



African Culturalist Subversion of Western Otherizing Logic in Decolonising the Mind: Ngugi's Indigenization Project

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Abstract

When discussing African literature, it becomes impossible to bypass the issue of language, and more importantly African native languages, which seem to be close to quasi-inexistent when it comes to writing in them. In fact, most African written literature has come to life using the languages of the European languages imposed by force and at times subtly by the colonizers. In his book *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the Kenyan writer and critic, addresses the issue by attacking these European languages in practice in both African nation-states and literature, and what the said languages represent ideologically and hegemonically when in use in Africa. In order to have a truly African literature, i.e., one utterly independent from the former colonial influences, Ngugi proposes a literature in African in African indigenous languages. How does he go about putting this in practice? Does such a proposition fit well in our days and age? These are the questions, among others, this paper seeks to address.

Keywords: *Africa, literature, indigenous, Europe, West, Other, subversion, culture, language*



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Abstract

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Introduction

This study examines how Ngugi wa Thiong'o explores the deep connections between languages with cultures and how such a combination produces the kind of literature the Kenyan critic and writer not only champions, but also produces. Also, I attempt to investigate how popular culture carries the potential of subverting the very logic of subservience seen in African literature,

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writers and users of foreign languages like French, Spanish, Portuguese, and English, among others in Africa, thereby creating a site of agency allowing for the conditions of possibility of their actual and effective participation in the global exchange of ideas and cultures. These new priorities could be seen in Leopold Senghor's idea of the so-called "civilisation de l'universel" (Civilization of the Universal) or what the Kenyan author and critic called for in his *Moving the Centre* or in his *Globalectics* where he is of the opinion that African people should not inscribe in a logic of exclusively taking and using other people's cultures without giving in return something from among their own cultures and civilization. This move should be able to make history and induce social change and initiate a process of the delinking hinted by late Franco-Egyptian scholar and economist, Samir Amin.

To proceed with this investigation means to attempt to answer some critically fundamental questions. Though not all of the questions will be systematically answered, the leading questions will be inclusive of the following: What is African literature in the first place? Can and should African people express their experiences by means of other people's languages? Who is aimed by writing local languages? How does this indigenization of literature as championed by Ngugi proceed in actuality and how practical is it?

African literature as we know it today emerged as a tool to counteract the Western representations of African people and those claiming African descent. This kind of representation has been for the most part biased. In fact, Westerners who were in contact with African people and, for some reasons, realized that the place they saw was home to no culture or civilization. Therefore, they discovered no trace of history on the African continent. The putative lack of culture among African people made possible the imperial agenda and/or the *mission civilisatrice* (civilizing mission) of the West. Behind this Western observation of the Dark Continent lurked a binary logic positing the Western as the center of the world (Us) and the people of the land to be conquered as the Other (Them). The purpose, as can be seen, was mission has to operationalize the Us/Them, West/Other, civilizer/barbarian binary. In witness of the literature produced by the Western educated African who embraced the function of writers, the intellectual exercise aimed at achieving one single objective. This consisted in disproving the above-mentioned oppositionalities.

Theirs was a mission to re-represent, to proceed with *la prise de la parole* (seizing the power of the word). In other words, to carry out this mission of self-re-representation, the intellectuals of the time appropriated the means to them given by the colonizer: the foreign language. The foreign languages in question here are, among others, French, English, Portuguese, and Spanish. In the same vein as the Harlem Renaissance Movement in the 1920's United States, - the Harlem Renaissance movement enabled African-Americans to prove themselves by way of showing artistically creative and racially proud they were ¹-, Negritude emerged out of the need that some African students in Paris expressed to write their own stories, to sing and to praise their own heroes like the Mande or African herald known as the griot.² Singing Africa the Motherland revolved around a thread: Africanness. Advocates of "personalité africaine" (African Personality) include Leopold Sedar Senghor would call "africanité," include the former Senegalese President, Aime Cesaire of Martinique, and Leon Gontran Damas of French Guyana. Theirs was to inspire, to call into action their brethren in Africa and the Diaspora to take pride in their cultural heritage and Africanness, and to live this assumed common African experience and worldview to the fullest, thereby testifying to their existence in a world where the latter was constantly challenged and assaulted by the colonial and dominant culture both at home and abroad.

