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# Ngugi wa Thiong'o and the English Language

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## Introduction

To say that Ngugi wa Thiong'o ranks among the acclaimed writers of the African literary landscape would simply be an understatement. Anyone conversant with the signifying field of African literature will certainly admit that the Kenyan writer needs little presentation. His outstanding literary output, inclusive a set of critical works speak volumes about the eminent stature he can boast of in the milieu of African letters. On a personal level, I contend that together with Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and Ayi Kwei Armah, Ngugi is part and parcel of the magical square of African literature. Undeniably, one can easily concur with Abiola Irele when he predicates Ngugi's "significance in the world of African and postcolonial letters" (2002, x).

The thrust of this paper is to unearth the protean rapport such a dinosaur bears with the English language. This critical venture calls for a diachronic insight so as to grasp the dilettantism inherent in his stance vis- à -vis English. How come that a writer who shot to fame thanks to this linguistic tool has come to dub it "a cultural bomb" (Ngugi, 1998: 34)? The contribution is keen on demonstrating that Ngugi evolves from an early tolerance of English growing into a radicalization that culminates in his publications in Kikuyu. Similarly, one cannot fail to notice that the writer is back again using English as a means of dissemination of his discourse, thereby giving credence to what may be termed a linguistic to and fro in his historiography that must be attended to.

## 1. The Age of Tolerance

It would simply be inaccurate and irrelevant to dismiss Ngugi's huge debt to English as a linguistic vehicle. Indeed, it cannot be denied that the Kenyan writer has garnered plaudits on the international scene by writing in English. For the sake of scholarly delineation, it is quite timely to use the taxonomic formula "early publications", to designate Ngugi's first cluster of novels, notably *Weep, Not Child* (1964), *The River Between* (1965), *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) and his magnum opus, the ever-timely and scathing critique of neo-colonial bourgeoisie, *Petals of Blood* (1977).

Still, one must hasten to posit that Ngugi's early publications, though written in the "master's language" (1998:34) as he would have put it, display a heterodox use of English bespeaking his long –time ambition to share in his cultural concerns. In fact, going through any of the aforementioned novels the reader bumps into such words and phrases as *Harambee*, *Uhuru na Kazi*, *Irigu, Thahu….*, punctuating the diegetic terrain sometimes untranslated. The pervasiveness of these lexical references, reminiscent of his native Kikuyu, calls attention to the heteroglossic dimension one senses in his narratives, in the Bakhtinian (Bakhtin, 1981:45) sense of the term. The concomitant use of English and of a Kikuyu language is a loud rebuttal to the transformative agenda of the colonial project of which Rudyard Kipling's (1994: 21) presumptuous phrase, "the burden of the white man," is an excellent illustration. Seen in this perspective, this English cum Kikuyu usage is an attempt to impart the view according to which English, as a linguistic medium, is not the language but is only a language. To be attuned to the problematics of our times, it must be asserted that such a performance in his texts is a congenial argument to locate his literary practice within the category of postcolonial discourse, beheld as a way of conceptualizing identity, literature and culture that flouts colonialist paradigms (Knepper, 2011:3).

Leaving aside these linguistic borrowings that one can trace to his cultural background, Ngugi's English is a brand of its own. The point being raised here is that, usagewise, there is a sea of difference between his and what is known to be the standard English. Let us expatiate on this claim by providing a few references for argument's sake. In *The River Between*, the reader is brought to understand that there is an algebraic equation between the ritual practice of circumcision and the linguistic reference "to be born again" (10). Put differently, to be circumcised is tantamount to being born again. While in Christian mythology, the phrase alludes to the acceptance by new converts of the Baptism rite, Ngugi's idiosyncratic use here simply infringes the normative English, or the Oxbridge-type. This semantic distortion can be read as a linguistic subversion which is not immune from cultural claims.

Another area that needs scrutinizing to get hold of the distinctiveness of Ngugi’s scriptural project is the vetting of the paremiology germane to his works. To take just one example, *A Grain of Wheat* is rife with aphorisms that proceed directly from his cultural repertoire. One cannot but muse upon the words put forth by Karanja ‘s mother when she cushions him against the pitfalls of betraying one’s community:”A man who ignores the voice of his own people comes to no good end” (197). The ontological substratum of this proverb is unmistakably Kikuyu; what is at stake here is a sociolinguistic transfer whereby the writer translates his Kikuyu language into English.

