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Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Abrogation of English Language: A Critique

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Abstract

Ngugi wa Thiong'o is a significant figure in postcolonial theory associated with the abrogation of English language. For him, language is not only a means of communication but also an agent that carries the weight of civilization. It is through language that culture develops, articulates, and transmits itself from one generation to another. He is the pioneer of linguistic decolonization, staunchly advocating for a definitive stop to the pervasive spread of English, especially in postcolonial countries, where English was previously a language of oppression. For him, English is a colonial language rather than a neutral means of communication. Realising this, he abrogated English language and shifted to Gikuyu, his mother tongue after seventeen years of engagement with this colonial language. The present paper seeks to offer a critical analysis of Ngugi's decision to reject English language as a means to achieve decolonization. Furthermore, it posits that his assertion regarding writing exclusively in native languages may not be universally applicable, particularly in regions such as Africa, where English language serves as a unifying force. Also, English language has been effectively utilised by African writers as a tool of resistance and self-empowerment to challenge hegemonic discourses.
Keywords: Abrogation, Appropriation, Decolonisation, English Language, Hybridity, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Mimicry

Introduction

Ngugi wa Thiong'o is a Kenyan postcolonial writer who is profoundly engrossed in the process of decolonisation through language. As language and culture are interrelated, he argues that writing in English or in any other European language perpetuates neo-colonialism. It is through language that the colonisers are able to mentally colonise the colonised. This mental colonisation has facilitated imperial powers in asserting their control effectively and comprehensively. Realising this, Ngugi asserts that writing in African languages is the only means of liberation from colonialism and its hangover for the Africans. For Ngugi, writing in African languages is a mandatory step towards decolonising the mind, reclaiming cultural identity, fostering cultural revival, and breaking away from imperialistic traditions. Due to these reasons, Ngugi abrogated English language considering it a colonial tool that perpetuates racist and negative stereotypes about Africa.

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Understanding Abrogation and Appropriation

Colonisation is not a straightforward military invasion as it is backed up with many ideological weapons like culture, religion, language and education. The intimate relationship between language and empire is acknowledged since the inception of Western expansion and colonization. English, being associated with the colonial centre, has complicated its status in independent nations. Postcolonial writers often use English for their creative works, and their relationship with the language is a significant issue in the postcolonial studies. In postcolonial theory, the terms "abrogation" and "appropriation" are used to refer to linguistic struggle. Abrogation stands for denial of the privilege of English. According to Bill Ashcroft et al., it "involves a rejection of the metropolitan power over the means of communication" (*Empire* 37). The concept of abrogation is opposed to appropriation which implies that postcolonial writers writing in the language of imperial powers are inevitably confined within the colonized conceptual paradigms. It asserts: "You can't dismantle the master's house with the master's tools" (Ashcroft et al., *Key* 5). Hence, abrogation stands for refusal and appropriation stands for reconstitution and remoulding of English according to use. Ashcroft et al. contend that the postcolonial literatures from the once colonised countries have challenged the colonial languages by appropriating English to produce new modes of production. They characterize this appropriated english as "a continuum of intersection in which the speaking habits in various communities have intervened to reconstruct the language" (*Empire* 39). Furthermore, they posit that the postcolonial literature is written out of "the tension between the abrogation of the received English, which speaks from the centre, and the act of appropriation which brings it under the influence of a vernacular tongue" (38).

Ngugi's Advocacy for Abrogation of English

Ngugi supports Franz Fanon's view that using the language of the colonizer means adopting their worldview. Following Fanon, he abrogates English language and ardently advocates for the use of indigenous African languages. He firmly believes that colonizers use language to mentally subjugate the colonized, thereby enabling the colonial powers to assert their control effectively. For Ngugi, writing in African languages is vital for decolonizing the mind and reclaiming cultural identity. He argues that only African languages can accurately convey African experiences, beliefs, values, and knowledge. African culture, which is transmitted through oral traditions like narratives, riddles, songs, dances, and stories, depends on language as a medium of propagation. However, European colonization has disrupted this process by prohibiting the use of local languages in schools and replacing them with English or other colonial languages.

