

# The Language of Politics and the Politics of Language: A Study of Select Novels of Ngugi wa Thiong'o

Maneesh Rai

Research Scholar Department of English  
Banaras Hindu University, Uttar Pradesh, India  
Email : [maneesheng1986@gmail.com](mailto:maneesheng1986@gmail.com)

## **Abstract**

*Politics, language, people and Propaganda: these are certain interlinked strands of the literary creations of the modern times obviously apparent in a number of novelists, the Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o leading from the front. Kenya is a country that has seen its fathers shot dead, mothers imprisoned, sons assaulted and daughters raped for getting itself free from the colonial clutches. But it was not over with the end of the Mau-Mau revolt. Kenya was occupied in the new seat, by Fanon's 'Black Skin, White Masks' thus compelling the native to remain the 'wretched Of the Earth'. The new dawn saw the transition of Kenya from a colony with the British interests being dominant to a neo-colony with the doors wide open to the imperialist interests from Japan and America. The voices of resistance were still dominant in the well known writers like Achebe, Soyinka and others but somewhere they failed to chart out the two major channels of dominance by these 'Black-Skins' that Ngugi identified: Religion (Christianity) and Language (English). Religion was gone with the British but the Language was still prevailing as a tool of suppression.*

*My paper deals with the language politics that Ngugi talks of especially in his fictions and the initiatives he invokes in some of his select novels.*

## **Keywords:**

Politics; Propaganda; Resistance; *Black Skin; White Masks*; the *Wretched of the Earth*; Suppression

## **Abbreviations:**

Decolonising the Mind (DTM), Petals of Blood (POB), A Grain of Wheat (AGW), The River Between (TRB), Weep Not Child (WNC)

The choice of language and the way a language is used plays a pivotal role in a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural environment and society and of course, in relation to the entire universe. Hence the language question has always been central to the two contending social forces, imperialism in its neo-colonial phase and the struggling African people, in the Africa of the twentieth century. The Berlin-drawn division of Africa found her baptized into different languages of the European powers. African countries, even today as neo-colonies, remain, to a great extent, defined in terms of the European language: English, French, Portuguese or Arabic. "Africa does not live in those languages... we have languages but our keepers of memory (writers and scholars) feel that they cannot store knowledge and emotions in African languages"(A Conference of African Writers of English Expression, 1986, Kampala, Uganda), Ngugi wa

Thiong’O proclaimed this in the 1986 meeting entitled ‘*A Conference of African Writers of English Expression*’ held in Kampala, Uganda. At the top of the various agendas in the conference was the question, “what is African literature?” (DTM 6) Thiong’O emphasized that the African languages are being pushed to the periphery by the language of the imperialist other, and expressed his angst on the fact that the conference automatically excluded those who wrote in African indigenous languages. He, in fact, puts a challenge to the African Writers to abandon writing in colonial languages by proclaiming the literature thus produced as the ‘Afro-European literature’ and instead opt for their native languages to give the African literature its own genealogy and grammar.

The question who and what comes in the true ambit of the African literature was never seriously discussed. Ngugi says, “The whole area of literature and audience, and hence of language as a determinant of both the national and class audience did not really figure: the debate was more about the subject matter and the racial origins and the geographical habitation of the writer.” (DTM 6) The whole of Africa had become Caliban (*ised*) in its approach and idea towards language. The languages like English and French were seen as having come to save African languages against themselves, a unifying factor against the seeds of disintegration that they contained. But Ngugi felt that the oppressors, in the guise of language, were actually wielding what he called “*cultural bombs*” (DTM 3) against the collective defiance that Africa was waging in against, previously imperialist and later on the neo-colonialist forces. This cultural bomb would, he argued, annihilate people’s belief in their names, languages, heritage of struggle, history, unity and ultimately in themselves. Their

past would appear to them as a “wasteland of non-achievement” (DTM 3) thus inducing in them, the will to get away from that wasteland.

