

Critical Readings  
of the Works  
of Ngugi wa Thiong'o



# Critical Readings of the Works of Ngugi wa Thiong'o

Edited by

Gambo Sani

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To  
my family  
whose love is just enough;  
and everyone else  
who cares enough  
to love



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## PREFACE

Ngugi wa Thiong'o is not just a man of letters, but one whose writings are laced with ideas, especially those that border on the issues of human existence in the postcolony, from colonialism and nationalism to neocolonialism, freedom, decolonization, and resistance, all significant tropes of postcolonial discourse. This feature of Ngugi's works apparently enhances his reputation as a prominent postcolonial thinker and intellectual. Furthermore, these trends in his works are by no means accidental as they are deliberately inscribed to underscore his deep empathy and concern for the human condition. The practice of literature has remained a profoundly satisfying experience in the way it enriches the mind and ventilates complex human emotions and experiences. This would not have been possible without the works of exemplary writers like William Shakespeare, Peter Abraham, Cyprian Ekwensi, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Nawal El Saadawi, Derek Walcott, Nadine Gordimer, and the great Euro-American writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries whose works transcend spatio-temporal interests.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's works have continued to hold especial appeal to critics of different backgrounds and generations for his deep sense of humanity, his empathy for the appalling human condition in the postcolonial world, his unrelenting activism, and his devotion to decolonization and change. These themes amply resonate in the essays contained in this volume, *Critical Readings of the Works of Ngugi wa Thiong'o*, an assemblage of fifteen scholarly discourses of Ngugi's literary oeuvre from diverse perspectives. The essays interrogate Ngugi's vision and commitment to social justice, his search for the lost soul of the postcolonial state, and his radical call for socio-cultural change. These are major areas of concern in many of his works such as *Weep Not, Child*, *The River Between*, *A Grain of Wheat*, *Petals of Blood*, *Matigari*, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, *I Will Marry When I Want*, *Moving the Centre*, *Decolonizing the Mind*, *Writers in Politics*, *Devil on the Cross*, *Wizard of the Crow*, and *Something Torn and New*. It is instructive to note that Ngugi's decolonization project, his denunciation of all forms of imperialist domination, his struggle for the birth of a new Africa and the associated revolutionary dimension, all receive extended attention in this volume.

Also, the contributors examine the contours and contexts of Ngugi's works, often uncovering fresh layers of meanings embedded in the texts. Some of the readings revisit common themes bordering on Ngugi's critique of colonial and neocolonial practices while others delve into areas like Ngugi's empathy for women, his social and cultural vision, his critique of political leadership, and more. From whichever angle the contributors approach Ngugi, the way and manner in which new insights are excavated from their analyses through the application of relevant theoretical concepts like postcolonialism, feminism, historicism, formalism, existentialism, ecocriticism, and psychoanalysis reflect the depth and complexity of Ngugi's imagination. The wealth of information contained in this volume, enhanced by the diversity of interest and approaches of the essays, makes this work an interesting and important contribution to knowledge. The volume is indeed a reminder of Ngugi's literary accomplishments and an attestation to his abiding legacies as a man of letters. Reading through these essays promises to be an intellectually gratifying experience for any reader. I therefore invite all lovers of literature to embark on this exciting adventure of engaging critically with these stimulating discourses in *Critical Readings of the Works of Ngugi wa Thiong'o*.

## INTRODUCTION

### NGUGI WA THIONG'O: A NATIONALIST, REVOLUTIONARY, OR REBEL?

GAMBO SANI

The character of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the famous Kenyan writer whose works constitute the focus of this volume of scholarly essays, is framed by a multiplicity of diverse personalities. For several decades, he has remained the leading man of letters from East Africa and one of the most significant writers from the postcolonial world. He is best known as a novelist, but he is also a playwright, essayist, critical theorist, academic, and socio-political activist of significant status. In addition to all these, he is a nationalist and a revolutionary as demonstrated in many of his works. Of course, some of these traits tend to overlap as the character of Ngugi himself amply demonstrates. For instance, being a revolutionary means that he is also a "rebel" as aptly suggested by Carol Sicherman in her provocatively titled book, *Ngugi wa Thiong'o: The Making of a Rebel*. The foregoing observation attests to the complex intersection of multiple personalities in Ngugi wa Thiong'o as evinced in his conception of man and society. These multiple characters have, at different stages in his creative and scholarly developments, called attention to themselves in varying ways.

