



RESEARCH ARTICLE



LINGUISTIC COLONIZATION VS GIKUYU LANGUAGE OF KENYANS: SELECTED WORKS OF NGUGI WA THIONG'O

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ABSTRACT



Ngugi wa Thiong'o, a Kenyan writer, argues that African writers should write in African languages only. The writer chooses translations in order to make his thoughts known to global readers. This research paper addresses the issue of language in African writing. It highlights divergent views on writing in one's mother tongue. It also emphasizes how African literature exploits the English language as a colonial dawn on the Dark Continent. The paper presented a brief analysis of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's works in order to highlight this fact.

Keywords: *Language, Translation, Colonial Ruling, Slave*

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Proceeding of Two-Day International Conference on "Emerging Practices in Teaching - Learning of English Language and Literature: A Journey from Theory to Praxis." (ICEPTLELL-2024) on 1st & 2nd February 2024, Govt. City College, Hyderabad.

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The sociopolitical, economic, and cultural facets of Kenyan society are discussed in Ngugi wa Thiong'o writings within the framework of colonial and neo-colonial experiences. His fictional works aim to inspire the Kenyan people to resist injustice. He wants to connect the people through his novels. African intellectuals, in his opinion, ought to support the continent's masses in their quest for a genuine national ideal. He says: "We need to work toward a social structure that will release the people's shackled spirit and vitality so that we can create a new nation and sing a new song. The African author might be able to contribute, if only a little, to the expression of the emotions driving this conflict" (Ngugi, 1972: 50). Ngugi's beliefs regarding the place and duty of the writer in a postcolonial society have mostly held true throughout their evolution.

Ngugi is a writer fighting against neo-colonialism, therefore he is aware of the socio-political context and firmly believes in functional art: "Of course, the main focus of literature is on the effects of political and economic structures on the values and essence of human relationships. When it comes to interpersonal relationships, no one who has visited the big cities of Europe and America—where capitalism is rife—can ever hope for the same outcome for Africa" (Ngugi, 1972: xvi-xvii).

Ngugi wa Thiong'o exhorts African writers to begin writing in their native tongues and to make sure that these works are connected to the revolutionary activities of their people in order to break free from the restrictions of their (neo)colonial societies. According to Franz Fanon, when writers start speaking to the people instead of attempting to win over the people to the colonizer's language of a European tongue, they become the most hazardous to the colonial powers.

According to Ngugi, language plays a part in all kinds of colonialism by suppressing native languages and advancing colonial ones. He discusses the plantations in the Caribbean where it was illegal to speak African languages and doing so may result in hanging. He asserts that historically, even geographically dissimilar places like Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Canada, and South America have all

shown a similar attitude toward language. Initially, colonial powers take authority by force. The next step is to eliminate any resistance by enculturation and the imposition of an educational program. The physical body is killed by the gunshot, but language was the tool used to subjugate the spirit.

In 1952, Kenya declared a state of emergency, and all schools were taken over by the colonial government. It was mandated that language of instruction should be conducted in English. "In Kenya, English evolved into more than just a language; it became the language, and all other languages had to submit to it." Language is an efficient instrument of communication. Ngugi (1986: 16) says that language is 'inseparable from us as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world.' Is writing in English or another language required when a writer writes in that language? Which language has the fastest readership? Oral traditions and regional languages, in Ngugi's opinion, make ideal mediums for superior literary expression. Ngugi wrote his first drama in his native Gikuyu, *Ngaahika Ndeenda*, which he later translated into English and called *I Will Marry When I Want*. He realized that he was missing the laborers and peasants when he began writing this drama with Ngugi wa Mirri. They discovered that they do not consistently and on time employ their local tongue in their works when they went to various areas to perform the theatre. The ignorant residents of the villages chastise them for not using proper discourse. They might be able to relate to the drama's characters and plot.

Ngugi (1985: 152-53) describes his experience of sharing *Ngaahika Ndeenda* with the villagers that "the villagers could discuss the play's plot and there was no language barrier. The meaning of the play was not cryptic. They might now take part in revising the script's content." Since it is in the native tongue besides the content of the play, it has attracted all over the Kenyans. Though he wrote his earlier works in English, he wanted to change his mind to write in Gikuyu so as to reach the peasants and masses of Kenya. He realised that his works do



not reach the illiterates. Aside from the play's topic, it has drawn attention from Kenyans all throughout the country since it is in the original tongue. Even though he had previously written in English, he intended to switch to writing in Gikuyu in order to address Kenya's masses and peasants. He came to see that the ignorant are not reached by his writings. He (1985: 154) mentions: "I chose this type of writing quite deliberately first, to meet the challenge of maintaining communication with the community, and second, to give myself a new mental challenge." It is somewhat difficult writing in native tongue than writing in English. In an interview with Rao Venkat (1999: 163-4), Ngugi has said that "When I came to *The Devil on the Cross*, two things have happened. I change language ... I had to shift the language to Gikuyu ... I can rely more and more on songs, proverbs, riddles, anecdotes"

In order to have a meaningful discussion about African literature, we must be aware of the opposing forces of imperialism, decolonization, and self-determination. Ngugi centers this heated confrontation around language. "A person's notion of who they are in connection to the natural and social environments, and even in reference to the universe, are fundamentally shaped by the language they choose to use and how they use it. It was via the language of imperialist imposition that writers who ought to have been charting a way out of that linguistic encirclement [by colonialism] of their continent came to identify themselves. Even in their most extreme and pro-African positions, they accepted as given that the European languages would be the means via which African cultures would resuscitate" (4-5).