Karl Marx once said that a particular culture is a product and reflection of human beings communicating with one another in the very struggle to create wealth and to control it. Thiong’O discusses three aspects of language conforming to Marx. The first is the ‘language of the real life’, i.e. the links that people establish among themselves in the community act producing wealth or means for life. Production here is the language of a relation between human beings. The second aspect is speech, i.e. the imitation of the language of real life. The third is the written signs that are the imitation of the spoken words. In most of the modern societies the written and the spoken languages are the same but the problem arises when a foreign tongue intervenes and induces in the people an alienation between what they speak and what they read or write on the paper.

This brings me to the first part of my discussion i.e. ‘*the language of politics*’ about how the British got into the creation of a new, colonial or “oriental” image. Derrida in his theory of deconstruction has talked of ‘presences’ and ‘silences/absences’. Writing, he says, is presence while speech is absence. The whole of African civilization and culture is mostly oral and is retained in the folklores, anecdotes, short-stories and songs to find it in the liveliest and most truthful existence. Ngugi uses the term “*story-teller*” (DTM 10) and “*fiction-artist*” (DTM 10) and not “fiction-writer” to describe the practitioners of the oral literature or the *Orature* of Africa. He talks of professional narrators like the *griots*, the *babalawos* and the Giccandi players who moved from place to place telling their

stories and stories about Africa to the people. In his *Decolonizing the Mind* Ngugi recalls:

I can vividly recall those evenings of storytelling by the fireside...the stories, with mostly animals as the main characters, were all told in Gikuyu. Hare, being small, weak but full of innovative wit and cunning, was our hero. We identified with him as he struggled against the brutes of prey like lion, leopard and hyena. His victories were our victories and we learnt that the apparently weak can outwit the strong. We followed the animals in their struggle against hostile nature...these twin struggles, against nature and other animals reflected real life struggle in the human world. (DTM 10)

It was the missionaries from the different part of Europe who entered various regions of Africa on the pretext of enlightening and bringing literacy to its people. The missionaries being the members of the literate European societies, the written word counted a lot for them. The Bible had to be read. It was the book of codes of conduct for the European people. Sermons had to be delivered. The priest read the written discourses aloud to the congregation. So first they had to translate the Bible into the various African languages. For this, scripts were needed which most of the African languages lacked. So scripts were either invented or adapted. And now the people of Africa were encouraged to read and write these languages. When the British came to Africa, they made English the language of communication, got hold over the educational institutions, banned the indigenous languages being used and declared English as being mandatory in the

schools and higher education. The new curriculum was modeled on the British curricula, having no place for the native languages. English was now an imposed reality for the people. They had to either move on with English or not to move at all. Ngugi voices the situation:

English became the language of my formal education... thus one of the most humiliating experiences was to be caught speaking Gikuyu in the vicinity of the school. The culprit was given the 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. (DTM 11)

Hence the power of word was replaced by power of the sword. Most parts of the continent had been colonized for the economic exploitation. This exploitation needed to be perpetuated which could be done by not only possessing the bodies but also the minds of Africans. Hence the western systems of education were introduced to instill into the minds of the Africans the superiority—cultural, political, social, and ideological—of the western ways of life thereby filling their minds simultaneously with a sense of inferiority for all that was African.

This brings us to the first *writers* of the African literature. These writers were missionary-educated people and were educated in the European models. So the fiction they started writing was modeled on the European model of novel writing. E. Casely-Hayford's *Ethiopia Unbound* R.E. Obeng's *Eighteenpence* were commendable early efforts at the prose narrative writing but were often condemned for being

imitative of their European models and for being *political in motive*.

The African novel thus produced was European in both theme and language. To be truly African meant to shed all marks of colonialism, language being the first and the foremost. The African literary world had two main streams of writers: first, a young well educated African elite writing novels and poetry undermining the traditional way of life and second the other African writers reinstating the beauty and validity of their native cultures. This latter class of the writers can further be divided into two streams: those choosing to write in the European languages and the others writing in the native tongues. The former is faced with the formidable task of, as D.E.S. Maxwell says, “achieving a distinctive national tone against the intimidating strength of the parent language.” (Maxwell 1965, 35-36) The first attempt to write, on account of an African writer became apparent in what is called an “apprentice period”. The writers like Oluudah Equiana, Samuel Adjai Crowther, Africanus Horton and Edward Blyden pioneered the protest and paved the way for the creative explosion of the 1950’s, which also, for the most part of it, remained a period of the incubation of the “cultural shock” faced by the Africans as a result of Christianity. At this point of time it is necessary to mention Chinua Achebe who drew on particularly the rich tradition of myths, folklores and legends.

