



Cleaning the hard disk of colonial memory: Analysis of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's Non-fictional writings

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Abstract

This paper intends to study the aftermath of power discourse on African people which results in an absolute distortion of native soul in the light of Ngugi WA Thiong'o's non fictional works. The geographical imperialism led to mental enslavement. The three imperial elements- naming, displacing, and owning became the key to establish 'Euro-centrism,' and disrupt the national culture from the memory. Our aim in this paper is to discuss Ngugi's exertion to re-establish the proud memory of indigenous Africa. Language and culture carry the social image of a nation side by side, but the colonial context has changed the consciousness of one's culture. The social binaries segregate the black people as 'other' and make them weaker to recall the real self. It is a prevailing Amnesia according to Ngugi, leading people to a conversion to be like the master. The Africans need to deconstruct the idea of 'occident behaviour' depriving them of their land, culture and language.

Keywords: discourse, conversion, memory, occident, culture

Introduction

"In order to achieve real action, you must yourself be a living part of Africa and of her thought; you must be an element of that popular energy which is entirely called forth for the freeing, the progress, and the happiness of Africa. There is no place outside that fight for the artist or for the intellectual who is not himself concerned with and completely at one with people in the great battle of Africa and of suffering humanity".

-- Sekou Toure

The claim to a national culture from past to the future does not only help to regain the sick 'nation' its old vigour, rather it also makes its generations feel proud of its glorious standing. African post-colonial literature is rehabilitating the 'self' by going back to its roots with the help of certain authors. The Neo-colonial African writers are trying to shift from 'Euro-centrism' to 'Afro-centrism'. Ngugi WA Thiong'o is one such writer continuously resisting the power discourse of the occident. James Ngugi known as Ngugi WA Thiong'o; is an African (Kenyan) writer, famous for his Novels, Short stories, and Non-fiction containing his radical views on Imperialism, Culture, language, and Conversion. He is among one such writer who raises their voice against the colonial hegemony. He renounced his name from James Ngugi to Ngugi WA Thiong'o, and also stopped writing in English. He prefers 'Gikuyu' his native language; to fight against the biggest weapon named Imperialism. From 'Decolonising the Mind' to his latest 'The perfect Nine' he is trying to establish that imperialism and its intermediary alliances in Africa can never develop the real 'Africa.'

Aim of the Study

The term post-colonial literature varies from one author to another. The semantic basis of the term 'post-colonial'

might seem to suggest a concern only with the national culture after the departure of the imperial power, writes Bill Ashcroft *et al* in his book 'The Empire Writes Back'. The very Title "The Empire Writes Back" is enough to tell that the long subjugation of the native was resulted in shattering the idea – 'the colonialists came to lighten the darkness of the native' [Ashcroft et. al, 5].

This paper unravels Ngugi wa Thiong'o's efforts to dismantle the power structures of the west and the impact of colonialism on African culture and its native. There was a constant debate among writers like Chinua Achebe who delivered a speech entitled- The African Writer and The English language-

"Is it right that a man should abandon his mother- tongue for someone else's? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces-: a guilty feeling. But for me there is no other choice. I have been given the language and I intend to use It" [Achebe, 5].

This paradoxical statement tells us the trauma of African writers hanging amid the colonial and native world. Ngugi WA Thiong'o chooses his native language after a splendid career as a novelist and Professor in English. He himself has experienced the impact of the physical violence of the battlefield which was followed by the psychological violence of the classroom. To him language is the most important vehicle through which the power fascinated and held the native soul prisoner. In his famous book 'Decolonising the Mind' (1986), he narrated his childhood experience with the 'other' language. As a child Ngugi was surrounded by the Gikuyu; whether at home, field, or playground, he grew up by playing with words through riddles, proverbs, transpositions of syllables, or getting a musical sense of his language. It was his first school where through language he got the first impression of his culture. And then he went to school; here the language is not his

native one, rather it was the language of the colonialists. Like other African children Ngugi never forgot the humiliation to be caught speaking Gikuyu in the vicinity of the school. He wrote- The culprit was given, corporal punishment- three to five strokes of the cane on bare buttocks or was made to carry a metal plate around the neck with inscriptions such as 'I AM STUPID' or 'I AM A DONKEY'. [Ngugi,11]

Language as a vehicle is playing its dominion over African children, it is responsible for their mental rive. They no longer are living in their world, rather the day dreaming to be one like the master ends up in a disorder. The whole process of Imperialism starting from occupying 'The Land' turned into a play game for the occident. The master divided Africa into two halves: The continent and its diaspora. Ngugi in his works like; *Weep Not, Child*, *A River between* or in his essays like *Moving the Centre*, *Something Torn and New* (2009) constantly remember the Afrikan soul, its vast culture and is focusing on indigenous Afrika. His lectures always contain the theme of the decolonization of African memory. In his view Ireland was England's first colony. It set a prototype for rest of the English colonies. He wrote that British colonialists used Anglo-Irish literature to frame the self-image of the 'Empire's gift to the world', which Rudyard Kipling also popularized as 'white man's burden to civilize the world'. Proceeding it V.Y. Mudimbe writes- "The geographic expansion of Europe and its civilization... submitted the world to its memory" [.

