

## DECOLONIZING THE MIND

Ngugi wa Thiong o

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--Nalini Prabhakar

### 1. Introduction

Ngugi wa Thiong o is considered one of the greatest writers to have come out of East and Central Africa. He was born on 5<sup>th</sup> January 1938 in Kamiriithu, Kenya. He was of Ki'ku'yu' descent. He was baptized as James Ngugi and had his early education in a mission school where the medium of instruction was the native language. But things took a turn for the worse after the Mau Mau movement during which Ngugi lost his step brother, saw his mother being tortured by the British. To suppress this anti-colonial movement the British government unleashed a reign of oppression and put most of the leaders of the movement, including the famous revolutionary leader Kenyatta, in jail. They also changed the medium of instruction in the schools to English. Ngugi subsequently went on to study at Makerere University in Uganda and at Leeds University in England.

It is at Leeds University that he published his first novel, and the first novel in English to be published by an East African, **Weep not child** (1964). In the meanwhile Ngugi had been increasingly concerned with the issue of using English language to tell African stories. Chinua Achebe as well as others were all publishing in English. Ngugi published his next novel, **The River Between** (1965) again in English. Around this time Ngugi was slowly moving on to more political subjects and he was attracted towards 'Fanonist Marxism'. **A Grain of Wheat** (1967) is a good example of this shift. Subsequently Ngugi gave up writing in English, Christianity and his Christian name James Ngugi and became Ngugi wa Thiong 'o. He began to write in Gi'ku'yu' and Swahili. His radical views didn't go down well with the ruling dispensation in independent Kenya and he was arrested and imprisoned. During this period he wrote, what is considered as the first modern Gi'ku'yu' novel, **Devil on the Cross**. After leaving Kenya in 1982 he published 'Decolonizing the Mind: The politics of Language in African Literature.' This essay started off a debate about using an alien language to render native realities and culture which continues even today. This was a very important essay because it deals with the after effects of colonialism in the sphere of language literature and culture of a subject population. Language, as we know, is not just a medium of communication. It is a mental construct which carries within its structures a whole set of beliefs, practices, and memories or in short a whole culture. Ngugi maintains, in this essay, that if we really wish to get rid of colonialism then we must first decolonize the mind, free it of the corrosive influence of English.

**1.1 Colonialism:** Colonialism, as a term, simply refers to a political ideology which legitimized the invasion, occupation, and exploitation of other people's lands and resources. In this form, colonialism has existed for a very long time indeed. But the modern form of colonialism, especially of the European kind is a little different. Unlike the earlier forms of colonialism, the modern European colonialism altered the modes of production and the relations of production in fundamental ways so that they were aligned with the modes of production of the mother country. This imposition of these new forms were extremely damaging for the society and culture of the colonized country. The socio-political, economic and legal changes were accompanied by profound cultural changes. I am sure our own experience of British colonialism would make this amply clear to you.

These cultural changes, often, began with the introduction of a new education system. You just have to remember the famous Macaulay's minutes on education to understand this. In

the minutes he had declared that, the new education system, would produce a class of Indians who will be Indian in their physical appearance but British in their thoughts and beliefs. It was necessary to produce such a class of people to help the colonial administration to man the administrative machinery. English education, in our case as well as in many other countries, became the language to progress and power. The subject population thus was divided into two groups. More than bringing in a split in the society on the basis a familiarity with English, English education had far reaching consequences in the sphere of culture. English language, being the language of power and control, was regarded as a superior language and consequently a superior culture as well. All other forms of indigenous knowledge were considered inferior and primitive. The subject population was made to believe that they were an inferior people intellectually, culturally and morally. This was much more damaging than the economic and political domination because it is not too difficult to reverse the damage done to the economy and polity but the damage done to the psyche of a people is not easy to reverse. Moreover the economic and political subjugation were accompanied by force and violence and hence had no legitimacy as far as the people were concerned. But cultural domination works in much more subtle ways. It works through consent rather than coercion and hence much more difficult to overcome.