Achebe’s novels, however, are replete with ambivalences, reflecting on one hand a willing adoption of the new values through which an educated African finds himself set apart from the simpler life of his kinsmen who are seen to have inherent weakness and reinforcing his protest against the process of colonial injustice on the other. While Ngugi has set out, for Gikuyu people,

to recreate his people’s history in what is essentially a story of displacement of land, of traditions, of customs and of beliefs. Ngugi, in the *Homecoming* (1972-77) says, “What an African novelist has attempted to do is to restore the African character to his history. The African novelist has turned his back on the Christian gods and resumed the broken dialogue with the gods of his people.” (Homecoming 43)

Language for Ngugi was not something that contaminates the culture, but simply something that frames an identity. If the language is English then it is not possible to create a true identity of the one living in Africa. In *Decolonising the Mind*, the writer observes:

It is the peasantry and the working class who are changing language all the time in pronunciations, in forming new dialects, new words, new phrases and new expressions... language is changing all the time, it is never at a standstill. The social history of the world before the advent of victorious socialism was the continued appropriation of the results an genius of the labour of millions by the idle class. (DTM 68)

So the question is why should not the African people appropriate the novel? Even if this art form is appropriated by the peasantry and the working class, “the most essential element in the oral tale as in that of the novel is still the story, the element of what happens next”. (DTM 69) Ngugi’s novels span over the pre-colonial, the colonial and the post-colonial periods of the African history. So now let us have a glance over some of the novels written by Thiong’O and explore how language has been the key component in his fiction.

His first novel—*The River Between*—though actually the second to be published (1965) depicts an idealized picture of the Gikuyu ways of life when for the first time it came in contact with the European civilization. But why was the novel not published when it was completed prior to *Weep Not Child*. The answer to this is provided by the marked advance in Ngugi's use of language. He was now more aware of the complex rhythms of English, and the Biblical evocations which were evident in *Weep Not Child* were handled with greater effect. Ngugi knits the very mass of lore and myths into the very thread of the novel. The beginning of the prophecy in the novel is related in dialogue:

"You have heard of Mugo wa Kibiro?"

"Yes."

"He was a seer... he saw things... the future unfolded before his eyes..."

"Mugo was born and grew up in Kameno before he went to tell people what he saw."

"For he saw many butterflies, of many colours, flying about over the land, disrupting the peace and the ordered life of the country. Then he cried aloud and said: 'there shall come a people with clothes like butterflies...' People did not believe him". (TRB 18)

But instead of continuing in this mixture of direct and reported speech, he dramatizes the whole prophecy and works it into the narrative by making Waiyaki the direct descendant of the seer:

"We are his offspring. His blood flows in your veins." (TRB 19)

Waiyaki however knows that he is too young to shoulder the responsibility of being the last of the descendants of the great seer. But the Biblical language that has been

used here heightens his sensibilities and he finds himself up to the task:

"Salvation shall come from the hills. From the blood that flows in me, I say from the same tree, a son shall rise. And his duty shall be to lead and save the people" (TRB 20)

Whether the Biblical cadences favored by Ngugi correspond to the deep structure of his language or merely reflect the indelible impression made on a young and sensitive mind by the author's first contact with English in the form of missionary teaching and the Christian church services is a bit difficult to tell, without having the proper knowledge of the syntax of the Gikuyu tongue. However the use of the Biblical tongue is appropriate to the theme of a people struggling to free themselves from bondage. Even the image of Jomo Kenyatta, the hero of the Kenyans, appear in the background in the phrases from Exodus in the text:

