

**" DECOLONIZING AFRICAN LITERATURE:  
A QUESTION OF LANGUAGES ?  
A CASE STUDY OF NGUGI WA THIONG'O**

**Hocine  
MAOUI**

University of  
Annaba

**ABSTRACT**

*The debate over the issue of decolonizing African literature revolves around two major questions : the language to be used in the writing of such literature and the critical criteria to be applied while appraising it. The present paper attempts to establish that a "genuine" decolonization of African literature can only be made possible through the use of an afrocentric rather than a eurocentric approach in the study of any African literary work. This is, of course, due to the cultural uniqueness and to the socio-historical contexts of African literature. The paper also stresses the significance of the African folk tradition in the attempt to decolonize African literature.*

The language question has been one of the most heated controversises in post-colonial Africa . In what language and to whom should one write ? What does it mean to write in a language that is not one's own ? What does it mean to have more than one language to write in ? How does this affect one's approach to English ? These are questions along with a related set of others about culture that many African writers have to grapple with . With relation to the language issue , another controversy in African literature is centred on the question of whether-and to what extent - European critical criteria need to be modified in order to 'decolonize ' this literature . African literary scholarship appropriated some borrowed Westren and Eastern theories -Freudian psycho - analysis , phenomenology , semiotic , structuralism , American new criticism , formalism...etc , and applied them often indiscriminately to aspects of African literary culture .

Against this rather ' eurocentric ' approach of African literature , is it possible to suggest an 'Afrocentric ' approach which is grounded on theoretical paradigms that are most directly relevant to the real conditions of life in the African society .This paper will deal partly with these contending questions and will attempt to come up with some possible conclusions related to a 'genuine ' decolonization of African literature .As for the question of language , I will deal extensively with the essays of Ngugi wa Thiong'o ( a Kenyan writer and critic ) relating his ideas with

those of other African writers and critics like Chinua Achebe ( Nigeria ) , Chinweizu and Chidi Amuta . To be familiar with Ngugi's reputation as a writer , one should mention his intense sense of progressive social commitment and his leaning towards Marxist ideology . Ngugi's commitment has not been confined to his creative writing but has found polemical and theoretical outlets in many collections of essays such as Homecoming , Writers in Politics , Barrel of a pen and recently Decolonising the Mind . Needless to say , that this paper is in no way conclusive It is part of an ongoing research to establish an identity for African literature and its criticism .

Should the African novelist write in English or his own language? The problem implicit in this question is not so easy as it might seem at first sight. In any case it lies at the heart of the matter . Two dominant positions have emerged , each drawing advocates from writers and critics alike . There are those like Achebe and Soyinka who insist that African literature written in European languages is historically legitimate and that the use of these languages to communicate African experiences enriches both the language question and the literature itself . These writers also recognize the legitimacy of literature in African languages . Opposed to this so-called accomodationist/assimilationist position are others like Ngugi wa thiong'o and Obi Wali (Nigeria) who insist on ' linguistic indigenization ' as a requirement for the existence of African literature .

Obi Wali , preceding Ngugi , has questioned the use of English for the creative purpose in Africa . In his article entitled "The Dead End of African Literature " , he argues that "any true African literature must be written in African languages , otherwise the writers and their Western midwives (critics or publishers) would be merely pursuing a dead end , which can only lead to sterility , uncreativity and frustration ." 1 Wali's position entailed a series of lively exchanges among African writers and critics of African literature which show that Wali had touched upon a subject which is of considerable interest to all those involved in the literary life of contemporary Africa .

Similarly , Ngugi wa Thiong'o advances the same controversial view that African literature in the European languages in fact constitutes Afro-European literature . In other words , genuine African literature can only be written in African languages . He has reechoed the position popularized by Obi Wali when he says :

African literature can only be written in the African languages of the peasantry and working class , the major alliance of classes in each of our nationalities and the agency for the coming revolutionary break with neo-colonialism. Afro-European literature can be defined as

literature written by Africans in European languages in the era of imperialism .2

The first argument for the use of African languages is predicated on the reality that the majority of African live in the rural areas and speak mainly African languages .No more than one quarter of the people is developing a literary 'minority' culture based on the use of the English language . This minority is removed from the culture of the vast majority .The cultural cleavage has resulted from this situation . The English language , in Ngugi's belief , has become subversive of the existence of a common culture and outlook in the English-speaking Africa .As the chief medium for the transmission of world civilization , it has become an instrument for the devaluation of the 'particular' African cultures . In one of his recent declarations about language , Ngugi reiterated his partisan position as he says :

I believe that the language issue is a very important key to the decolonization process .What is really happening now is that the African thought is imprisoned in foreign languages . African literature and thought , even at their most radical , even at their most revolutionary , are alienated from the majority . 3