In the first place, his early works are influenced by "the nationalist imagination" which Sule E. Egya locates "within the mainstream of literature of social commitments...."<sup>1</sup> Ngugi's engagement with the colonial situation, and his exposure and critique of the tensions irrigated by this situation as reflected in his early works, *Weep Not, Child*, *The River Between*, and *The Black Hermit* clearly emancipate the nationalist in

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<sup>1</sup> Sule E. Egya, "The Nationalist Imagination in Remi Raji's *Lovesong for My Wasteland*," *Research in African Literatures*. Vol. 38, No. 4, (Winter 2007): 111.

him. Simon Gikandi asseverates that early in his writing career, “Ngugi was primarily concerned with the tension between a violent colonial past and the dream of cultural nationalism.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Ngugi’s critique of the rupture that accompanies the colonial enterprise contributes to the struggle for self-determination and the liberation of Kenya from colonial practices. Gikandi further explains how the nationalist imagination of older East African writers like Jomo Kenyatta, J.M. Kariuki, and Tom Mboya inspires Ngugi’s works. In the “Introduction” to *The Columbia Guide to East African Literature in English Since 1945*, Gikandi contends that

[f]or readers looking for evidence of the ways in which the nationalist memoirs came to affect the literature produced by the university elite, there is no better place to turn than Ngugi’s first two novels, *Weep Not, Child* (1964) and *The River Between* (1965). For while these works were still cast within a familiar European framework—the romance of childhood, the *Bildungsroman*, and the individual subject’s search for a moral position above collective interests—the dominant themes were drawn directly from the discourse of cultural nationalism (see Gikandi, *Ngugi wa Thiong’o*). As a result, historians of East African literature will find in Ngugi’s first two novels an intriguing tension between modernist angst and nationalist self-assertion: the main characters in both novels (Njoroge and Waiyaki) are archetypal subjects of the bourgeois novel, characters striving to acquire self-consciousness against the political demands of their families and communities.<sup>3</sup>

Ngugi’s third novel *A Grain of Wheat* can perhaps be regarded as representing the transitional phase of his creative metamorphosis from the nationalist to the revolutionary phase. As a novel of post-independence disillusionment, *A Grain of Wheat* represents, for Ngugi, what Gikandi describes as “a key part of his desire to situate himself within the tradition of the modern novel.”<sup>4</sup> Earlier, Gikandi had revealed quite vividly Ngugi’s creative metamorphosis at this stage of his development:

Clearly, one can begin to understand the changes taking place in Ngugi’s notion of the relation between aesthetics and ideology by comparing the treatment of the theme of disillusionment in *A Grain of Wheat* and *Petals of Blood*. For while the two novels were written under the Fanonist

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<sup>2</sup> Simon Gikandi, “Ngugi wa Thiong’o.” In *Encyclopedia of African Literature*, ed. Simon Gikandi (London: Routledge, 2003), 515.

<sup>3</sup> Simon Gikandi, “Introduction: East African Literature in English from 1945 to the Present.” In *The Columbia Guide to East African Literature in English Since 1945*, ed. Simon Gikandi and Evan Mwangi (New York: Columbia UP, 2007), 12.

<sup>4</sup> Simon Gikandi, *Ngugi wa Thiong’o*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), 103.

ideology..., their discernible differences, especially in techniques of representation, tell us a lot about the changes Ngugi was undergoing as the decade of independence and its euphoria were eclipsed by radical disenchantment.<sup>5</sup>

As Ngugi's imagination shifted from the nationalist to the revolutionary praxis, his focus settled more on emancipating the nation from emerging neo-colonial practices perpetrated by the new, indigenous ruling elites in active collaboration with the erstwhile colonial overlords. The class structure of the postcolonial state would mean that the masses are forced to endure untold hardship, deprivation, and exploitation at the hands of the ruling establishment as evinced in works like *Petals of Blood*, *Devil on the Cross*, *Matigari*, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, and *I Will Marry When I Want*. This shift is informed by the fact that "[t]he writer's primary responsibility in Ngugi's view is to channel his or her creative energy towards the production of the aesthetic devoted to the fight for freedom, exposing the distorted values integral to the capitalist exploitative system and the struggle against exploitation in a class society. To carry out this task, a writer has to be sensitive to the class nature of the society and its influence on the imagination."<sup>6</sup> Apart from the above, the spirit and sensibility which defines this phase of Ngugi's life and writings manifest in his decision to reinvent his identity by changing his name from James Ngugi to Ngugi wa Thiong'o, as well as his adoption of Gikuyu as his language of creative expression rather than English. These efforts which occupy the front burner in the enterprise of decolonisation also form the crux of Ngugi's scholarly interest at this stage of his development. For instance, the language question is the major thrust of *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, and also resonates prominently, along with other issues of cultural renaissance, in *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedom*. His increasing involvement in socio-political activism at this period brought him into direct face-off with the ruling elites and consequently cost him his teaching job at the University of Nairobi. More than that, it led to his arrest and detention on several occasions and finally, a prolonged state of exile. He wrote the original version of *Devil on the Cross* in prison, and his sordid prison experiences inspired his memoir *Detained: A Writers Prison Diary*. Of the connection between prison and exile, Ngugi writes, in *Moving the Centre*: "Was there a connection between *prison and exile*? In both cases, the

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<sup>5</sup> Gikandi, *Ngugi wa Thiong'o*, 32.

