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Ngugi's Politics of Language: Background and Context

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Abstract:

The purpose of this research paper is to analyse Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's politics of language and culture. Ngugi, one of the most prolific of the contemporary Kenyan writers, has been an outspoken critic of colonial rule, Christianity and neo-colonial abuses of Kenyan authorities. Ngugi wa Thiong'o began his literary career in English, but then he resolved to reject English and write solely in Gikuyu, his mother tongue. This research paper attempts to broach some of the theoretical issues that Ngugi addresses in his non-fictional works, especially in *Decolonizing the Mind*. This paper will highlight the grounds for his rejection of English speech and will explain why he switched to his native language Gikuyu.

Keywords: Ngugi wa Thiong'o, language, linguicide, linguifam and Afro-European literature.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o is one of the most prolific of the contemporary Kenyan writers. He has been an outspoken critic of colonial rule, Christianity and neo-colonial abuses of Kenyan authorities. Ngugi wa Thiong'o began his literary career in English, but then he decided to reject English and write solely in Gikuyu, his mother tongue. His work, *Decolonizing the Mind*, explains how he came to write in Gikuyu and is also an exhortation for the African writers to write in their native tongues instead of paying tribute to the foreign languages. Ngugi and his supporters were opposed by several African writers like Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka among others. But Ngugi is of the view that by writing in foreign languages like English, French, and Portuguese, the African authors are continuing to enrich the alien cultures at their own expense. It is truly said that Ngugi speaks for the continent. In his non-fictional work *Decolonizing the Mind*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o proposes a program of radical decolonization. In this seminal text, he emphasizes out the way in which the language of Afro-European literature manifests the dominance of the empire. Ngugi champions a complete return to native languages. He speaks of 'linguicide' and 'linguifam' and points an accusing finger at the dominance of English language in the current era of globalization. His agenda is to join anti-imperialistic struggles carried out by the peasantry and the working class on the basis of his native language and also to bring African Renaissance by returning to local languages.

Ngugi is a disciple of Fanon, who reasons that he who has taken up the language of the colonizer has accepted the world of the colonizer and therefore the standards of the colonizer. Fanon opines that language is a technology of power. Language is power and is considered the most potent instrument of cultural dominance. Fanon argues that the process of colonization involved not only physical occupation of the land and imposition of government on the colonized people, but also mental colonization. This means that the language not only conveys a set of associations related to a particular culture, but also particular ways of thinking and perceiving. If postcolonial writers choose the language of their colonizer, they work with words and syntax which express the characteristic modes of thinking of a culture which scorned their own language and culture. For total domination, the ideological structures of colonialism require the complete eradication and destruction of native languages, culture, history and customs. Colonizers replaced it with the European

system of culture, history and language. Fanon asserts in *Black Skin, White Masks*, “to speak a language is to take on a world, a culture. The Antilles Negro who wants to be white will be whiter as he gains greater mastery of the cultural tool that language is” (Fanon 25). By considering indigenous culture and language inferior, the colonized shifted to foreign culture and languages which ensures the colonial project’s very survival. Following Fanon, Ngugi states:

This book, *Decolonizing the Mind*, is my farewell to English as a vehicle for any of my writings. From now on it is Gikuyu and Kiswahili all the way. However, I hope that, through the age old medium of translation, I shall be able to continue dialog with all.” (Ngugi, *Decolonizing* xiv)

By doing this, Ngugi advocates the total rejection of the touchstones of the colonizing culture including its language. Ngugi is against appropriation of English and argues that writing in English or in any other European language perpetuates neo-colonialism. Ngugi is an opponent of the current global spread of English and argues that this language is a form of linguistic imperialism. He is of the view that this language expansion should be halted, especially in postcolonial countries where English was previously language of oppression.