These pioneers of (Francophone) African literature with the focus on cultural regenerescence thus paved the way for a new generation of writers to correct the grave misperceptions on them and their history and culture. Their heirs include, but are not limited to, Bakary Traore, Tovalou Quenum, Ferdinand Oyono author of *Une Vie de Boy* or Houseboy, and Cheickh Ahmidou Kane who wrote *L'Aventure ambiguë* (*The Ambiguous Adventure*).

¹ John Locke's "The New Negro" is a text in point; it laid the foundation of the talk and spirit of what the new African-American was supposed to be in a country that his/her forebears bore on the back and yet that they could not enjoy like others claiming the freedoms provided by the foundational texts of the US. He writes in 1925 that "The day of 'aunties,' 'uncles' and 'mammies' is equally gone" (Locke 23).

² This word has an uncertain origin as some relate it to Portuguese "criado" (someone shouting/heralding news in town) while others see in the word the meaning of what is known as the bard. The griot in West Africa is historian, a genealogist, a shrewd advisor of kings and princes, and singer/musician. Assuredly, the literary productions of the culture radicals known as proponents of Negritude, starting with Senghor who sings his native Joal in present-day Senegal, have to be screened against the background of the griot's function and performance.

Though on the Anglophone side goals were somehow different, the thrust of literary creativity and its political use was very much the same. National liberation or independence was to be had through rearticulating one's cultural priorities and premises in order for the ostracized to take part in interactions with other peoples and cultures. Both Francophones and Anglophones like Chinua Achebe, author of *Things Fall Apart*, William Canton of Sierra Leone, and even Wole Soyinka were all contributing to speaking for and about themselves by their own selves. Not only did they provide their own story of the imperial/colonial encounter with Africa with the cultural problems that ensued, but also some of them (the Francophones) set out to invite to the source.³ The central question is the kind of negotiations to be performed with the consequences of the violent colonial encounter. In other words, the question was as to what to do with the African culture and the culture of the colonizer inhaled by the colonized. Two groups emerged here along political priorities and cultural lines.

The first group, mostly nationalist or Pan-African with figures like Kwame Nkrumah as well as those Anglophone who retained some of their roots due to the English Indirect Rule, de-emphasized valuing of cultural and traditional values, not necessarily because the values in question were not important, but because times and space had imposed new strictures and constraints upon them. In fact, they placed the emphasis on the everyday life of their people denouncing the way independent African nations were being ruled by the elite in complicity with the former colonizer. This is the post-independence/post-colonial writer at work. The second group, though initially sounded nationalist ended up being defenders of Western culture more than their own. Marked presence of French language and culture in West Africa speaks to this.

Though the two groups sound different in outlook and approach to Africa, they nonetheless have a common denominator which is their addressing issues African. Also, and more important, though they are all seizing *parole* like a griot, they do so using someone else's language. They utilize foreign languages

³ This reads as a form of blind traditionalism looking at Africa as a homogeneous whole. This perspective is definitely monolithic, antihistorical by reason of its overemphasized past-orientedness. It would be wise to advocate the *resort to the source*, which assumes that they integrated their own cultural values added to the already internalized the imposed culture by remodeling it so that it fit their own understanding of lived experience or their situatedness.

and sometimes foreign genres and therefore their works were evaluated by means of Western literary canons such as defended by Harold Bloom in *Western Canons*. In a sense, it is not exaggerated to state that African literature as we know it today is not genuinely one; it is unquestionably literature by African artists but in foreign languages like French, English, Spanish, and Portuguese. The peculiarity of former Western colonized Africans is that most of these Africans have perfect command of ex-(colonial) master's languages more than their own. For one, the official language of most formerly colonized countries is the language of the former master. The use of the said foreign languages in creative and non-creative settings could not be bypassed because these languages were the only written ones.

This is exactly the point Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Kenyan writer and critic, made at the 1986 Conference of African Literature in Uganda. His critique of the state of African cultural affairs is loud and clear: how can someone use someone else's language, modes of representation and tones, and still pretend that those are his/her?