<sup>6</sup> M.S.C. Okolo, *African Literature as Political Philosophy*. (London: Zed Books, 2007), 101.

writer is keenly aware of his loss of freedom. He is haunted by a tremendous longing for a connection. Exile can be even worse than prison. Some people have been known to survive prison in their own countries better than ‘freedom’ in physical exile.”<sup>7</sup>

Ngugi’s literary metamorphosis continues in *Wizard of the Crow*, a novel influenced by the mytho-epic tradition of Latin American magical realism. In spite of this shift, the concern with the appalling postcolonial condition continues to resonate in his work as he revisits the tortuous question of leadership in postcolonial Africa, showing all the dark sides of dictatorship which Ngugi himself has repeatedly suffered from. To this end, scholars like Robert Spencer in his book: *Dictators, Dictatorship and the African Novel*, and Cabral Pinto in his review of *Wizard of the Crow* have identified the novel as an exemplary dictator novel. As Cabral Pinto avers:

Ngũgĩ demystifies dictatorship by focusing on its cardinal ingredients. And the dictators Ngũgĩ talks about are men. Some of these ingredients of dictatorship, for example, are murder, rape, and corruption; there is the greed of the dictator who struggles to centralize, own and control all the resources of his country, decadent masculinity, staunch heterosexuality and male chauvinism; and there is also homophobia, religious confusion, political illnesses, patronage and reliance on foreign military and foreign economic, social, cultural and political support, not to mention poverty, unemployment, disease, environmental degradation and low quality and unpatriotic education. Though fictionalized, one can identify the Ruler in the novel as Kenyatta, Bokassa, Mobutu, Banda, Mugabe, Moi and other African dictators all rolled up in one.<sup>8</sup>

The foregoing are among a myriad of issues which have come to define the Ngugian tradition, and thus occupy the attention of the fifteen chapters collected in this volume. It is instructive to provide a brief highlight of each chapter at this point to uncover their specific nuances and dynamics, and thus facilitate understanding of the particular angle from which each of the chapters seeks to illuminate the Ngugian tradition.

In the opening chapter titled “Ngugi wa Thiong’o and the Linguistic Revolt in Decolonisation,” Emmanuel Ogheneochuko Arodovwe interrogates Ngugi’s robust contribution to the enterprise of decolonisation through

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<sup>7</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedom*. (London: Heinemann, 1993), 106.

<sup>8</sup> Cabral Pinto, “A Review of *Wizard of the Crow*: Ngugi’s Homecoming Gift to Kenyans.” In *Ngugi: Reflections on His Life of Writing*, ed. Simon Gikandi and Ndirangu Wachanga (Suffolk: James Currey, 2018), 205.



what he describes as “the linguistic revolt.” His discourse, executed essentially from a philosophical perspective, is anchored on Herder’s and Hegel’s separate philosophical interpretations of world history. He endorses “Ngugi’s argument for the indispensability of a linguistic revolt as a necessary step to true liberation.” Arodovwe’s position in this chapter is informed by the fact that the languages of colonisation such as English, French, and Portuguese “underdevelop and alienate, rather than enhancing” the cultural experiences of the colonised people. In the light of this, he calls for “the retrieval of the abandoned languages of Africa” and the outright jettisoning of the languages of colonisation as necessary steps to decolonisation. His conclusion that by “championing the crusade for the resuscitation of African languages,” Ngugi wa Thiong’o has assumed “the role of what Hegel describes as a ‘world historical figure’” underscores the significance of Ngugi’s contributions to the struggle for decolonisation and the search for a better world.

The second chapter titled “Blazing the Trail: Ngugi’s Women and Nationalism in Africa” is contributed by Ufuoma Rebecca Davies. Her analysis of Ngugi’s novels is executed from different purviews which include feminist, postcolonial, and ecocritical perspectives. Davies’s thesis in this chapter is informed by the need to examine “the multifaceted roles women play in the fight for liberation and the complexities they encounter in patriarchal societies.” Through an analysis of the portrayal of selected female characters in *Weep Not, Child*, *Petals of Blood*, and *A Grain of Wheat*, Davies illuminates Ngugi’s writings through her observation that his “novels contribute to feminist discourse by raising awareness about the systemic nature of gender-based violence and advocating for the empowerment and liberation of women.” In other words, she reveals Ngugi’s empathy for women and the prominent roles women play in his works. She argues that Ngugi’s works are powerful instruments for the sustenance of indigenous knowledge and culture while also providing valuable insights into the important roles of women in nationalist and liberation struggles in Africa.

