness. She defeats all in the tough anatomy course beating her main rival Aoro with 78 against his 77 points. She specializes in pathology, pursues her studies and gets a masters and finally a Doctorate in Medicine. As a professor of Medicine and the chairperson of the Department of Pathology at the University of Nairobi, Wandia has all that a modern woman would wish to achieve with “an ordinary looking family” on her side.

In conclusion, women like Akoko, Nyabera, Awiti and Wandia indeed succeed in the face of gender imbalance in the society. Their courage is what sees them through

7. Drawing examples from the lives of married couples in The River and the Source,

write an essay on the importance of commitment to family. (20 marks)

In our contemporary society, many marriages have broken due to lack of commitment to family. Couples are unable to overcome the challenges that face them and decide to separate or divorce. In The River and the Source, most families survive various setbacks because couples are committed to family ideals.

Akoko and Owuor Kembo display a lot of commitment to one another and their three children. The author describes their family as “close knit”, full of love and respect for each. Owuor Kembo treats his wife as a queen and she never fails him. He refuses to marry a second wife despite pressure to do so by his mother and the council of “Jodongo”. So concerned about the welfare of Akoko that when her delivery of Owang’ Sino is harrowing, he finds himself “wishing fervently that no more children would come”. Akoko on her part lives for and gives her all for the survival of her family. This couple is perturbed when their son Obura expresses a wish to go and see the outside world and when he disappears from home and eventually dies in the

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“first big war”, Akoko and Owuor are heartbroken. They bear the loss only by the mercy of “Were”. In fact Owuor develops an illness that he ends up succumbing to nine years later.

Commitment is also evident in Elizabeth’s and Mark’s family. Although Mark inadvertently drifts into unfaithfulness during the emergency period, he comes to his senses and resolves to have “devoted love of his wife and the affection of all her children”. He and Elizabeth are united in bringing up their seven children and are totally committed to their well-being. Mark even studies privately and this enables him to get a promotion and improve the welfare of his family. He takes to an “unmanly” act of helping his overworked wife around the house. The couple does all it can to make sure that each of their children gets good education. The two are also uncompromising as far as the discipline of their children is concerned. Their commitment bears fruit as most of their children succeed in their education and end up in lucrative careers. Vera becomes an electronics expert, Aoro a doctor and Opiyo a manager.

Aoro and Wandia are also very committed to family, nuclear and extended. Their professional lives with Aoro as a busy surgeon and Wandia as pathologist and professor does not prevent them from raising four children as well as Becky’s two children. Aoro appreciates Wandia’s “wonderful job” with the children as well as her cordial relationship with his mother Elizabeth. On her part, Wandia counts Aoro the best among her blessings. Their commitment to family in spite of their busy schedule becomes a pivotal part of the extended family as Elizabeth and Mark age and sets a good example for other people who aspire to achieve in life.

Becky's and John Courtney's marriage reveals what lack of commitment to family can cause. Though John is loving, Becky is promiscuous and this leads to divorce when John discovers Becky's affair with other men whenever he is on trips abroad. Although she leaves a lot of wealth for her two children, she leaves them confused and were it not for Wandia and Aoro who adopt them, they would not have made it in life.

From the foregoing, it can be concluded that commitment to family is the glue that holds couples together and guarantees success in their children. Those who aspire to raise a good family should therefore borrow a leaf from Akoko and Owuor kembo, Elizabeth and Mark as well as Wandia and Aoro.

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