The use of foreign languages invites the perpetuation of foreign domination on African minds. Ngugi believes that instead of disabling the cultured/uncultured or West/Other dichotomy, which some African writers pretended to do, the appropriation of foreign languages weakens Africa rather enriches the West thereby reinforcing the dichotomy it means to subvert. Importantly, since foreign languages are the media by which literature in Africa is produced, Ngugi believes that there is no African literature per se, but some literature of European expression authored by Africans. Therefore, he proposes indigenization of African literature. In other words, his claim is that in order for any African work of art and literature to be considered and valued as African, it must, first and foremost, be written in African language(s). This is a culturalist agenda par excellence. Nowadays, with persistence of racializing interactions and relations of non-Whites, and particularly the African continent, with the West, more and more voices are raising in favor of tapping in one's own cultural resources to face the material and immaterial challenges of our times.

Culture is the talking point in this study. There is a need to investigate culture, to interrogate the meaning that some give to the word over and again the contending senses the word/concept might have. On what ground did the colonizing champions pretend that there was no culture in Africa? What are the conceptual possibilities of this concept cum practice?

Culture has been an unflinchingly ambiguous concept throughout history. In terms of theory it is a worldview issue in the sense that a people always has a mode of life, a way of rationalizing that is idiosyncratic or native to them and by which one identifies them. As for culture as a practice, it spans the political, social and economic life of a nation or a people. Investigations into this allow for discovery of the real self of the people studied. In terms of practical assessing of the term, it has been used in the field of farming as putting the land to use or to value. This is the meaning of agriculture. The same way, when one cultivates one's mind, one is working on a tabula rasa that is receiving seeds from outside. This is the notion of someone being cultured or not. Culture is also consonant with identity; it is the history of a people. It is both the identity and civilization of a people. History here is to be understood as the deployment of experiential development of the individual as well as the community. Here comes the notion of "cultural community" – whether monocultural or multicultural.

The practical side of culture can be seen in its figurative or metaphorical understanding. As Bauman puts,

Culture is about expanding temporal and spatial boundaries of being, with a view to dismantling them altogether. Their expansion and effacement of boundaries are partly independent, partly interpenetrating endeavors, and culture's ways and means in pursuing them are partly specialized, partly overlapping. The first activity of culture relates to *survival*--pushing back the moment of death, extending the life-span, increasing life expectation and thus life's content --absorbing capacity; making death a matter of concern, a significant event-- lifting the event of death above the level of the mundane, the ordinary, the natural; directly or indirectly (yet still more importantly), making the job of death somewhat more difficult. (Bauman, 1992: 5-6)

As Bauman beautifully puts it, culture is quintessential in the making and sustaining of the human being as the latter builds him/herself over and against symbolic and actual death. Here, culture is consubstantial to any being. As much culture as a praxis may be hierarchized in terms of high and low culture in the

West⁴, thereby validating this conception for every nation. This is a mistake to redress. All nations have their cultures to be reckoned with.

Either the imperialists lied to themselves about the absence of culture among African people, thus convincing themselves of the justness of their thought and actions against the latter, or their conception of these people's culturelessness was innocently misguided. Anyways, culture has been very instrumental to the West in the process of the colonization of African people. Undoubtedly, the imperialists did not frown on means to render the targeted subjects of their will to power. They utilized both tangible and intangible weapons, and "any means necessary."⁵

In the African context, arms were resorted to in order to silence African resistance to foreign domination. One must remember violent repression of revolt in Kenya (the Mau Mau rebellion), the Belgian amputating Africans who refused to take part in hard labor and feigned sickness, and the defeating of resistance in Francophone Africa. The case in point is the massacre at the Thiaroye military camp adapted to the screen by late Ousmane Sembene. Yet, the most important weapon used by the Western imperialism is culture. These forces simply refused the very existence of culture among African people. They designed schemes and strategies against the culture of Africans. They were aware of one important thing: the centrality of culture in bringing up or downgrading some people. For as long as some nation has a strong sense of their culture, their domination by a foreign power will prove difficult. As one of the outstanding African anti-imperial nationalists in Africa, and especially in Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau, Amilcar Cabral says:

[T]he value of culture as an element of resistance to the foreign domination lies in the fact that culture is the vigorous manifestation on the ideological or idealist plane of the physical and historical reality of the society that is dominated or to be dominated. Culture is the fruit of a people's history and a determinant of history, by the positive or negative influence which it exerts on the evolution of relationships between man and his environment, among men and groups of men

⁴ See Theodor Adorno and the critics of the Frankfurt School who opposed popular culture to high culture.