Idris Hamza Yana, in the third chapter titled “Patriots or Traitors? – A New Historicist Examination of Power Dynamics in *A Grain of Wheat*” is concerned with the exploration of the roles that Africans play not only in the promotion of the colonial agenda, but also in actively engaging the tools of neo-colonialism such as political power to subjugate and oppress their fellow Africans. By critically appraising Ngugi’s *A Grain of Wheat*, Yana, in this chapter, deploys the aesthetics of New Historicism in the quest to interrogate the roles of the African elites in the postcolonial

society, in an attempt to provide answers to the question of whether they can genuinely be regarded as patriots, or, on the contrary, traitors. Thus, by delving “into the prevalent theme of power dynamics” and power struggles in Ngugi’s *A Grain of Wheat*, Yana provides some useful insights into “the plight of the oppressed communities during the colonial and postcolonial eras in Kenya.”

Chapter four titled “Social Consciousness in Selected Novels of Ngugi wa Thiong’o” by Maria Ajima uses the postcolonial purview as analytical framework to identify and examine the various issues and leitmotifs of Ngugi’s works. Through an in-depth analysis of *Petals of Blood*, *Devil on the Cross*, *Matigari* and *Wizard of the Crow*, Ajima argues that “wa Thiong’o is a writer who, through his writings, demonstrates the belief that a socialist oriented literature is a strong weapon that can be used to radically change things in a society from a negative situation to a positive one.” Some of the thematic issues that receive her extensive attention in this chapter include imperialism, dictatorship, corruption, globalisation, gender, language, and so on. She contends that the perpetuation of imperialism, dictatorship, corruption, patriarchy and other forms of exploitation “results in continuous conflicts and counter retributions across society.” The chapter concludes that “in mediating on the injustice in society, writers like wa Thiong’o raise a voice that rouses the social consciousness of the masses to fight for their rights.”

The fifth chapter titled “Postcolonial Reflections: Power, Corruption, and Resistance in Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Weep Not, Child* and Contemporary Nigerian Politics” by Beatrice Onoja examines, through the prism of postcolonial literary theory, the curious parallels that exist between the fictional world represented by Ngugi in *Weep Not, Child* and Nigerian realities of the twenty-first century. By establishing such parallels, especially as it relates to the use and abuse of power, corruption, and resistance, Onoja demonstrates in her chapter that the “scenario of chaos,”<sup>9</sup> as David I. Ker aptly puts it, which Ngugi succinctly narrativises in his fictional world of some seven decades ago is still playing out in contemporary Nigeria. Onoja argues that the misappropriation of power, bordering on corruption and the oppression of the poor by the ruling elites in colonial and neo-colonial Africa, are the catalysts for resistance in both *Weep Not, Child* and twenty-first century Nigeria. As Onoja concludes, the chapter “contributes to a deeper understanding of the ongoing struggle for

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<sup>9</sup> David I. Ker, *The African Novel and the Modernist Tradition* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), 1.

power, the consequences of corruption, and the potential for resistance and transformation within a postcolonial framework.”

Gambo Sani, in the sixth chapter titled “The Aesthetics of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Matigari* and the Search for Truth and Justice in the Postcolony” interrogates the various aesthetic tools which Ngugi deploys to forge *Matigari* into a work of fiction imbued with genuine merit. He argues that, contrary to the received notion of the concept, aesthetics is not only concerned with form; it is also concerned with content. By engaging such aesthetic tools as resistance, decolonisation, orality, irony, and allusion, the chapter explores the form and contents of Ngugi's *Matigari* and demonstrates that the novel derives its significance from the way and manner it not only participates in national discourse, but also in its critique and repudiation of the colonial and neo-colonial systems which have eroded the values of truth and justice in society. He concludes that the “fact that these aesthetic tools have nationalistic bearings points to Ngugi's abiding nationalist sentiments which permeate in most of his works.”

Through the purview of existentialism, the seventh chapter titled “Freedom and Responsibility in Selected Plays of Ngugi wa Thiong'o,” queries the long held perception of women as stereotypes both in the African and mainstream Western literary imagination. Through an analysis of three of Ngugi's plays: *The Black Hermit*, *I Will Marry When I Want*, and *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, this chapter, contributed by Charity Oghogho Oseghale, advances the views expressed by Rebecca Ufuoma Davies and Maria Ajima in earlier chapters by arguing that Ngugi deconstructs this perceived stereotype by creating female characters that are “strong, daring, and resilient with an uncommon ability to surmount domestic, social, and political hurdles through recourse to ingenuity and pertinacity.” These attributes, according to Oseghale, enable Ngugi's female characters such as Thoni in *The Black Hermit*, Gathoni in *I Will Marry When I Want* and the woman in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* to subvert, through silence, defiance, and militarism, those forces that inhibit them from exercising their liberty to make choices, and ultimately equips them with the capacity to take responsibility for their choices.