Ngugi talks about his early experiences learning languages. He uses stories in his native Gikuyu language, where language was magical, strong, and melodic, to contrast his village lessons. Then he talks about school, where he had to study English against his will and saw firsthand how it was utilized to classify pupils into a hierarchical pyramid. He says: "If you couldn't use English well, you didn't continue, no matter how intelligent you were. You

were prohibited from speaking in your own tongue at the same time" (1986: 14).

Ngugi uses the previously mentioned observations to the setting in which a foreign language is forced upon children by an imperialist. First and foremost, their goal is to control people's wealth and to rule the language of everyday life" They had to elevate the "language of the coloniser" (1986: 16) and devalue the native culture in order to do this. This caused the child's home language and school to become estranged, upsetting the balance between written and spoken language. This is the means of alienation, together with "cultural" language in all three of its manifestations. I was reminded of DuBois' duplicity of awareness by this. Ngugi is demonstrating the process for us. At its best, it produces indigenous intellectuals that champion the colonizer's language at the expense of their own, as Senghor, Achebe, or Banda (in Malawi). It is the best indication that the pogrom has been successful and explains why a conference like the one in 1962 occurred.

Ngugi believes that the Gikuyu people like his works because they get the message he was trying to get across. He guessed that the British language was not able to penetrate the general public. Writing in Gikuyu, Ngugi (1986: 71) he says: "I would try writing a novel in the same language that had served as the justification for my imprisonment. I would reacquaint myself with the African book of new commitment rather than the Afro-European novel of the past." He strongly asserts that "people without their own language are but mere slaves" (Mazrui, 1986: 65) and also he maintains that "African writers ought to re-establish their connection to the revolutionary legacies of Africa's organized peasants and working class, as they fight against imperialism and unite with all other global peoples to establish a more advanced democratic and socialist system. Our multilingual variety would remain together if we remained united in that effort" (Ngugi, 1986: 29-30). Unlike other authors, he has spoken out against the use of the European language, which encourages people to be gregarious and



cunning while making them forget their race, caste, creed, and culture.

Ngugi (1986: 128) urges African intellectuals and writers to “break the chains of their enslavement and serve as the carries of their people’s aspirations. There are countless rivers to ford, mountains to ascend, and distances to traverse. However, that does not mean that we should ignore the matter and put our heads in the linguistic sand of Europe in the hopes that the language issue will go away on its own....To improve the literary beauty and magnificence of our language and the people who created it, we should harness the oral force of our people” (1986: 128). That is why, he dedicated his non-fiction *Decolonising the Mind* to all those who write in African languages, and says that “who over the years have maintained the dignity of literature, culture, philosophy, and other treasures carried by African language” (Ngugi, 1986: v).

Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Timothy Wangusa and Lewis Nkosi oppose the idea of Ngugi to write the works in native tongue. Chinua Achebe counters that European language is more important than local language. He argues that if he had written his famous works such as *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* in his local language means in Igbo, who would have read it. Does Achebe bag the fame from the various readers from world? Although he opposes the idea of writing in indigenous tongue, he also accepts that people like the first language. He says, “It is a fact that most people prefer speaking in their own tongue over learning another. However, the vast majority of individuals do not write” (Achebe, 1975: 79). He counters both sides at a time that both languages are necessary to African literature. Perhaps he gives more preference English to native language. Achebe thinks that Africans should know English because it is a world language and he cautions African writers against trying to learn to use English like a native speaker, calling it “neither necessary nor desirable” (Achebe, 1975: 82). In his view, English language will introduce a person to the official world. He mentions that English can take African writings to the world readers but it must be in new English. It should

create the African themes in the works. Achebe (1975: 6) puts it: “I believe that my African experience can be adequately conveyed in English. However, it will require a new form of English that is both tailored to its new African environment and fully in harmony with its ancestral home.” According to Ngugi, African literature which is written in English is called not as African literature, it is called European literature. He states that ‘Literature written by Africans in European languages....can only be termed Afro-European literature; that is, the literature written by Africans in European languages.’ (Ngugi, 1986: 27) There are a lot of arguments regarding this by umpteen critics and research literati.

According to Ngugi, culture is mostly composed of language, and worldview formation is greatly influenced by culture. For this reason, language is fundamental to our sense of self and identity. When a colonial subject is forced to speak an alien language, their identities become confused. Colonialism produces the absurd illusion that native languages are the source of division and the colonial language is a unifying force.

The colonized subject is cut off from their original identity and estranged from their own language, culture, and history. Adopting the colonizer's language causes the colonized subject to reject their own and feel more pride and kinship with the culture, history, and viewpoint that language carries. Native literature is disregarded and literature from the area produced in the colonial tongue is given the designation of indigenous literature.

Many people view the local language negatively and the colonial language as something to be embraced excessively. Some people will assert that the colonial language is nearly native, or that it is native in actuality. Although the control of riches has always been the foundation of colonialism, control over the minds of the populace is also necessary for it to survive after military conquest and political oppression. While the colonial language is purposefully exalted, native dance, art, literature, education, geography, history, and religions are minimized. Literacy was introduced in Kenya, although it was mostly limited to the people running



the colonial apparatus. There might be censorship to regulate the material in places where publications were promoted.

Ngugi accepts that he does not want to leave European languages. He substantiates that "Writing in Gikuyu does not cut me off from other language communities because there are always opportunities for translation" (Ngugi, 1985: 155). Despite translating his writings from Gikuyu into English, why should colonialists attack him for it? What's wrong with him if he has written in his mother tongue? Gikuyu ends up teaching the common Kenyans. To impede Ngugi's progress, political figures and a few local writers criticize his beliefs. Even though he wrote in Gikuyu, the locals cannot eradicate the European language, which stands for the colonialists, from their nation until they undergo a mental shift. Ngugi has been working to raise awareness of imperialism and neo-colonialism among Kenyans.

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