"There was a man sent from God whose name was Jomo. He was the Black Moses empowered by God to tell the white Pharaoh: Let my people go." (AGW 58)

The language of religion—as David Crystal points out (Crystal and Davy 147)—is perhaps the most distinctive variety a language possesses. But this religious language extends far beyond the original religious context in which it appears. In literature or in the Kenyan sense *Orature* there is a deliberate, evocative use of the religious language. And Ngugi does this in a greater or lesser sense in all his novels. Apart from this the other characteristics of the Biblical language also feature in the novels of Ngugi like negatives with a postposed 'not' (*Weep Not Child*), the frequent use of imperatives sometimes with archaic pronominal forms ("*Watch ye and pray, said Kihika!*") (AGW 19), use of archaic lexicon

("Arise. Heed the prophecy. Go to the mission place.") (TRB 20), the use of contracted forms in auxiliaries ("Cannot you for a moment leave a man alone?") (AGW 48) etc. especially interesting is the way the phonetic criterion dominates the grammar. The text is split into short parallel sentences creating a balanced structure as in the verses of the Book of the Common Prayer

"The strong shall rule. The weak need not remain weak."

"A few shall die that many shall live" (Crystal and Davy 157)

On the lexical level religious language is extremely distinctive, and Ngugi's vocabulary reflects many of the anarchisms which were items of general currency in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries like 'thereafter', 'arise', 'heed' etc. Ngugi uses the lexical words often reserved for an elevated style into otherwise homely dialogue. This he deliberately does for suggesting the dignity of an ancestral mode of speech ("He fears the night will catch him"). (Crystal and Davy 152)

At times Ngugi uses a kind of language that sounds quite official in tone. In *Petals of Blood* Munira's views on the new government reads more like an official report than a novel. He says:

...after internal self-government, the colour bar in schools admissions and the allocation of teachers was removed. The result was that while the former African schools remained equally poorly equipped, they now also lost the best of the African teachers. These were attracted to the former Asian and European schools which remained as high-cost schools with better houses, equipment, teaching aids. (POB 107)

Wherever there is a natural-sounding dialogue it runs for pages thereby making the movement of the novel a bit slow. But Ngugi certainly seems deeply involved in

the problems of Kenya and its people, because he has rejected the former poetic, metaphorical style of writing in favour of a more realistic attitude. The novel also contains many striking images from Ngugi's native tongue like: "people are full of wild tongues" (AGW 13-14), a traitor is "a friend who is not a friend... whose tongue is coated with sugar" (WNC 87) etc. the traditional legends of the Gikuyu myth have very adeptly been moulded with the English tongue. He describes the prophecy coming true as: thus, the Whiteman is "the stranger with scalded skin" (AGW 13) whose "iron snake was quickly wriggling towards Nairobi for a thorough exploitation of the hinterland. Could they move it? The snake held on to the ground, laughing their efforts to scorn." (AGW 15)

Ngugi has a different grammar of expectancy that is unlike the standard British English. His imagery represents a slight deviation from the expected:

"Then in the twitching of an eyelid, all was gone" (AGW 37)

"he became stiff, as if a pin had pricked his buttocks" (AGW 52)

By this he achieves a convincing representation of an alien tongue, without the use of pidgin, as using a pidgin would not be appropriate keeping in view that African characters talking to each other would use normal grammatical structures.

Ngugi's technique underscores the extent to which the skeleton of a mere story-line is subject to the expressive needs of a hypothetical performing story-teller. To write a novel means to go beyond the immediate contact with a communal audience that an oral performer enjoys. It is in order to circumvent this loss that Ngugi comes to bend the conventions of the novel towards a more communal conventions of orality. The narrator of *A Grain of Wheat* is passive as far as action in the novel is concerned, but he speaks in the first person

plural, as if addressing of a familiar community:

For more than an hour Mugo's hut was taken prisoner. His name was on everybody's lips. We wove new legends around his name and imagined deeds. We hoped that Mugo would come out and join us, but he did not open the doors to our knocks. (AGW 232)

*Petals of Blood* reaches out for this "communal" vitality by having much of its narration couched in conversation or personal confession.