Musa Franklin Oyabebefa, in the eighth chapter entitled “Interrogating the Diseconomies of Western Imperialism in Africa: Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross* as a Counter-Narrative” examines “the crises of postcolonial African experience accentuated by Western imperialism” in Ngugi's novel. He argues that active collaboration of postcolonial African leaders with the agency of Western imperialism is the single most

significant cause of the continent's perennial state of underdevelopment. Oyabebefa therefore is inclined to agree with "Ngugi's standpoint that one of the ways to liberate Africa and its rulers from the shackles of colonialism, slavery and neo-colonialism is to decolonise the mind and sever the ties that subjugate, inferiorise, subordinate, stereotype, marginalise, and denigrate the African in relation to the West." In addition to this, he stresses that another "way forward is to develop internal mechanisms for addressing African problems without recourse to the West. In this way, Africa will, on the long run, be able to divest herself of undue reliance on Western powers and institutions."

Nasir Umar Abdullahi, in chapter nine entitled "Symbols as Literary Treasures: A Formalist Reading of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat*" assesses the use of symbols by Ngugi to highlight the appalling realities of postcolonial Kenyan society. Executed from a formalist perspective, Abdullahi's chapter shows the preponderance of symbols in Ngugi's work, and analyses them "to highlight the profound significance of symbols as literary treasures ... as they link the reader to not only the overriding thematic preoccupations of the text, but also point to the deeper meanings of the text." The main symbolic elements identified and analysed in this chapter include the title of the text, characters, objects, nature symbols, cultural and mythical symbols, symbol of colonial superstructure, political symbol, and miscellaneous symbols. This analysis shows Ngugi's fascination with the use of symbols as narrative objects or "literary treasures."

In chapter ten, Sunday Joseph Bankola Ola-Koyi, in "A Womanist Reading of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The Black Hermit*," explores the representations of female characters in Ngugi's play. In line with the arguments of Davies, Ajima, and Oseghale in earlier chapters, Ola-Koyi's thesis is that even though Ngugi is not, by ideological orientation, a feminist or womanist, his treatment of female characters such as Thoni, Nyobi, and Jane in *The Black Hermit* betrays his empathy for the travails of women in patriarchal societies. These societies, according to Ola-Koyi, are structured in such a way that they restrict women and their aspirations "through customs and traditional practices," and, by implication, force them "to submit their physical, mental and emotional rights and aspirations to the will of men even though some of these men are nonchalant to women's needs and aspirations." He concludes is argument with a "call on African women to seek for personal developments and operate within the boundaries of marriage and family irrespective of the challenges they face."

Chapter eleven entitled “Alienation in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Early Fiction: A Study of *The River Between* and *Weep Not, Child*” is contributed by Abdulmalik Mohammed Daurukayat, Enejo Onuche, and Onucheyo Antonio Friday. It re-examines the concept of alienation and identifies it as both a tool and a manifestation of oppression. As a result, they believe that it “can sometimes become the catalyst for social action.” In their exploration of the experiences of characters like Waiyaki and Muthoni in the *River Between*, Boro and Ngotho in *Weep Not, Child*, as well as the communal experiences of alienation arising from the colonial factor, these authors contend that “Ngugi is not just interested in projecting, for the sake of it, portraits of loneliness, dejection, gloom, powerlessness, hopelessness, and frustration that are among the most common and distinctive hallmarks of some of these alienated characters. Instead, Ngugi seeks, through their experiences, to engage in constructive dialogues with his people to rouse them to action.” This is the kernel of their argument in the chapter.

Chapter twelve, contributed by Sodiq Abubakar Muhammed and Jude Zeal Adegoke, is titled “A Psychoanalytic Examination of the Intersections of Human and Unconscious Actions in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat*. Using the psychoanalytic postulations of scholars such as Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and Carl Jung, the chapter delves into the unconscious minds of selected characters in *A Grain of Wheat* “to establish the various psychical motivations behind their actions.” Muhammed and Adegoke argue that human actions are usually products of desires repressed in the unconscious. They also note that “a psychoanalytic reading of the text has revealed some symbols which represent the sexual desires of the individuals which are hidden in their unconscious.” They conclude that the unconscious of Ngugi's characters “becomes the hibernation spot, a dormant repository of their past experiences,” and it “intersects with the different psychic components of humans as seen in the characters of Kihika, Mumbi, Gikonyo, Karanja, and Mugo.”

In chapter thirteen, “Ngugi and Neo-colonialism in Africa: A Postcolonial Study of Selected Novels,” Nasir Umar Abdullahi deploys the postcolonial ideas of Kwame Nkrumah, Frantz Fanon, and V.I. Lenin to examine Ngugi's scathing critique and denunciation of neo-colonial practices in Kenya and, by extension, Africa. Through an analysis of *A Grain of Wheat*, *Petals of Blood*, *Devil on the Cross*, and *Matigari*, Abdullahi observes that Ngugi's fiction “unveils the diabolic, incessant, profound, and destructive disposition of neo-colonialism in Kenya and by extension, the African continent.” He examines the various dimensions of neo-colonial exploitation from the political to the social, and most significantly,

economic exploitation, as manifested in Ngugi's works, and concludes that the novels significantly "portray the profound and ceaseless impacts of neo-colonialism on the African continent and its perpetual state of underdevelopment."