It is interesting to note that the supposedly cultural and moral inferiority of the people of Africa, India and other countries was used as the justification by the European powers to colonize these countries. It was the 'white man's burden to go out and civilize these savages. Ngugi's Africa was long considered as primitive and savage by the Europeans. Hence it was the white man's duty to civilize the savages. And ironically, the occupying powers, in their ignorance and arrogance, did whatever they could to destroy the very cultural and social fabric of the people they were supposed to civilize. Let us end our discussion of colonialism here with just two generalizations:

1. The modern form of colonialism, as exemplified by European colonialism, was not just about exploiting the land and resources of another country but also, more importantly, about effecting fundamental changes in the modes of production so that the economy of the subject country got aligned with the economy of the mother country. These profound changes caused considerable damage to the socio-political and economic fabric of the subject country. The effects of this violent damage are still visible in most of the former colonies.
2. Colonial domination worked in two ways. The first and obvious one is the complete political and economic domination, often accompanied by force and violence. The second was a much more subtle and extremely damaging cultural domination. The cultural domination, which was effected through consent rather than coercion, was achieved primarily through education, religion, and other cultural forms. It is this second form of colonization, the colonization of the mind, which Ngugi is concerned with in the essay on decolonization.

**1.2 Post-Colonialism:** Post-Colonialism is a problematic term. Though it has been one of the most important and influential theoretical innovations of the last several decades, the term still remains fuzzy. The 'post' in the post-colonial suggests the final end of colonialism after the colonial powers transferred power into the hands of the natives and left for their homelands. But it is not as it seems. Though colonialism ends with the transfer of power, vestiges of colonialism survive and continue to flourish in other guises. Neo-Colonialism, for instance, is a term which refers to the continuing exploitation of the former colonies through which the former masters continue to maintain control over the colonies.

So instead of thinking of post-colonialism as a kind of break from the past, we can think of post-colonialism, as a set of theoretical constructs that deal with or tries to understand the after effects of colonialism, especially in the areas of language literature and culture. It explores and interrogates forms of dominance and control as well as the ambivalence and hybridity that exist in post colonial societies. It is in this context that we will examine Ngugi's essay 'Decolonizing the Mind'.

**1.3 African literature/Language/Politics:** Politics has always occupied a significant part in African literature. As you know, much of what is now known as modern African literature is influenced by the various freedom struggles that were taking place in various parts of Africa. Most of the leading writers of the time like Chinua Achebe in the West, Alex La Guma in the South and Ngugi in the East, were primarily concerned with the issue of identity and history. It was important to contest and fight the European notions of Africa as a dark continent without a history and culture or in short as a primitive and savage continent. And most of the writers wrote in English because they were writing primarily for the western reader, though they also wanted their people to rediscover their own culture and its history. This was important because the African people were made to believe that they were an inferior race. They needed to feel proud of their history and culture. Thus modern African literature, from its very beginning, was always enmeshed in politics. Ngugi himself defines the role of the writer in an emphatic manner in his preface to *Writers In Politics* 'Every writer is a writer in politics. The only question is what and whose politics'.

**1.4 Decolonizing the Mind:** This particular essay of Ngugi deals with the persistence of certain colonial mindsets in the post colonial Africa in general and Kenya in particular. The issue here is very clear. Is it possible to create a distinct African identity and culture by continuing to use English as the language of instruction in schools? Ngugi argues that it is not possible to do so until the harmony that existed between the child and his environment is restored by sorting out the language issue and according due importance to the native languages.

**1.4.1 Oral Literature/Gikuyu/Environment:** Ngugi begins this essay by recollecting his experiences as a child growing up in an organic world. He was born into a large peasant family. And the important thing is they spoke Gikuyu while working, playing, and at home as well. The evenings were spent listening to stories sitting around a fire. In fact story telling was a communal affair with almost everyone in the family involved in the event. The stories were then often retold by the children to other children. Thus we see that the stories had a life and that they travelled from mouth to mouth. One of the important functions of oral story telling was, apart from entertainment, moral instruction. I am sure you are familiar with own tradition of story telling which has similar functions. The stories had animals as their main characters and the children often sympathized with the hare, which was small and weak but also had wit and cunning.

We see here that the children learn certain values while listening to the stories. They identify with the weak and appreciate their struggle against predators and vagaries of nature. These lessons were important because the weaker animals struggle against stronger animals and against nature reflected the real life struggles of the people. They also had stories about human beings. These stories often had two kinds of human beings. The true human being with qualities of courage, kindness mercy and concern for others and the other kind was the selfish, individualist, greedy man. While the former believed in cooperation and community interests the later stood against all that was good for the community.