The logical conclusion of these strategies is Ngugi's Gikuyu work, *Devil on the Cross*, which uses oration, Biblical and liturgical prose, conversation, confession, song, and even the text of an oratorio—and is itself of the nature of a fable intertwined with more or less conventional narration. The book's zestful plunging into the grotesque has solid precedents in the classical European literature, but it also approaches the slap-stick ridicule of a performer at on with his audience. But by Ngugi's own assertions, the use of such strategies in *Devil on the Cross* is essentially rhetorical. He says, "People would be familiar with these features and I hoped that these would help root the novel within a known tradition." (DTM 77) Canvassing the relationship of language to culture he observes in *Decolonising the Mind* that

Culture embodies those moral, ethical and aesthetic values, the set of spiritual eyeglasses, through which [human beings] come to view themselves and their place in the universe. Values are the basis of a people's identity, their sense of particularity as members of the human race. All this is carried by language. Language is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history. Culture is

almost indistinguishable from the language that makes possible its genesis. (DTM 14-15)

## CONCLUSION

To conclude it can be said that language is inseparable from us as a human community with its specific form and features, a history, and a specific relationship to the world. Language according to Thiong'O is a primary mediation on a more intimate level as well. He says, "Language as culture is thus mediating me and my own self and other selves; between me and nature. Language is mediating in my very being." (DTM 15) Language has accordingly been a primary tool in the colonialist subversion of the African mind, in general, and Kenyan, in particular as the imposition of English, for example, in Kenya necessarily warped the way in which Kenyans put together their picture of the world—all the world. The central idea in the novels of Thiong'O, almost all of them, has been the constitution of a truly African identity. He was at pains to derive logic of using language in order to take Africa out of the clutches of its linguistic bastardization. And Ngugi is successful in his attempt to achieve a language which does not stray too far from *standard*, if any, but far enough to be personal and to evoke an alien rhythm and structure so that after having explored the fictional world of Thiong'O nobody dares to speak of the *Kikuyu of Fort Hall*, but of *Gikuyu of Muranga*. At the hands of Ngugi the *logos-ergon* pattern becomes the profounder relation described by Paulo Freire:

The word is more than just an instrument which makes dialogue possible; accordingly, we must seek its constitutive elements. Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical

interaction that if one is sacrificed—even in part—the other immediately suffers. There is not a true word that is not at the same time praxis. Thus to speak a true word is to transform the world. (Freire 1970, 75)

[14] Thiong'o, Ngugi wa. *Writers in Politics: Essay*. Heinemann. London. 1981. Print.

### WORKS CITED

- [1] Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin White Masks*. Pluto Press. London. 2008. Print.
- [2] Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Grove Press. New York. 1963. Print.
- [3] Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Herder and Herder. New York. 1970. Print.
- [4] Kirk-Greene, Anthony. "The Influence of West African Languages on English". John Spencer (Ed.). *The English Language in West Africa*. Longman. London. 1971. Print.
- [5] Maxwell, D.E.S. "Landscape and Theme". John Press (Ed.). *Commonwealth Literature*. Heinemann. London. 1965. Print.
- [6] Narang, Harish. *Politics as fiction: The Novels of Ngugi wa Thiong'o*. Creative Books, New Delhi. 1995. Print
- [7] Palmer, Eustace. *An Introduction to African Novel*. Heinemann. London. 1972. Print.
- [8] Pandurang, Mala. *Ngugi wa Thiong'o: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*. Pencraft International. New Delhi. 2007. Print
- [9] Thiong'o, Ngugi wa. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Heinemann. London. 2011. Print.
- [10] Thiong'o, Ngugi wa. *Devil on the Cross*. Heinemann. London. 1980. Print.
- [11] Thiong'o, Ngugi wa. *Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture and Politics*. Heinemann. London. 1982. Print.
- [12] Thiong'o, Ngugi wa. *Petals of Blood*. Heinemann. London. 1977. Print.
- [13] Thiong'o, Ngugi wa. *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance*. Perseus Books Group. New York. 2009. Print.