In Decolonising the Mind , Ngugi debated the following key problem : What were the consequences of, on one hand the systematic suppression of African languages and the literature they carried , and on the other , the elevation of English and the literature it carried ? To answer this question he attempted to examine the relationship of language to human experience human language , and the human perception of reality . For him , language is both a means of communication and carrier of culture . As a means of communication , language has three aspects ( language of real life , speech , written signs ) As for the language being a carrier of culture , Ngugi observes that communication between human beings is the basis and process of evolving culture . All the moral , ethical and aesthetic values embodied in culture are carried by language . So language as culture is " the collective memory-bank of a people's experience "4 and annihilating or assimilating the native language means uprooting it from history . Language as culture also has 3 aspects :

- 1- Culture is a product and a reflection of human beings communicating with one another .
- 2- It is not only a reflection of history but an image-forming agent of the world of nature in the mind of a child . Our perception of ourselves as a people , individually and collectively , is based on those

representations and images which may or may not correspond to the actual reality .

- 3- Specific culture transmits those images of the world and reality through the spoken and written language in its particularity .

Communication creates culture : culture is a means of communication. How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture , at their entire relationship with nature and other beings 5.

On the basis of this correlation between language and culture , Ngugi attempted to answer the question about imposing a foreign language on children and the suppression of their native one . Imposing a foreign language as spoken and written is already breaking the harmony between the African child and three aspects of language . Since the new foreign language as a means of communication is reflecting the 'language of real life' elsewhere , it could never properly reflect or imitate the real life of the African community .

It is to be underlined that the most effective area of domination of the new imposed language was on the written language because it could never completely break the native spoken language . The written language of a child's upbringing in the school became divorced from his spoken language at home because the language of the books he read was foreign . The language of his conceptualisation was foreign . Thought in him took the visible form of foreign language . This resulted in the disassociation of the sensibility of the child from his national and social environment , what we might call colonial alienation . The colonial child is being made to stand outside himself to look at himself . He is to see the world through images as defined or reflected in the culture of the foreign language . And since those images are mostly passed on through literature , it meant the child could only see the world as seen in the literature of that foreign language , a world often associating the child's native language with low status , barbarism , racist images ...etc .

In fact , what Ngugi said about the consequences of colonial education and the use of foreign languages is also valid to literature . The shift of the African writer from an oral native language to a foreign written one entails one problem of linguistic transference which an English writer does not have . Stated simply , this problem is how is the African writer to express his African experience in a language which was originally evolved to embody a different kind of experience and a different kind of sensibility ? Can he express his experience in a language which embodies the very culture he is resisting ? How can he , as a writer , transfer his character's words , feelings and attitudes into English and still retain the idiomatic speech and the authenticity of his character?

This , in a way , is the problem of all translations . But for the African writer the problem is more acute than any ordinary cases of

representations and images which may or may not correspond to the actual reality .

3- Specific culture transmits those images of the world and reality through the spoken and written language in its particularity .

Communication creates culture : culture is a means of communication. How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture , at their entire relationship with nature and other beings 5.

On the basis of this correlation between language and culture , Ngugi attempted to answer the question about imposing a foreign language on children and the suppression of their native one . Imposing a foreign language as spoken and written is already breaking the harmony between the African child and three aspects of language . Since the new foreign language as a means of communication is reflecting the 'language of real life' elsewhere , it could never properly reflect or imitate the real life of the African community .

It is to be underlined that the most effective area of domination of the new imposed language was on the written language because it could never completely break the native spoken language . The written language of a child's upbringing in the school became divorced from his spoken language at home because the language of the books he read was foreign . The language of his conceptualisation was foreign . Thought in him took the visible form of foreign language . This resulted in the disassociation of the sensibility of the child from his national and social environment , what we might call colonial alienation . The colonial child is being made to stand outside himself to look at himself . He is to see the world through images as defined or reflected in the culture of the foreign language . And since those images are mostly passed on through literature , it meant the child could only see the world as seen in the literature of that foreign language , a world often associating the child's native language with low status , barbarism , racist images ...etc .

In fact , what Ngugi said about the consequences of colonial education and the use of foreign languages is also valid to literature . The shift of the African writer from an oral native language to a foreign written language entails one problem of linguistic transference which an English writer does not have . Stated simply , this problem is how is the African writer to express his African experience in a language which was originally evolved to embody a different kind of experience and a different kind of sensibility ? Can he express his experience in a language which embodies the very culture he is resisting ? How can he , as a writer , transfer his character's words , feelings and attitudes into English and still retain the idiomatic speech and the authenticity of his character?

This , in a way , is the problem of all translations . But for the African writer the problem is more acute than any ordinary cases of

translation because the process of translation is part and parcel of creation and determines whether the completed book is a success or failure. Having the privilege of belonging to 'both worlds' and exploiting the advantage of his bilingual position, the African writer, using the English language, has to transfer his structure of thought, feeling and expression from an African language into English, while at the same time making sure that his English is intelligible enough to a wider readership. In other words, he who attempts to translate his African experience into English needs to be thoroughly 'at home' within both languages, a requirement which is very unlikely fulfilled in most cases.