In chapter fourteen, titled "Narrative Peculiarities in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* and *Wizard of the Crow*," Okachukwu Onuah Wosu and Wokpe Chimdindu examine the diverse narrative perspectives through which the events of postcolonial Kenya are narrativised in the two novels. They are of the view that by deploying narrative tools such as the anonymous, collective, retrospective, and empathetic narrative styles in *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi is able to "create a polyphonic choral narrative" which enhances "the uniqueness of this novel." Similarly, they argue that Ngugi's adoption of multiple narrative forms such as the "ironic narrative, first person narrative, conversation implicature, and the figural narrative style" in *Wizard of the Crow* suggests that the novel "can be read as a polyphonic novel in which Ngugi deliberately puts out certain problems for discussion before the distinct voices." In the light of the foregoing, Wosu and Wokpe sum up their argument by insisting that Ngugi's recourse to multiple narrative perspectives in both *A Grain of Wheat* and *Wizard of the Crow* "is an indication of his intention to write an all-inclusive narrative where every member is a participant in the narration."

In chapter fifteen, the last but not the least, "The African Renaissance: How Far Gone?" Jesutomi Mary Orija interrogates Africa's tortuous and seemingly unending journey to rebirth. With reference to Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Something Torn and New: The African Renaissance*, Orija problematises the African Renaissance, arguing that "the future of the African Renaissance appears unpredictable." She critiques Ngugi's call for the re-membling of Africa as the touchstone for the realisation of the African Renaissance, saying that "[i]f the African Renaissance waits till Africa is re-memembered, the African Renaissance may end up as an impossible task, remaining only as an ideal without the mechanism to translate it into reality." This, according to her, is because the process of decolonisation has largely been subverted by the enterprise of neo-colonialism.

The fifteen essays contained in this volume are, by no means, exhaustive in their approaches and analyses of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's works. It is doubtful if any single volume on Ngugi can make such claim at this time considering a range of factors which include the multiplicity of his personality as well as the encyclopaedic breadth of his outputs in creative

and scholarly terms. In spite of this, the current volume is an important addition to the criticism of Ngugi's writings and, by extension, African literature, as it brings in fresh scholarly viewpoints and opens new windows of insights into Ngugi's perceptions of man and society in the postcolonial world. The comprehensiveness of this collection is partly illustrated by the fact that it addresses a range of diverse issues in all of Ngugi's novels, all his plays except *This Time Tomorrow*, and a few of his scholarly works. To this end, this book could be regarded as a significant addition to the existing body of knowledge on Ngugi's writings and a valuable resource material to students, teachers, and scholars of African and postcolonial literatures.

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## CHAPTER ONE

# NGUGI WA THIONG'O AND THE LINGUISTIC REVOLT IN DECOLONISATION: A PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

EMMANUEL OGHENEOCHUKO ARODOVWE

### **Introduction**

Ngugi wa Thiong'o is a foremost theorist of decolonisation in Africa. Through his numerous books and publications, he has consistently argued that sustainable development in Africa is achievable only on the basis of the rejection of the languages of colonisation. Language is therefore at the centre of Ngugi's decolonisation theory. He sees language as the medium for the transmission of cultural and scientific values, which, if foreign, underdevelops and alienates, rather than enhancing the experiences of a people. Therefore, a major step to decolonisation, for him, would have to be through the retrieval of the abandoned languages of Africa. Such a linguistic revolt would see the English and French languages outlawed as medium of instruction in schools and in business in the former African colonies of Britain and France, respectively. To this end, this chapter concurs with Ngugi's argument for the indispensability of a linguistic revolt as a necessary step to true liberation. This position is supported through a philosophical justification for the quest for linguistic self-determinism. This discourse benefits from a close study of global cultural interactions in world history. The chapter argues that linguistic revolt has been an essential core of the dialectic of state interactions through history, and is integral to liberation and self-determination. The argument is anchored on the framework of J.G. Herder and G.W.F. Hegel's philosophical interpretations of history.