Ngugi successfully wrote in English, but in 1977 after seventeen years of involvement with Afro-English literature, he eventually turned to writing in Gikuyu, his mother tongue. He believes, “my writing in Gikuyu language, a Kenyan language, an African language, is part and parcel of the anti-imperialist struggles of Kenyan and African people” (Ngugi, *Decolonizing* 28). For this decision, he was even rebuked as if he was doing something weird. But he wants other writers to follow his example. He relates his return to African languages as “a quest for relevance” (87) noting that the use of indigenous languages in the fictional writing is a liberating venture that capacitates Africans to visualize themselves clearly in the relationship to themselves and to others in the universe. Ngugi defines three aspects of language- one is language as culture which “is a product and a reflection of human beings communicating with one another in the very struggle to create wealth and to control it” (15). Second is a language helps in transmitting the images of the world that is contained in a particular culture. Third is language carries different values through which we perceive ourselves and helps in defining our place in the world.

In the mid 60s, Ngugi gave a talk on the advantages of writing in English rather than African languages, citing in justification the extensive vocabulary available to users. “Return to Roots” in *Writers in Politics* is Ngugi’s first extended examination of the language question. Ngugi explains that the root of his language switch goes back to the challenge thrown down to African foreign-language writers by Obi Wali in his famous 1963 paper, which defined African literature as comprising only works written in African languages. Obi Wali aptly says:

The whole uncritical acceptance of English and French as the inevitable medium for educated African writing is misdirected and has no chance of advancing African literature and culture... until these writers and their western midwives accept the fact that any true African literature must be written in African languages, they would be merely pursuing a dead end... (Wali 10)

Wali questions whether such writing could be actually called African literature. He claimed that the use of a European language limited the writer’s audience to a tiny elite of Westernized college graduates. He attacks the choice of Wole Soyinka’s *A Dance of the Forests* for staging during Nigeria’s independence celebrations in 1960, claiming that it was accessible to less than 1 percent of the Nigerian people. He considers Afro-European literature “merely a minor appendage in the mainstream of European literature” (Wali 14). Wali argues that it is the African languages that are in crying need of development, not the overworked French and English. If African writers continue to enrich foreign languages, then “there is

little doubt that African languages would face extinction, if they do not embody some kind of intelligent literature, and the only way to hasten this is by continuing in our present illusion that we can produce African literature in English and French..." (14). Obi Wali article was published after the 1962 Makerere Conference. No doubt, his challenge was met with hostility, but this led to raise the issue of language of African literature. In 1956, the Senegalese poet David Diop suggests in tones which strongly echo Fanon that:

The African creator, deprived of the use of his language and cut off from his people, might turn out to be only the representative of a literary trend of the conquering nation. His works... will doubtless rouse the warm applause of a certain group of critics. In fact, these praises will go mostly to colonialism which, when it can no longer keep its subjects in slavery, transforms them into docile intellectuals patterned after western literary fashions which besides, is another more subtle form of bastardization. (Ngugi, *Decolonizing* 25)

Gakaara wa Wanjua was jailed for ten years for writing in Gikuyu. These writers held faith in their national languages.

Ngugi's basic premise is that colonialism persists today, less visibly though insidiously, as a form of cultural and linguistic invasion. He states that hegemony is achieved through education, schools, church and political system which Althusser has called 'Ideological State Apparatuses.' In his cultural analysis, Althusser explored how society functions in order to perpetuate the dominant order. Althusser claims that the ruling ideology is promulgated by ideological state apparatuses, which helped in producing docile populace.

Ngugi's exhortation on using native languages as the indispensable medium of his writings is not only a reaction against Anglicization, but it is more about resurrecting the African soul from slavery, denigration and imperialism. Ngugi was uneasy using English language after writing *A Grain of Wheat*. He questioned himself:

A Grain of Wheat, a novel that dealt with the Kenya people's struggle for independence. But the very people about whom I was writing were never going to read the novel or have it read for them. I had carefully sealed their lives in a linguistic case. Thus, whether I was based in Kenya or outside, my opting for English had already marked me as a writer in exile. (Ngugi, *Moving* 107)

European languages were spoken by only 5% of the population and the very people for whom he was writing would not be able to read it. Ngugi exhorts writers, who are a part of the educated elite and have opted for European languages to write in African languages by saying:

The African Prometheus had been sent to wrest fire from the gods, but instead became a captive contended with warming himself at the fireside of the gods. Otherwise, he carried the fire in containers that were completely sealed and for which the majority had no key. For whom were they writing? (Ngugi, *Moving* 107)