Considering the above, it is safe to argue that Ngugi’s early fictions are written in an English that transpires his cultural heritage; Kachru (1986: 67) would have spoken of “nativisation”. To put it in another way, one must forcefully admit that Ngugi wa Thiong’o writes in English to draw the attention of English people that he is not English. This truth can no longer be put to rest; the writer wants to make a difference with his in-between writing, labeled “hybridity” by Homi Bhabba (1994: 78). The cultural quest underpinning his literary and critical discourse will reach its apex when Ngugi decides to resort to Kikuyu on an exclusive basis, thereby turning the back on the very language that contributed some years earlier to his world-wide applause.

## 2. Turning the Back on English

1977 represents a milestone, a crucial period in Ngugi’s emphatic rejection of the Shakespearean language, to use this tantalizing metonymy. Historically, that year stands out as a watershed in his ideological trajectory since it ushers in the publication of his first literary piece in Kikuyu, *Ngaahika Ndeenda.* Like a prodigal son formerly lost in the language of imposition, time is up for the writer to connect with his roots by writing in Kikuyu. What can be called Ngugi’s cultural u-turn, expressive of his essentialist, ontological move, at the expense of English, is envisioned by Simon Gikandi (2002: 45) as his “linguistic conversion” consequent to the enlightening thoughts of Frantz Fanon and his much celebrated quote on the issue of language:” To speak a language”, Fanon (1967:38) wards off, “is to take on a world.” Likewise, Ngugi’s emphatic castigation of English looked upon as a discipline of scholarly erudition in Kenyan schools is grounded in the Socratic ambition vested in the injunction:"Know thyself."

It seems the writer has seriously made up his mind to dissociate himself from English to the point that another literary publication will follow suit in the form of *Caitaani Mutharabaini* (1980). Therein one learns unequivocally the rationale behind this linguistic homecoming of which the deliberate writing in Kikuyu is a glaring manifestation. Particularly expressive of this ascetic penchant is the narrative voice and his cogent statement that serves here our purpose so well: "The slavery of language is the slavery of the mind and nothing to be proud of." (56) Simply put, the use of English by Africans encapsulates the seriousness and acuteness of their depersonalization bordering on a form of cultural abortion; Daniel Kunene (1968:12) would have said "deculturation."

The critical works produced by the writer will attest to the fact that Ngugi is all the more adamant as he wants to impart his nationalistic outlook at all costs. For that, it is certainly fruitful to recall the lines of his *Writers in Politics*:

> While there is nothing wrong with any group to promote the spread of their language, there is something entirely wrong in any group, people, community, nation, race, becoming so mesmerized by other's people's languages that they begin to look at their own languages as barriers to progress and modernity. (1983:63)

What is of interest here is the unrelenting proclivity on behalf of Ngugi to cast off what the writer sees as too much eurocentrism dominating the daily practices of Africans. The writer does not reconcile himself with this sweeping leaning that prompts his countrymen and Africans alike to extol English as a foreign language while they are ready to execrate African linguistic vehicles. English, Ngugi argues, should cease to be the one and only paradigm, the yardstick par excellence regulating the African social tapestry. Conversely, its pervasiveness within the social formation is only a semiotics underscoring the magnitude of the state of alienation plaguing former colonial societies.

The linguistic demise of English continues unabated with the publication of *Matigari wa Njiruungi* in 1986. With this novel, Ngugi has certainly made a name for himself, in the words of Evan Mwangi as" the most famous indigenous East African writer" (2). Remarkably, the writer is no longer judged according to this "language of good morning", to borrow this humorous designation from Wangari, one of the custodian of national identity in *Devil on the Cross*; rather he is henceforth known through a periphrastic reference in keeping with his identity roots.

The very fact that Ngugi eschews English as a language of imaginative literature urges us to visit anew our insight when it comes to what African literature is all about. Indeed, the syntagmatic reference "African literature" subsumes for him an altogether different reality. In Ngugi, African literature in English is a serious contradiction in terms; if anything the writer suggests the lexicon "Afro-European" (Ngugi, 1998: 57) to label that body of works written in European languages such as English, French and Portuguese. It follows that one can only speak of African literature, Ngugi holds, when such productions are enunciated in African languages. At this junction, one cannot but bring into the limelight the huge conceptual gap that needs underlying between Ngugi wa Thiong'o and the writer of *Things Fall Apart* (1958). While Chinua Achebe contends that writing in an African language such as Igbo, Yoruba, Kiyuku or Swahili is tantamount to propagating an ethnic literature the former is of the opinion that it is a national literature.