It is exactly what Ngugi wa Thiong'o asserts - mapping which involves exploration and surveying, was followed first by naming and then by owning. He considered mapping as an imperial road to domination and power. He discuss the case of Christopher Marlowe's Tamburlaine who becomes blind in greed of possessing more land quotes-

"Give me a map: then let me see how much
Is left for me to conquer all the world..." [Marlowe,
act.5.scene 3.]

Since then Tamburlaine's historical children are carrying his ambition of mapping the world, and dismembering places from native memory. Ngugi critically gave examples of world landscape filled with European memory as New York, New Jersey, New Britain, New Haven and New England. Similarly the African continent is filled with imperial memory, which is described by Ngugi as: even today, after achievement of political independence, the African continent is often identified as Anglophone, Francophone, or Lusophone. This process of dismembering the old memory is marring the consciousness of native people and caused amnesia. They are living in a detached world, and are true representative of T.S Eliot's modern waste landers. The native is no more than a mimic man, living in death in life like situation. The condition of these men can be compared to modern waste landers of Eliot-

"Who is the third who walks always beside you? When I
count, there are only you and I together But when I look
ahead up the white road there is always another one walking
beside You Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle hooded I do
not know whether a man or a woman But who is that on the
other side of you?"

[The Waste Land – 366]

The native is under master's shadow because the education program set up by the ruler deteriorates their real identity and segregates them from their own world. On commenting this Ngugi says: of- course the colonialists did not literally

cut off the heads of the colonized or physically burry them alive. Rather they dis-membered the colonized from memory, turning their heads upside down and burying all the memories they carried [7]. Apart from discussing the colonial plan of subjugation through amnesia, the author is also concerned about native culture and language. Franz Fanon explains what is a national culture? in his famous book 'Wretched of the Earth' – "A national culture is not a folklore, nor an abstract populism that believes it can discover the people's true nature... it is the whole body of efforts made by people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which the people has created itself and keeps itself in existence" [233]. Bill Ashcroft et. al uses two terms in 'The Empire writes back'- Abrogation and Appropriation. Abrogation is a refusal of the categories of the imperial culture. While Appropriation is the process by which the language is taken and made to bear the burdens of one's own cultural experiences. But without the process of Appropriation the moment of abrogation may not extended beyond a reversal of privilege, the normal and correct inscription [38]. This process can be delineated as the approach by which the sovereign combine its authority over the oppressed. However writers like Ngugi and others renounced the imperial language and prefered their native language to discuss their colonial experiences. The imperialist tries to impose linguistic marginalization as English became the official language and is associated with elitedom. The culture is the product of people's history, and language as a dual medium is not only a carrier of culture rather a means of communication too. But in colonial Africa the human experience with 'other' language increases the mental agony and aloofness. Earlier the children were grown up by hearing the orature of Two mouthed Ogre or the local stories of Hare, Lion and other beast fable, but suddenly the imperial designed curricula forced them to read about Shakespeare, Dickens, or G.B Shaw. Thus language has stopped as an image forming agent of culture because African children' has nothing to do with the stories of *Oliver Twist* or *Hamlet*. Mary Pratt calls it' Contact Zone:- A term used for the trans-cultural pedagogic exercise to try and involve students in understanding their own subject position [1991]. She refers it as a meeting of the different social cultures and its grappling with each other to show power relations. This disassociation with the native culture results in alienation. In *Decolonising the mind* Ngugi observes this - "Since culture does not just reflect the world in images but actually, through those very images, conditions a child to see that world in a certain way, the colonial child was made to see the world and where he stands in it as seen and defined by or reflected in the culture of the language of imposition" [17]. The native in a dilemma is terrified by the coming degradation because he is afraid of white culture. It makes him hanging here and there in search of his identity, and his failure to find one; makes him victim of emotional and psychological trauma. Ngugi wa Thiong'o voices against the eurocentrism throughout his non-fictional writings, he sees the world divided into two: The Oppressor and the Oppressed. The native is struggling to develop his own culture, because culture on a mental level has become the very abstract of the people's identity.

Conclusion

To a human entity memory is the power of association, it is the creator of the 'being'. But the very embodiment of

memory with a language help people to frame images, thus both language and memory reside together. Ngugi wa Thiong'o is constantly working for the restoration of the lost inheritance of African regime. The nomenclature was possible because both language and culture disassociate its fundamental structure. The naming and gaining policy of the colonizer ends African consciousness of the 'self. The master created social discourse such as Black, Aborigine, other' and were successful in the psychological transformation of the native. Searching everywhere his lost identity he accepted himself as a mimic man. But here is some hope as the black answer the white: "That is our pride in being black and we cannot change creation".²¹ This is known as black consciousness, and Ngugi is revisiting the glorious past of Kenya, of Africa; quotes Thabo Mbeki echo in his famous essay Something torn and new, that would be suffice to end this paper on a positive note- "Whoever we may be, whatever our immediate interest, however much we carry baggage from our past, however much we have been caught the fashion of the people of cynicism and loss of faith in the capacity of the people, let us say - nothing can stop us now".³⁶

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