Ngugi argues that writing in native languages is a mandatory step towards cultural identity, cultural renaissance and destruction of imperialist tradition. For Ngugi, attacking language means attacking or ruining people's memory bank. Ngugi highlights importance of language, as a means of communication as well as an agent that carries the weight of civilization. Dismemberment of Africans is made possible solely through the weapons of language, religion and education. He writes well:

The bullet was the means of physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation... the physical violence of the battlefield was followed by the psychological violence of the classroom. But where the former was visibly brutal, the latter was visibly gentle. (Ngugi, *Decolonizing* 9)

Ngugi emphasizes that language is the carrier of culture and culture cannot be separated from language. It is through language that culture develops, articulates and transmits itself from

one generation to another. Language carries the images of the world contained in the culture by written literature or orature. Ngugi puts:

Communication creates culture: culture is a means of communication. Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. (16)

The colonizers are putting the knife upon this harmony between native languages and culture by imposing their languages on natives. Through this, colonizers desire to control the “entire realm of the language of real life” (16). Through language, the colonizers are controlling the mental universe of the colonized because they know that their control cannot be effective and complete without mental control. For “mental colonization,” it is necessary because “to control a people’s culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others... The domination of a people’s language by their culture and languages of the colonizing nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonized” (16).

This imposition and elevation of foreign languages lead to the destruction of people’s culture, art, dance, religion, history, education, orature and literature. Even in schools, English is considered the main language and it is used to break the harmony with the mother language. Due to this “learning, for a colonial child, became a cerebral activity and not an emotionally felt experience” (17). This leads to total divorce between the written language taught in school and language spoken at home. The harmony with the native language is broken, and this results in colonial alienation. This alienation is enhanced by keeping Europe as the centre of the universe and colonial child is made to look upon him from the European point of view. They look at the world from Euro-centric point of view and it appears to them “the earth moved around the European intellectual scholarly axis” (93). African languages are forbidden in schools and are considered inferior in comparison to European languages. Ngugi aptly highlights the degradation of African languages and points:

Thus, one of the most humiliating experiences was to be caught speaking Gikuyu in the vicinity of the school. The culprit was given corporal punishment- three to five strokes of the cane on bare buttocks- or was made to carry a metal plate around the neck with inscriptions such as I AM STUPID or I AM A DONKEY. Sometimes the culprits were fined money that they could hardly afford. (11)

Ngugi laments that Kenyan languages were associated with negative qualities of backwardness, humiliation, inferiority and under development. In this way, English becomes the measure of a child’s progress and the ladder of formal education. This systematic suppression of African languages and literature and gradual elevation of English is leading them to holocaust as “school trains him to look down upon what is national and Kenyan, and to look up to what is foreign even it is anti-Kenyan” (Ngugi, *Writers* 43). As Ngugi puts it, “language and literature were taking us further and further from ourselves to other selves, from our world to other worlds...English became more than a language: it was the language, and all the others had to bow before it in deference” (Ngugi, *Decolonizing* 11).

Ngugi wants African children to transcend colonial alienation by linking themselves to their mother language. He thinks that separating an individual from the native language is like “separating the mind from the body so that they are occupying two unrelated linguistic spheres in the same person. On a large scale, it is like producing a society of bodiless heads and headless bodies” (Ngugi, *Decolonizing* 28). This result in the discouragement of Kenyan national languages and suppression of the progressive culture they carried. The effect of colonialism can be seen on African languages as “in the African continent, African languages-deprived of the food, water, light, and oxygen of thought... underwent slow starvation, linguifam... contact with Europe turned them into ghosts from graveyards over which now lie European linguistic plantations” (Ngugi, *Something* 19). This starvation of

native languages leads to “linguicide” and “linguifam” which eventually leads to the extinction of these languages.