However, according to Ngugi, it is not enough to write in African languages. One should target the audience he is writing to and about. In Writers in Politics, he says:

To choose a language is to choose a world, once said a West-Indian writer ... For whom do I write? Who is my audience? Whether I am critical of the content or not? You cannot possibly write for a peasant-worker audience the same thing in same way as you would for the parasitic jet set in Africa (bougeois class). 6

In the African context, Ngugi believes that the peasant and the worker in Africa have been denied participation in discourses about their economic, political and cultural survival. They have no access to information. Issues of language inequalities should then be linked to those of social inequalities within African nations themselves. In other words, any search for a new social order within an African nation will have to address the language question. 7

It is true that Ngugi was among the pioneering writers who propounded the language issue. He himself had stopped writing in English in 1978 and his latest novels Devil on the Cross and Matigari came out in Gikuyu. As one looks over his novels reflecting his early literary phase and those originally written in Gikuyu, one becomes aware of the gradual build-up of hate, as he struggled with the injustice of the world. Because of his plain revolutionary Marxist stance, hate in his later works becomes the controlling passion and only violence is left. Indeed, it is important to speak out against injustice, but one wonders whether Ngugi, now in exile in London, has anything to offer after the revolution he calls for. In Writers in Politics and Decolonising the Mind, he talks at length about the struggle against foreign domination. Yes his own work is increasingly dominated by foreign Marxist ideology, and has lost the purity and power of his early works. Embracing the dogma of catch-words- "workers", "peasants",

" revolution " , " exploited " , Ngugi has failed to see that this Marxist dogma has nothing more to offer than any other Western dogma . 8

In terms of subject , Ngugi's last novel , Matigari (1987) , is a rather simplistic ideological version of the critique of neo-colonialism and underdevelopment articulated in the previous novels ( more specifically , Petals of Blood ) . As for the form , Matigari's adoption of a simple narrative structure and the simplified language of popular discourse negates his author's obvious technical talents and aesthetic qualities in his previous novels written in English ? Ngugi considers the possibility that , by writing in Gikuyu , he has generated a different kind of novel . This is not true because in his attempt to convert his native tongue into an agent of fictionalization according to generic conventions developed in Europe , Ngugi did fail in his objective .

Indeed , the bone of contention is , I believe , not Whether the language is foreign or native but how efficiently it is manipulated to depict differences in levels of characterization , narration and speech processes as a whole . The writer's handling of his medium , language-idiom , vocabulary , syntax .. etc , determines the overall effect and success of the finished product . Nuruddin Farah , a Somalian writer , observes : " Some writers bother too much with the politics of language and not with the experiential content of what they pen " . 9 Writing in one's native tongue does not solve the issue overnight . So much bad writing could be produced in Gikuyu as by the same person in English . This applies to good writing as well . Contrary to Ngugi's position regarding the question of language , some of the African writers see the need and admit a commitment for the restoration of African values , while at the same time accomodating those external influences and institutions . One of these is the persistence of European languages . Africa's leading novelist , Chinua Achebe once pointed out that a present reality in today's Africa is that " there are not many countries in Africa today where you could abolish the language of the erstwhile colonial African and still retain the facility for mutual communication " .10 Although he vividly conveys the linguistic problem of the African writer, Achebe is rather for an accomodationist position. In one of his articles about the role of the writer, he observes:

For an African, writing in English is not without its setbacks. He often finds himself Describing situations and modes thought which have no direct equivalent in the English Way of life. Caught in that situation, he can do one of two things. He can try and contain what he wants to say within the limits of conventional English or he can try to push back those limits to accommodate his idea.11

Moreover, African literature in European languages is simply one of those by-products of the same processes that produced the Africa of today. There is around 800 African languages. Owing to the ethnic heterogeneity of African states, European languages-as official languages-have been necessary to the realization of national cohesion among these disparate nationalities . These languages , by helping to sustain these states as homogeneous political entities have negated their originally negative historical " mission " . It becomes apparent that to reach more than his ethnic group , the African writer must write in a language widely spoken across and beyond the African continent . As a response to Ngugi's attitude towards language, Achebe declares in a recent interview :

It's interesting that people who are saying this in Kenya and elsewhere are those who see themselves as radicals , as Marxists ... So what we are seeing here is people who are politicking with language . They are mixing their political ambition with literature ... We need to dispose of the language question ... What we need is to ensure the development of this multiplicity of languages .12

In the light of these opposing views regarding language , I am rather leaning towards a mid-way position . The possible conclusions to be drawn from these controversial reactions are as follows :

