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Abrogation of Language in Ngugi's *Decolonising the Mind*

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Abstract:

The purpose of the paper is to analyse Ngugi's decision to abrogate the English language and to write only in Kenya's indigenous language, Gikuyu. Ngugi wa Thiong'o is an icon of anti-colonial resistance and an outspoken advocate of African literature in native African languages. His *Decolonising the Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986) is an essay collection about language's constructive role in culture, history and identity of a nation. This work is Ngugi's 'farewell to English' and it continues the language debate. Ngugi also focuses on the linguistic medium (to write in indigenous or hegemonic language) of the African writer. The denouncement of English puts him ahead in psychological resistance for linguistic decolonisation. According to him radical decolonisation through native language can bring back the long lost African cultural glory. This paper highlights Ngugi's strong rejection of European languages from Africa's educational, cultural and political sphere to decolonise the very thought process.

Keywords : Abrogation, Indigenous, Decolonising, Hegemonic, Denouncement.

Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o has been a staunch critic of colonial rule, Christianity and post-colonial abuses of Kenyan authorities. The rejection of hegemonic language and religion shows his tendency towards native culture and establishes him as a spokesperson of African authenticity. His abrogation is a rejection of a normative concept of 'correct' or standard English used by certain classes of groups, and of the corresponding concepts of inferior 'dialects' or 'marginal variants' (*Post-colonial Studies*, 3). The commencement of his literary career was with English language when he produced some of the best known novels of Africa such as, *Weep Not, Child* (1964), *The River Between* (1965), *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), *Petals of Blood* (1977). Later he bids farewell to English and announces his return to his native Gikuyu tongue in his works. His work *Decolonising the Mind*, focuses on the question of language. According to him language is the medium to control the psychic space of people by colonial powers, so he is determined to help his community to return back to the roots through a linguistic break. He explains the reason of his rejection of English and calls African writers to do the same. This was not supported by many African writers including Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe. But he calls the politics of language as a 'quest of relevance', a search for a liberating perspective (87). Ngugi criticises writers like Okara and Achebe to advocate the Africanizing of the English language to express African experiences and surrendered themselves to the hegemonic language. For Ngugi an effective post-colonial voice can only be found in the total rejection of the European languages and a "return to the roots" (*Writers in Politics*, 53). He also believes that an African writer who has chosen the

total dependency and literary enslavement to foreign languages will never be able to speak to national audience and will be always detached from the indigenous mass (*Writers in Politics*, 54). He appeals in *Decolonising the Mind* that,

Kenyan writers have no alternative but to return to the roots, return to the sources of their being in the rhythms of life and speech and language of the Kenyan masses if they are to rise to the great challenge of recreating, in their poems, plays and novels, the epic grandeur of that history. (73)

The issue of language is one of the most debated topics among post-colonial writers, critics and readers. The language question symbolises the struggle of African writers and artists to free themselves from the shackles of colonialism and imperialism not only politically but also culturally and psychologically. Ngugi writes, “I believe that my writing in Gikuyu language, a Kenyan language, an African language, is part and parcel of the anti-imperialist struggles of Kenyan and African peoples” (28).

Decolonisation is an active resistance against the exploitation of minds, bodies, lands and cultures and realization of indigenous liberation by despising colonial structure (*For Indigenous Eyes Only*, 3). The process of decolonization is a political and cultural assertion in which the colonized refuses to articulate the oppressor’s language and looks back to own language. Ngugi argues that language exists as culture and it is inseparable from community of human beings (*Decolonising* 16). “To control a people’s culture is to control their tools of self definition in relationship to others. For colonialism this involved two aspects of the same process: the destruction or the deliberate undervaluing of a people’s culture, their art, dances, religions, history, geography, education, orature and literature and the conscious elevation of the language of the coloniser”(16). In the section ‘The Language of African Literature’ Ngugi discusses that language is the carrier of culture and use of foreign language can harm the native culture and can alienate people from their indigenous culture. Language acts as a carrier of culture and culture carries orature and literature, but forced and imposed colonial language stopped orature (oral literature), in Kenyan languages (12).