Africa contrasts sharply with other developed continents in terms of economic progress, technological and scientific advancement, and socio-

political stability. Yet, 40% of the world's natural resources are domiciled on the continent. Africa has become, since independence in the 1960s onwards, an unending theatre of war, violent clashes, corrupt governments and serious crises of underdevelopment. Given these issues, African scholars have reacted accordingly through intellectual papers, theses, philosophic thoughts, action plans and recommendations in order to salvage the continent from its embarrassing backward position in global ratings. Ngugi wa Thiong'o is a major African voice in this patriotic quest to rescue the continent from its state of underdevelopment. His argument is that at the heart of the continent's problems is that of cultural alienation, manifested in the abandonment of Africa's autochthonous languages for foreign colonial ones. He therefore advocates a wholesome rejection of these foreign languages and the revival of African languages as the panacea to Africa's problems. This chapter demonstrates that Ngugi's quest to revitalise and reinstall Africa's abandoned and moribund languages such as Gikuyu as the medium of communication is not only significant, but is a non-negotiable stage in the historic journey to authenticity and sustainable growth in any people's post-colonial experience. To adequately pursue this logic, this chapter resorts to J.G. Herder and G.W.F. Hegel's philosophical analyses of the *teleos* of global history as theoretical framework. The discourse then shows that Ngugi wa Thiong'o is playing the role of what Hegel describes as a "world historical figure," in championing the crusade for the resuscitation of African languages. Crucially, the analysis includes what could be described as hegemonic colonial obstacles to the realisation of Ngugi's lofty ambition for Africa. These impediments are considered to be Africa's state boundaries and territorial structures. It is shown that these boundaries, created arbitrarily by the colonisers, were strategic attempts to frustrate such future radical ideas for development as those of Ngugi. These arbitrary state boundaries exist to ensure that Africa's post-colonial experience would be exactly what it is at present: an unstable, backward, and war-ravaged continent of alienated peoples. The chapter concludes with radical recommendations such as the restructuring of African societies and the redrawing of state boundaries in Africa to reflect cultural and linguistic homogeneity. This should aid the implementation of Ngugi's novel proposals for Africa, and invariably the attainment of sustainable development.

## **Colonialism in Africa**

Africa's colonial experience began at about the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century following the abolition of slave trade in the 1840s and the commencement

of what is described as legitimate trade. The trade involved the exportation of raw materials especially mineral resources from the African continent to feed industrial plants in Europe for the production of various items which were then shipped back to markets in Africa, Asia and the Americas.<sup>1</sup> The contest for these resources by European merchants and businessmen gave rise to a scramble which required a conference in Berlin, Germany, to peacefully resolve. The resolution involved the partitioning and distribution of African territories among the competing European countries. The drawing of such maps and territorial boundaries was without regard for cultural and historical realities in the continent; the only consideration was the equitable distribution of the territory to the satisfaction of each interested European country. Political imperialist tendencies soon followed economic interest immediately after the conference of Berlin was concluded. European merchants imagined that it would benefit their interests further if they sought the permission and consent of their home countries for royal charters or presidential permits to establish colonies in Africa such that not only the resources but the peoples themselves would belong to them (the Europeans). Of course, European governments had no hesitation in granting these permits, and, by 1900, Europe had fully annexed African territories and peoples, and imperialism in Africa had become a reality. Expectedly, the colonisers set up institutions to consolidate political control over the peoples. The British and French were the major beneficiaries of this process, taking 30% and 15% respectively of African territory. Portugal (11%), Germany (9%), Belgium (7%) and Italy (1%) were the other beneficiaries.<sup>2</sup>

Foreign values, ideologies, systems of governance and justice systems were introduced as the colonial era in the continent commenced in full gear. European colonisers named the territories that had fallen within their jurisdictions as they felt convenient. Gold Coast, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, and Upper Volta became new names for the collections of peoples found within these arbitrarily-constructed boundaries. The languages of the colonisers were imposed as official medium of communication within the boundaries. Consequent upon the aforementioned, the African became alienated. In the French colonies, an assimilationist policy was vehemently implemented. It was intended to "assimilate" as quickly as possible, African peoples into the French culture. Attractive rewards were offered to those who demonstrated the best traits in quick mastery of the French

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<sup>1</sup> Max Siollun, *What Britain Did to Nigeria: A Short History of Conquest and Rule* (London: Hurst & Company, 1988), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Solliun, *What Britain Did to Nigeria*, 7.

language and culture. By the time colonialism was challenged and outlawed in the 1960s onwards, the African had become essentially a 'black skin, white mask,' as Frantz Fanon describes him. He was no longer his original, authentic self. He had been perforated and emptied of his original values, culture, belief system, and world view, with these replaced by foreign ones. It is this neither-nor, either-or, indeterminate status of the African that Ngugi sees as fundamental to the crises of the African continent. Being a split personality, Ngugi holds that the African is in no position to think appropriately about his own development because the equipment for the organisation of his thoughts have already been compromised by foreign values through the instrumentality of the languages of colonisation.

### Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Linguistic Revolt

In this discourse, the term "linguistic revolt" is used to describe Ngugi wa Thiong'o's argument that only through the rejection of the foreign languages of colonisation and the revival of Africa's autochthonous languages can sustainable development become a reality in Africa. What is instructive about Ngugi is that he does not just recommend this revolt, but leads it from the front. Ngugi is from the Gikuyu linguistic group in Kenya. It is the largest in the country, with 20% of Kenya's population, and having about 6 million speakers. Yet, Kenya's adopted *lingua franca* is English. Ngugi has since the 1980s revolted against English as his language of writing. In 1976, he changed his name from James Ngugi to Ngugi wa Thiong'o. He stopped writing in English in 1981. Why does Ngugi see language as something germane to the development of any people? It is because, for him, language is more than a means of communication. Words are not just sounds for conveying wishes and intentions to another. Language is the essence of a people's being. It is, in his words, as quoted by Warah Rasna, "the medium of our memories, the link between space and time, the basis of our dreams."<sup>3</sup>

Ngugi sees, from the prism of his Marxist orientation, a great struggle in the African continent between two mutually opposed forces: an imperialist tradition on the one hand and a resistance tradition on the other. The target of this imperialist tradition is the economy and culture of African peoples using international conglomerates and financial institutions as agents;

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<sup>3</sup> Warah Rasna, "Ngugi wa Thiong'o: Still Decolonizing the African Mind." In *Daily Nation*, 2007.

while the gowned clergymen, judiciary, bourgeois intellectuals and journalists with neo-colonial temperaments are accomplices of this imperialism. The resistance tradition is championed by peasant workers and African patriots, who have remained untainted despite the pressure to be acculturated into foreign worldviews. The cultural assault is, in Ngugi's opinion, worse than the economic one because it is designed to annihilate the peoples' beliefs in their names, their languages, their environment, their heritage, their unity, and ultimately, themselves.

The diagnosis of the African predicament cannot be divorced, as Ngugi firmly believes, from the 1884 division of Africa into different languages of the European powers in Berlin. African countries, following the Berlin conference, came to be defined, and to define themselves as English-speaking, French-speaking or Portuguese-speaking African countries. This has created the problem of an appropriate classification of literary works from Africa. At best, they can be described, in Ngugi's opinion, as 'Euro-phone' African literatures, as opposed to authentic African literatures written in African languages.<sup>4</sup>

Ngugi takes the phenomenon of language very seriously because, he believes it has a dual character—as a means of communication and a conveyor of culture. Language began as speech and later developed into writing when men devised means to replace sounds with visual signs and symbols. When spoken and written languages are the same, Ngugi believes, it reflects harmony for the users. They do not have to think in one language and write in another language. This is the situation in advanced societies of the world. But when, as obtains in post-colonial Africa, the medium of speech and of writing are different, it creates a crisis of division and splits; it breaks the harmony existing in the environment and dissociates the individual from his mental and psycho-social space. Ngugi's linguistic revolt aims at the resurrection of the African soul from what he describes as a "psychic tomb." He contends that the African has been misled to think that if he masters the colonisers' language, he would own it. This for him is the misplaced thinking around which the alienated African has found his consolation. He believes that when a people lose their language, the essential core of their soul is lost with it; they are then left empty, rudderless, disenfranchised and marginalised. By adopting the foreign languages of colonisation as medium of instruction in schools and official language of business, Ngugi believes that Africans are committing

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<sup>4</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 2005), 5.

“linguicide,” interpreted as the killing of a language by its owners. Ngugi also accuses post-colonial Africans of “psychic suicide,” by which he means an inferiority complex which manifests in viewing African languages as inferior and incapable of expressing and sustaining scientific discourses and endeavours. Given this psychic state, African intellectuals are condemned to writing their stories and scientific discoveries in English and French languages, thereby contributing to the vast literatures in these foreign languages at the expense of their own languages. Ngugi also discusses what he terms a “linguistic famine” in the African continent, in which there is a diminishing number of African language speakers over time. While other progressive societies make accumulative advances in the number of speakers of their languages through deliberate and strategic policies, Africans celebrate their mastery and competence of foreign languages. Ngugi’s linguistic revolt therefore is conceived by him as a battle for the soul and survival of Africa.

### **Locating Ngugi’s Linguistic Revolt in the Dialectic of Global Historical Experience**

Ngugi’s linguistic revolt is not an isolated quest in the history of decolonisation in the world. On the contrary, history teaches that such revolts have always been the core of all successful decolonisation processes, and are crucial in determining the fate of all formerly colonised peoples in their post-colonial situation. The imposition of a foreign language on a people has been fundamental to all successful colonisation processes, just as much as the revival of an autochthonous language to replace a foreign one has also been a permanent feature of all successful decolonisation processes in world history. Given this background, it appears safe to say that Ngugi is justly urging Africans to obey the logic of universal history, in which suppressed language forms are retrieved as a necessary stage in the riddle of the politics of language use in global history.

World history is replete with incidences of colonisation and decolonisation. Philosophers of history have been baffled by these recurring cycles of human experience and have formulated theories of interpretation to explain the phenomenon. Colonisation begins with imperialist tendencies which, when successful, lead to the emergence of empires. All the world’s great empires that have existed (and collapsed) owe their establishment to this practice. Realist thinkers such as Thucydides, Niccollo Machiavelli and Hans Morgenthau corroborate the point when they argue that the early