Engrossing himself in the struggle of decolonisation through language, Ngugi forcefully proclaims that for complete decolonisation, it is imperative to reject the language of the oppressor and the appeal of its supposed universality. He adopts the strategy of abrogation and takes a radical position against the appropriation of English, describing it as "a case of black skins in white linguistic masks" (*Moving* 20). He refers to this practice as "language treason," arguing that such an approach will hinder the development of their own native languages. Unlike Chinua Achebe, Raja Rao, Gabriel Okara, Wole Soyinka and Leopold Senghor, Ngugi postulates that appropriation of language or linguistic hybridisation leads to the enrichment of imperial languages. In contrast, he urges African authors to "create literary monuments" in their

own languages. Ngugi criticizes writers of the Afro-European tradition, such as Achebe and Okara, for being "feeble" in their claims to native languages while being "aggressive" in their adoption of imperial languages (*Decolonising* 8-9). He attributes this tendency to "selective education and rigorous tutelage," which sustains the belief in "the unassailable position of English (*Decolonising* 20). For these writers, ignorance of their native languages becomes a source of pride rather than a cause for shame. Thus, Ngugi's resistance discourse is centred on rejecting English language.

Like Ngugi, Kamau Brathwaite's idea of "nation language" addresses the issue of colonial linguistic domination and supports the reclamation of indigenous languages. Both George Lamming and Brathwaite emphasize the importance of reclaiming African and Caribbean identities through language. While writers such as Derek Walcott and Edwidge Danticat primarily use English for cultural expression, they also incorporate Caribbean dialects and Creole. This blend creates a language that resists colonial control. Overall, these authors challenge colonial power and highlight the importance of expressing cultural independence in one's own language. Similarly, several South Asian writers engage with language politics in ways that align with Ngugi's advocacy for the use of indigenous languages to resist colonial legacies. While Ngugi outright rejects English in favour of African languages, writers like Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh incorporate English to navigate post-colonial identities, blending it with local languages and cultural references to subvert colonial power structures. Bapsi Sidhwa and Arundhati Roy also use English as a means to explore the complexities of linguistic diversity and post-colonial realities in India and Pakistan. In contrast, Mahasweta Devi focuses on marginalized indigenous voices reflecting Ngugi's concern with the suppression of native languages. Though these authors may not completely reject English, they all critically engage with how language shapes identity and power in post-colonial societies. This makes their work resonate with Ngugi's language politics.

Critical Counter Currents

According to Ngugi, indigenous languages play a vital role in the decolonization process. However, decolonization cannot be achieved solely by writing and speaking in indigenous languages. It is not appropriate to single out the linguistic aspect of colonisation and ignore other important elements. Decolonization requires more than just pride in local languages; it necessitates that people are equipped with the intellectual tools needed to understand their reality. This understanding, in turn, empowers them to bring about societal transformation.

Another argument against Ngugi's language politics is that he himself finds it hard to write exclusively in indigenous languages. This is evident in his continued use of English, which he employs for his critical discourse, despite recognizing it as a language of universality. Simon Gikandi observes that Ngugi is frequently "at odds with his commitment to local knowledge" ("Travelling" 201). Ngugi is justified in his claim that native languages should be promoted in order to safeguard cultural heritage. However, insisting on writing solely in native languages is unrealistic in today's globalized world, making it a weak contention. Gikandi also criticizes Ngugi for his "return to English" in the early 1990s without providing any explanation. The publication of *Moving the Centre* (1992) and *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams* (1998) clearly marked Ngugi's return to English, allowing him to resume his role as a critic of imperial European languages. This return reflects the pressures of exile and academic life in

the U.S., where using Gikuyu became impractical, explaining his ambivalence towards the English language. His later return to English in the 1990s also reflects the complexities faced by diaspora writers. South Asian writers, like Ngugi, have also faced the complex politics of English in postcolonial societies. Writers such as Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Bapsi Sidwa and Vikram Seth have used English as a literary tool to reach global audiences, while simultaneously navigating the tension between colonial legacy and cultural identity. Jhumpa Lahiri and Anita Desai also explore the complexities of belonging and displacement through English, a language that connects them to wider audience but also separates them from their native languages. These writers, like Ngugi, face the dilemma of using English—a colonial language—to criticize colonial legacies and express postcolonial identities.

Ngugi's argument for writing exclusively in native languages does not hold up in the context of Africa. African writers have effectively utilized English language to express their aspirations and challenges. Even in postcolonial times, English has served as a means to counter dominant narratives and hegemonic discourses. Postcolonial writers have harnessed this language as a tool for resistance and self-empowerment. Furthermore, African writers have successfully communicated their cultural values and worldviews to the broader world through European languages. Literature produced in these languages has played a significant role in resisting neo-colonialism and imperialism, showcasing the creativity and resourcefulness of African writers. By giving more importance to the African languages, Ngugi tries to devalue the works of African writers writing in European languages. It may be argued that the language in which a literary work is written is not as important as the message, content, and stylistic devices employed in it. Afro-European writers like Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka advocate for the indigenization and appropriation of English language to authentically represent African culture. They have effectively conveyed their messages by transcending the grammatical norms of European languages and incorporating various idioms from African languages. The success of Achebe's and Soyinka's novels supports the idea that African literature does not need to be written exclusively in African languages to express an African message. It is undeniable that literature produced by African writers in European languages, which Ngugi refers to as "Afro-European" literature, is indeed a form of African literature.