- 1- The idea of ' linguistic indigenization ' , echoed by Ngugi , could not stand without due attention to the ideological content of the literature and its relationship with its audience , even if all of African literature were to be written in African languages .
- 2- The language question needs to be redefined if literature is to play a cultural role in the transformation of society . The problem , to my mind , is not that of language in the sense of verbal signification- that is Europe an Vs . African- but rather that of strategies for cultural communication in a neo-colonial situation . This idea is overtly articulated by Chidi Amuta , an African critic, when he says:

Language needs to be reconceptualised to mean the totality of the means available for communicating a cultural form to the greatest majority in a manner that will achieve defined cognitive-ideological effect in the consciousness of the audience so defined ... Instead of these controversial exchanges on the language question , intellectual energy should be directed to strategic thinking on alternative cultural policies for African countries in the context of which



literature can play its rightful role in the reformulation of social relationships . 13

In this respect , both European and African languages , be they oral or written , along with other means are implicated .

The second controversy related to the language problem is that of literary criticism . Using the language criterion as a subterfuge , Europeans have tried to annex this African literature to European ones . Even the African euro-centric critics consider it as a literature with no traditions of its own to build upon and no models of its own to imitate . An African work must conform to rules or criteria developed within European traditions . These Africans charged their fellow writers with various technical , thematic and ideological inadequacies . In **Toward the Decolonization of African Literature** , Chinweizu has extensively dealt with these charges . 14 It should be pointed out that these attempts are worthless if we transcend the language problem . These critics seem to ignore several important facts :

- 1- There are striking differences between the African and European realities about the human universe. The African human universe goes beyond the notion of man in society for it includes in its conception the spirit world of the dead and the unborn as well as the world of the living . The spirit realms are legitimate part of the African view of the universe . Therefore, characters, themes and techniques of presentation in the African novel should be considered through the African rather than the European cosmography .
- 2- Both the colonial and post-colonial situations impose a different set of concerns about the African novel. So the socio-historical context needs to be emphasized in our evaluation to African literature.
- 3- It is true that the African novel is hybrid out of the African oral tradition and the imported literary form of Europe . But African oral tradition ( orature ) is important to this enterprise of decolonizing African literature for it is the reservoir of values , sensibilities , aesthetics and achievements of traditional African thought and imagination , outside the plastic arts . It must serve as the root from which written literature must draw sustenance . Given the nature of African cosmography , the critic should dig into the various African *folk traditions to learn the traditional conventions for handling* characterization , settings , incidents instead of relying on the European critical standards .

Decolonizing African literature or literary culture is then not only a matter of language . A national literature is something to be determined by shared values and assumptions , world outlook , and other fundamental

elements of culture . Although language does embody and is a vehicle of expressing cultural values , it is not the crucial generator of these values .

### NOTES

- 1- Obi Wali , " The Dead End of African Literature " , **Transition** 10, 1963, p . 50 ..
  - 2- Ngugi wa Thiong'o, "The Language of African Literature" New Left Review, N° 125 , 1985, p. 125.
  - 3- Interview with Ngugi wa Thiong'o in **Interview with Writers of Post-Colonial World** ( eds , Feroza Jussawla and Reed Way Dasenbrock , 1992) , p .30 .
  - 4- Ngugi wa Thiong'o **Decolonising the Mind** ( London : Heinemann , 1986 ) , p.15.
  - 5- Ibid . , p. 16.
  - 6- Ngugi wa Thiong'o, **Writers in Politics**( London : Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1981 ) , p. 51.
  - 7- Ngugi wa thiong'o , " The Allegory of the Cave : Language , Democracy and New World Order " **Black Renaissance** vol .1 N° 3 , 1997 , p. 12 .
  - 8- M.E.K Neuhaus , " How Ngugi wa Thiong'o Lost his Way " , **Quadrant** , Jan/Feb 1987 , p . 96
  - 9- Interview with Nuruddin Farah in **Interview with Writers of Post-Colonial World** (eds, Feroza Jussawla and Reed Way Dasenbrock , 1992 ) , p . 53
  - 10- Chinua Achebe , "English and the African Writer " , **Transition** , vol .4 , N° 18 , 1965, p. 28.
  - 11- Chinua Achebe , " The Role of the Writer in a New Nation " , **Nigeria Magazine** , N° 81, June 1964 , p. 160
  - 12- Interview with Chinua Achebe in **Interview with Writers of Post-Colonial World** ( eds, Feroza Jussawla and Reed Way Dasenbrock , 1992) , p. 77
  - 13- Chidi Amuta, **The Theory of African Literature** ( London : Zed Books Ltd ., 1989), p.113
- For further details about the euro-centric charges the African novel, cf .to Chinweizu Onwuchelkwa's **Toward the Decolonization of African Literature** (London : KPI , 1985) .