The magnitude of this ideological rift is such that he came out publicly with a statement that is of particular relevance within the framework of the current critique. The citation from his book, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986), is worth quoting. Therein the Kenyan literary baobab pledges his rejection of English in clearer terms:

> In 1977 I published *Petals of Blood*, so writes Ngugi, and said farewell to the English language as a vehicle of my writing of plays, novels and short stories…This book, *Decolonising 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 dialogue with all (p.xiv)

For the sake of clarity, it must be borne in mind that these lines are taken from *Decolonizing the Mind*…. published in 1986. In light of this, for any scholar versed in African literature, a question, of necessity, comes to mind.

How can we figure out the breach between theory and practice? Though Ngugi has put a stop to writing his literary works in English, one is sometimes seriously tongue-tied to notice that he did not stick to his initial pledge as evinced by this recent publications such as *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedom* (1993), *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams: Towards a Critical Theory of the Arts and the State in Africa* (1998), *Remembering Africa* (2009) and *Dreams in a Time of War: A Childhood Memoir* (2010). This oceanic divide between what is said and done must be probed into.

## 3. Ngugi between Theory and Practice

In an effort to elucidate Ngugi's return to the language he heartily sidelined, Simon Gikandi made the following observation: "Ngugi returned, without explanation, to his familiar role as a critic of imperial European languages writing in English" (274). What must be stressed here is that a critic should not always expect ready-to-swallow and transparent answers. His task is absolutely rewarding when he learns to read between the lines. Such a task, if performed so well, illuminates the rationale behind Ngugi 's spectacular recantation. It needs emphasizing that *Penpoins, Gunpoints, and Dreams*… provides a tremendous response in accounting for the failure on behalf of Ngugi to keep his promise of "farewell to the English language". Ngugi's quote may be of interest here:

> In Africa and the world, so writes Ngugi, europhone literature has usurped the name African literature, for instance, and there are hardly any conferences anywhere of those who work in African languages. Foundations within and outside Africa hardly ever fund conferences and seminars conducted in European languages… (98)

The clarity emerging from this citation is hard to beat. The one-time Marxist must have understood that the economics is, in the last resort, the prime determining factor. To borrow the metalanguage of this school of thought, the superstructure is contingent upon the infrastructure.

Similarly, this economic argument is compounded bearing in mind that under the capitalist dispensation, books are first and foremost goods that need to be sold. And as it is unquestionable that the Kenyan writer did not want to downgrade his readership with its ensuing financial fallouts, pointedly referred to as “commercial suicide” by James Curry (2006:52), he has to backtrack.

Furthermore, considering this failure to practice what is preached one can venture to raise a point at this stage: is this not a rhetoric of déjà-vu reminiscent of his creative works? Indeed, the divorce between theory and practice has excellent reverberations in the world of Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s fiction. By failing to stick to his 1986 pledge, the writer follows in the footsteps of a long list of characters whose actual behaviours do not live up to their theoretical equivalents. Such is the case with Chui, the one-time nationalist of *Petals of Blood*, who later turns out to be the exact replica of the practices he branded some years back. The Ministry of Truth and Justice in *Matigari* who, ironically. is the excellent antinomy of the denomination of his Ministry, is no different.

In the same vein, in castigating English the way he does, Ngugi’s outlook is at variance with what one would name his practical existence. On that score, the Kenyan man of letters no longer lives by example. In fact, symbolically what does English stand for? The answer to this query would simply be the language of the West, Europe and the US include. Is there a point in laying a curse on English and yet choose as a living place the US? Under this backdrop, one cannot but draw a telling parallel between his posture and the chichidodo, the bird that resents feces with some vehemence yet only feeds on maggots, in Ayi Kwei Armah’s first seminal novel, *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968). If I were to give Ngugi a piece of advice, I would say, Mzee, to borrow this Kiswahili terminology, “Come back home,” meaning Africa. At times, action speaks louder than words.

## Conclusion

Ngugi wa Thiong’o‘s literary and critical discourse are insightful resources to keep track of his development vis- à-vis the English language. While his early novelistic productions are narrated in a hybridised English, Ngugi would later on express unequivocally his will to put an end to the

Shakespearean language as a vehicle both of his literary and critical discourse. The fact that this proclamation has not been implemented testifies to the fact there is always a gap between theory and practice. Failure to keep his promise of completely turning the back on the English language is a token of realism underscoring the centrality of western thought in the life of their former colonies, thereby raising afresh the question of the true meaning of independence.

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