But equally important was the art of story telling. All the story tellers told, roughly the same stories but the stories came to life in the hands of a good story teller. The difference being the particular choice of words, images, voice modulations and mime. The children thus learnt that words and images had a power beyond the ordinary meanings. They understood that words had great powers of suggestions and this knowledge was reinforced by the kinds of games they played with proverbs, riddles or musically arranged words. Thus they not only learnt the morals from the stories but also the nuances of language which presented them with a new view of the world through images and symbols. Thus there was an organic relationship between their work, learning, and the environment that they lived in.

**1.4.2 English Education:** With the beginning of the Mau Mau movement (an armed struggle against colonial administration) the colonial administration took over the schools and introduced English education. Ngugi attended one such school. The language of instruction was no longer the language of the culture. Consequently the harmony that existed between their learning and the world they lived in was broken. In fact English, as he puts it, became more than just a language. It was the language of domination and aspiration as well. All other languages were regarded as inferior to English and the students were actively discouraged from using their mother tongues. Along with it came lessons in deception and the children were forced to become traitors to their immediate community. The children were given the task of catching other students who spoke their native tongues in school. So, instead of helping each other they turned witch hunters and were rewarded for it.

Students were rewarded for excellence in English (Ngugi himself a beneficiary of this practice). English became the yardstick of a child's intelligence and abilities. This insistence on proficiency in English at all costs had a very damaging impact. The language not only reinforced the superiority of English speaking race but also legitimized it. Oral literature slowly started disappearing and the students were fed on stories from another culture which had very little relevance to their understanding of their world. Thus children were drawn away from their own identity into another identity an identity which was not theirs.

**1.4.3 Writing in Gikuyu :** Ngugi Started writing in Gikuyu after writing several novels in English. But writing in Gikuyu was a conscious political act for Ngugi. The Devil on the Cross is the first major novel written in Gikuyu. But his decision was questioned by many people, some of them well wishers. What amused Ngugi was the fact that it was considered abnormal for an African writer to write in his mother tongue. Ngugi considers his writing in Gikuyu as a part of the anti imperialist struggle of Kenyan and African people. English education had taught the children to hate all that was their own, their language, culture and their people. Ngugi wants children in modern Kenya to grown up without the colonial alienations.

Colonial alienation, Ngugi says, takes two forms which are interlinked:

- a. A distancing from the reality around
- b. An identification with things which are external to one's environment.

This ambivalent attitude is produced when the conceptualization of ideas and thinking is done progressively in a language which is not the language of everyday life. Ngugi says it's like separating the body from the mind. In fact many important theorists of post colonialism, notably Homi. K. Bhaba, have talked about this ambivalence. When this ambivalence is produced on a larger scale in society, the society itself becomes disjointed.

Thus it is important to restore that harmony so that the society can, again become an organic whole. Ngugi would like to believe that his decision to write in Gikuyu is a small step in that direction. A child, who grows up in this environment, then is able to understand it and

would be able to effect changes when necessary, for the collective good of the community. Ngugi is not against the teaching of other languages to the children. What he is trying to convey is that it's only after the child is able to feel this harmony between his language, his culture and the world around him would he be in a position to approach other peoples literature and languages without any sense of inferiority or complexes about his own language, self and environment.

**1.5 Conclusion :** Ngugi, in this essay, has made a very strong case for reintroducing the native languages as the medium of instruction in Kenya's schools. He demonstrates that the dominant position of English in independent Kenya was due to the colonial education imposed by the colonial administration and that the corrosive influence of this language has made educated Kenyans strangers to their own culture. He calls for a literature in the native languages because these are the only languages which can reflect the rhythms of Kenyan life and the struggles of the people. Only a literature like this can restore the harmony between a child and his environment. The essay is aptly called *Decolonizing the Mind* because the minds of the Kenyan people have been colonized by a language literature and culture which has taken them away from themselves. Thus colonialism persists, in the minds of the Kenyan people, long after power was transferred to the Kenyan people. Hence it is important to first 'Decolonize the Mind'.