Ngugi is greatly influenced by Frantz Fanon. Fanon believed that language has the power for mental decolonisation of people. In *Black Skins, White Masks* Fanon emphasis on his belief ‘to use a language is to assume a culture’ (8). He says,

To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture. The Antilles Negro who wants to be the whiter as he gains greater mastery of the cultural tool that language is (25).

As a true interpreter of Fanon’s ideologies, Ngugi focuses on the violent ramification of colonialism on the mindset of the colonised and their deep sense of degradation and inferiority. In *Decolonising the Mind*, he gives the remedy for this traumatic experience and suggests to go to the roots of indigenous culture. Ngugi denotes English as a “cultural bomb” that continues to wipe out pre-colonial histories and identities. According to him it is annihilating the people’s belief, their language, their heritage, their unity and their capacities. This makes them want to distance themselves from this wasteland of non-achievement and eventually it leads to a serious doubt about the moral rightness of struggle (3). Ngugi Marxist

approach is also showcased when he credits the African “peasantry” for keeping native African languages alive and for speaking their mother tongue without any contradiction. Ngugi believes that writing in African languages is the only way of liberation from colonisation,

African literature can only be written in African 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. (27)

According to Ngugi when the coloniser’s language is forced upon colonised, the spoken language remains in native tongue and it breaks the harmony between the written and spoken word. For colonisers violence was the means of the physical subjugation and language was the means of spiritual subjugation which held colonized souls prisoners (9). Ngugi asks ‘How did we; as African writers; come to be so feeble towards the claims of our languages on us and so aggressive in our claims on other languages, particularly the language of our colonization (9)? The writers of *The Empire Writes Back* explain that language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of ‘truth’, ‘order’ and ‘reality’ become established. This power is rejected in the emergence of an effective post-colonial voice (7). Ngugi voiced the silence of African mass and prepared a ground for the rejection of colonised culture to establish African indigenous culture.

Ngugi in *Decolonising the Mind* remembers his childhood when he used to play with words through riddles, proverbs, transposition s of syllables, or through nonsensical but musically arranged words (11). Eventually it led him to preserve orature and legacy of his tribe. Later on in a colonial school the harmony was broken the language of his education was no longer the language of his culture. After the declaration of emergency over Kenya in 1952, all the schools run by patriotic nationalists were taken over by the colonial regime and English took very important place and became the measure of intelligence and ability in the arts, the science, and all the other branches of learning. He tells, English was the official vehicle and the magic formula to colonial elitism (12). He wrote about his school life and told how those boys who used to speak native languages received corporal punishment.

He also states, language and literature were taking Kenyan people further and further from themselves to other selves, from their world to other worlds (12). The colonial education made African writers’ writings ‘petty bourgeoisie’ and ‘caged them within the linguistic fence of its colonial inheritance’ (22). According to him,

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 language, 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 Africa cannot do without imperialism and the writer who says Africa cannot do without European language (26)?

Ngugi believes that native language as Gikuyu plays an important role in the anti-imperialist struggles. Gikuyu is a Kenyan language and an African language, is part and parcel of Kenyan and African people. In order to show his commitment towards his ethnic group Kikuyu he changed his Christian name James Ngugi to Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Ngugi believes that English is used as a lingua franca to create new Anglican black elite. His denial of colonial culture and language shows his staunch revolutionary figure against the forced culture and language. Ngugi emphasises on the idea that searching linguistic satisfaction through foreign language is more like 'linguicide' which leads to the extinction of native language because of hegemonic language. According to Ngugi,

It is like separating the mind from the body so that they are occupying two unrelated linguistic spheres in the same person. On a larger social scale it is like producing a society of bodiless heads and headless bodies (28).

As a subversive character a writer should convey a message of revolutionary unity and hope. The reconnection of African languages by revolution inspires organized peasantry and working class to struggle against imperialism. Ngugi considers English education had taught the children to hate and oppose their own language, culture and their people. The colonial alienation made him to denounce English language as his tool to express himself. According to him the denouncement of hegemony and use of indigenous language can restore the harmony among African people.

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