Some critics, such as Lupenga Mphande, Willaim Slaymaker, and Joseph McLaren consider Ngugi's emphasis on native language to be misplaced. However, Ngugi appears to be firm in his argument despite the fact that many of his works are still composed in English. McLaren quotes Lupenga Mphande who highlights Ngugi's dilemma on the language issue thus: "If Ngugi insists that African writers should write in their native tongues, why does he draw his aesthetic principles from the European languages he condemns?" (394). Similarly, Slaymaker criticizes Ngugi for his over-reliance on Eurocentric theoretical discourses. He argues that Ngugi borrows extensively from both European and Anti-European thinkers, particularly Fanon. This fact is evident from his critical essays. Slaymaker considers him as a Third World postcolonial writer "with First World rhetoric," suggesting that it challenging for Ngugi to "escape from formulating Kenyan culture in a foreign language" (190). To support his argument, Slaymaker quotes H.L. Gate who asserts that "to attempt to appropriate our own discourses by using Western critical theory uncritically is to substitute one mode of neo-colonialism for another" (190).Slaymaker aptly highlights the contradictions in Ngugi's language politics by stating that Ngugi's extensive borrowing from the jargon of the revolutionary left, combined with his continued use of English instead of Gikuyu or Kiswahili to articulate his aesthetic and political

theories, keeps his discursive practices firmly rooted in Europe (189). He further notes that Ngugi's language remains closely aligned with the Eurocentric perspectives of his linguistic upbringing. Slaymaker argues that Ngugi's idea of "liberation aesthetics" needs to be freed from extreme nationalist views and vague language theories (189).

Ngugi's approach is paradoxical, flawed, and contradictory. Although he is critical of the English language, he translates his works into English to reach a wider audience. Abdul Jan Mohamed notes that colonial writers often experience a split between the self and the other, leading to "necessary contradictions in ideological intentionality" (qtd. in Slaymaker 189). Even Ngugi acknowledges these contradictions and confesses that "I have never ever said that I am above the contradictions which bedevil our society. I have never ever said that I have found solutions to these contradictions" (Slaymaker 190). His contradictions are "a curious mix of Marxism, Pan-Africanism, Christian sensibility, and literary romanticism." Ngugi needs to "stretch the categories and criteria of literary criticism in order to bridge the contradictions of his Western/Non-Western radical nationalistic symbiosis" (190). He should consider English language as a tool which can be used for multiple purposes. His theoretical arguments are narrow and thinkers like Bill Ashcroft, Alamin Mazrui, Appiah, Chinua Achebe and many more argue that language can be used for both colonization and liberation. They suggest that, much like Gikuyu, English can be used to express anti-colonial sentiments.

Perspectives Offered by Other Postcolonial Theorists

Like the theoretical insights of discourse theorists such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, Ngugi emphasizes the value of artistic practice in everyday life. He is the direct product of anti-colonial movements and writes under the influence of the first phase of postcolonial theorists such as Franz Fanon, Amilcar Cabral, Sam Selvon, CLR James, Aime Cesaire, and Leopard Senghor. These thinkers argue that colonialism is sustained by colonizing the minds of the oppressed, which reinforces the notion that white people are superior to black people. This form of colonization affects individuals psychologically, encouraging the colonized to adopt the language and values of their colonizers. The internalization of the colonial values was an effective means of disempowering the colonized. Influenced by this wave of thought, Ngugi chooses to abandon English language. By using Gikuyu language, he actively engages in a genuine anti-colonial struggle, grounded in the principles of cultural and political commitment.

It may be argued that this kind of anti-colonial struggle has been superseded by discourse analysis, which encourages a new kind of study based on textual analysis. There was a transition in postcolonial studies in the late 1980s and 90s. Postcolonial theorists distanced themselves from the binary mode and introduced concepts like hybridity, ambivalence, and heterogeneity. They acknowledged the influence of thinkers like Fanon, Octave Mannoni, and Albert Memmi in constructing Manichean relationships between the colonizer and the colonized. However, they argued that strategies of hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence have opened up new spaces of resistance against imperialism. Postcolonial thinkers analyse that these strategies help in creating "in-between space" for subversion and reinvention for the colonized. Critics such as Said, Bhabha, and Spivak move beyond Ngugi, and attempt to show how not only English language but all linguistic practices and discourses are intertwined with the processes that support colonialism. In fact, all discourses and institutions are in one way

or the other, inseparably bound up with colonialism and neo-colonialism as well as modes of resistance. Bhabha attempts to deconstruct essentializing conceptions of colonial discourse and identity. He emphasizes the fact that even the colonial discourse is internally fissured and leaves the space for resistance. It obviously means that English language is also a possible site of domination, contestation and resistance.