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said emphasis on the crucial role culture and literature played in the expansion of European empires. He points that literature helps in creating “what William calls ‘structures of feeling’ that support, elaborate, and consolidate the practice of empire” (Said, *Culture* 14). He tries to link culture with imperialism by announcing, “Neither culture nor imperialism is inert, nor so the connections between them as historical experiences are dynamic and complex... Cultural forms are hybrid, mixed, impure, and the time has come in cultural analysis to reconnect their analysis with their actuality” (15). Said opines that the notion of hegemony and power of culture is used by imperial powers to subjugate the colonized. He considers culture as a hegemonic power rather than a description of the way of life. He opines that the power of culture is potentially equal to the power of the state. Culture acted as an active force in imperialism and assisted in the formation of an empire. He considers literature as a force that “support, elaborate and consolidate the practice of empire” (14). Said also asserts the fact that imperial ideology and British culture remained unchallenged by social reformist movements because of its confident, authoritative and quiet structure. Its imperial assumptions become so central that no social movement such as the liberal movement could challenge it. So, the role of the culture in keeping imperialism cannot be underestimated. This is clearly demonstrated by taking the example of India. In India, the British ruled millions of Indians using this cultural bomb. Said argues that the very language we use may be complicit in perpetuating forms of knowledge which support a colonialist vision of the world.

Ngugi categorizes the African writers writing in English as “petty bourgeoisie” who are the product of colonial education. No doubt, their literature helped the petty bourgeoisie to confront the racism of Europe and explain Africa to the world from a new perspective. Their literature is based on the anti-colonial, anti-imperialist upheavals and political awakening and on the proverbs, fables, stories, riddles of the peasants. It attempts to create a new picture of Africa instead of “seeing Africa as one undifferentiated mass of historically wronged blackness” and also shows that “Africa had a past and a culture of dignity and human complexity” (Ngugi, *Decolonizing* 21-20).

Ngugi states that this quest is hampered by the choice of language and due to the use of European language; it could reach only a small section of people and hence is “caged within the linguistic fence of its colonial inheritance” (22). This literature produced by the petty bourgeoisie in a European language was given the identity of African literature as if there had never been literature in the African language. He defines “Afro-European literature as literature written by African in European languages in the era of imperialism” (27). This has produced many writers like Chinua Achebe, Ayi Armah, Sembene Ousmane, Agostino Neto, Senghor and many more. Ngugi admires the contribution of these writers, but addresses a very important question to the petty bourgeoisie:

We as African writers have always complained about the neo-colonial economic and political relationship to Euro-America. Right. But by our continuing to write in foreign languages, paying homage to them, are we not on the cultural level continuing that neo colonial slavish and cringing spirit? What is the difference between a politician who says African cannot do without imperialism and the writer who says African cannot do without European languages? (26)

By writing in European languages, they are excluding the participation of the peasants and working class. Practitioners of this Euro-African literature claimed that European languages were really African languages and that they were trying to Africanize English or French or Portuguese. The works of these writers have highlighted Africans struggle against colonialism and neo-colonialism, but this is also true that their works belong to “Afro-

European literary tradition” or “hybrid tradition” or “a minority tradition” which will last as long as Africa is under the rule of European capital in a neo-colonial set up (27). Due to language choice, African elite is completely uprooted from the people of Africa and tied to the West. For Ngugi, writing in African languages is the only means of liberation from colonialism and its hangover for the Africans:

African literature can only be written in African languages, that is, the languages of the African peasantry and working class, the major alliance of classes in each of our nationalities and the agency for the coming inevitable revolutionary break with neo-colonialism. (Ngugi, *Decolonizing* 27)

African writers should attempt to do for the African literature what Spencer, Milton, Shakespeare, Pushkin and Tolstoy did for their languages. By writing in African languages, they can bring renaissance in African culture and can also join the revolution and anti-imperialist struggles carried forward by the peasants and the working class to liberate the Africans and their wealth from internal and external parasites. It is through the African languages that the African writers can reconnect themselves to the revolutionary traditions to defeat imperialism and bring socialism. So, Ngugi emphasizes that no foreigner can develop African indigenous languages and that it is not possible to develop an African culture through borrowed tongues. Only by returning to their roots, the Africans can create the patriotic African literature that would be the envy of many foreigners and the pride of the Africans.

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