In contrast to Ngugi, these theorists argue that opposing the English language is not the only way to resist colonialism. In her influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Spivak posits that it is impossible for the subaltern to speak without appropriating the dominant language. Meanwhile, in the essay "Of Mimicry and Man," Bhabha insists that the unstable, incomplete process of mimicry would eventually prove subversive. Bhabha states:

> Mimicry is, thus, the sign of a double articulation: a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which "appropriate" the other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate…and poses an imminent threat to both "normalized" knowledges and disciplinary powers. (85)

Bhabha argues that the ambivalence of the colonized subject poses a direct threat to colonial power, particularly through the effects of mimicry. He describes mimicry as "one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge" (85). The colonized individuals who receive European education and learn the English language become what he refers to as "mimic men." These mimic men are educated in English and adopt aspects of English culture, but they do not fully become English. In Bhabha's words, "to be Anglicized is emphatically not to be English" (87). Furthermore, Bhabha suggests that these mimic men are not the disempowered as they are invested with the power to *menace* the colonizers. As these mimic men use the colonizers' language, there is a resemblance between the colonizers and the colonized. This resemblance is a threat to colonizers as it can collapse the Orientalist structure of knowledge in which distinctions are made between the colonizers and the colonized. Therefore, Bhabha views the ambivalent position of the mimic man as a source of anti-colonial resistance. By learning English language, the colonized can challenge all the stereotypes and representation that define them. This indicates that the colonized have not succumbed to the power of the colonial centre by learning English language. Instead, they are empowered through this language.

It can be argued that "mimicry inaugurated the process of anti-colonial self differentiation through the logic of inappropriate appropriation" (Gandhi 150). Postcolonial writers using English are acting as "mimic men" whose inappropriate appropriation can transgress the boundaries of colonial discourses. Postcolonial literary critics also argue that by appropriating English language, these writers are trying to "replace a Western cultural paradigm with its non-western counterpart" (151). Therefore, it can be argued that the postcolonial literary critics tend to privilege appropriation over abrogation. Ashcroft critiques Ngugi for abrogation of English language stating, "Ngugi continues to appropriate the novel form itself, and it has been argued that the very success of his political tactic of renouncing English has relied on his reputation as a writer in that tongue" (*Key* 19). Furthermore, Ashcroft elaborates:

> By appropriating the imperial language, its discursive forms and its modes of representation, post-colonial societies are able, as things stand, to intervene more readily in the dominant discourse, to interpolate their own cultural realities, or use that dominant language to describe those realities to a wide audience of readers. (20)

The strategy of appropriation has enabled postcolonial writers to challenge established power

dynamics between the center and the margin, effectively elevating marginalized voices to the forefront. This is apparent from the counter discursive mode of anti-colonial writings of various postcolonial writers. Their works tend to open up the 'in-between' space of cultural ambivalence by highlighting marginalized perspectives. McLeod views Ngugi's relationship with English of a different sort as there is "touch of nostalgia" in his argument and it seems "he is keen to recover an idealized community experienced in childhood relatively unravished by the effects of colonialism" (*Beginning* 127). Similarly, Ashcroft opines that it is impossible "to return to or to rediscover an absolute pre-colonial cultural purity, nor is it possible to create national or regional formations entirely independent of their historical implication in the European colonial enterprise" (*Empire* 195-6). Even the postcolonial critics like Bhabha, Said, and Spivak do not advocate a complete return to native languages and cultures. They assert that the nativism is not a reality in a globalized world. Thus, it can be argued that it is not possible to reverse the things easily.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that Ngugi has rightly acknowledged the importance of African languages and literatures in bringing African renaissance. However, he should also recognize the importance of English language in voicing protest. African writers have effectively used English to express their aspirations and experiences. Ngugi cannot deny that English has served as a medium for conveying African experiences, cultures, and traditions, particularly when no other means were available to writers. Nowadays, English is successfully employed as a tool for decolonization by those who have been linguistically marginalized. Previously, English was utilized as a weapon of textual violence, but it is now used more effectively in the postcolonial context to challenge colonial discourses. Ngugi's claim to reject English is not tenable as the vast body of postcolonial literature in English testifies.

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