⁵ This phrase has been vulgarized in the US owing to its use by Malcolm X when he rightly harbored radical nationalistic thoughts over and against his white countrymen who were ostracizing his people then.

within a society, as well as among different societies. Ignorance of this fact may explain the failure several attempts at foreign domination- as well as the failure of some international liberation movements. (Cabral 43)

Culture is a tool serving those who intend to impose their agenda on other people. As much it serves as a dominating tool for the power-hungry, so too stands as a tool to resist domination or external imposition by those who understand their worth and agency. . The realization of the emancipative potential of culture is central in Ngugi's culturalist discourse for the decolonization battle through literature. Here, Ngugi emphasizes the use of culture as a means to subvert, to undo foreign cultural domination more specifically over African people and by extension the rest of the world.

Literature, like culture, is about the use of language whether borrowed or native. When language is used, the context and intent inform its meaning. One would say that when "the empire writes back to the center," the problem would be solved. Negritude proponents did their part appropriating the former colonial masters' language. What is of particular importance is that they resolved to not abide by the canons and standards imposed by the center in order to be constant conflict with those in the periphery. These writers were fully cognizant that "language is a tool which has meaning according to the way in which it is used" (Ashcroft 57).

The first generation writers used language as described by Bill Ashcroft. So does Ngugi when he flips the question around and rejects the imposed languages and seeks to resuscitate African languages going almost extinct because they are almost disabled by their rightful practitioners who refrain from using them. As he advocates the Africanization of literature, Ngugi reexamines the concept of language in general. For him, language has a twofold dimension. As Ashcroft has it, without language, communication becomes almost impossible. Also, language is the carrier of culture. As a means of communication, Ngugi sees in language three aspects. First, there is the language of real life, then language as a speech, and ultimately, language as an imitation of the word of mouth i.e., the written language.

As for language of real life, it manifests itself in the process of labor; it links the people of the same community during the process of the production of wealth and such means of subsistence as food production, clothing and shelter. Language as speech is the imitation of language as in the real life case. The

word of mouth reflects the links people create among themselves during the process of production of their means of subsistence. “The spoken word is the relation between human beings what the hand is to the relation between human beings and nature”.⁶ The spoken word acts as a mediator between human beings and shapes their speech.

He goes on to say that language as writing is the representation of the sounds that one emits when speaking. Therefore, communication between individuals makes the basis and the process of culture as it evolves. Culture comes into being through the repetition of the same things, which in the long run become values and the latter are handed down to the next generation and stand as the characteristic traits of that people or community. In fact, he writes that culture “embodies those moral, ethical and aesthetic values, the set of spiritual eyeglasses, through which they come to view themselves and their place in the universe” (Ngugi, 1986: 16). The values emerging from the interrelationships between the members of a given community are constitutive of the identity of that community, and stand as the specificity of that group of people among many others in the human race. They rise out of the very (f)act of seeing community as language.

It follows from the making of culture, as Ngugi shows it, that there is an extremely narrow line of demarcation between language and culture. Language like culture, first of all, is a product of history and it reflects history in that it is the repetition of the year-long acquired values through intra-community communication. Secondly, language as culture conditions the worldview of the individual and the community insofar as their identity and conception of themselves is contingent on the images stored up from childhood to adulthood. Thirdly, the relationship between language and culture is important because that the individual’s images as well as what he thinks of his./her environment is transmitted either by word of mouth or by means of the written medium. This is language plain and simple.

Ngugi believes that these aspects of language as culture are universal. What is specific to any community in the act of speaking is the peculiarity of the word, its combination with others to make a sense, and the law governing this ordering. The strongest point or the thesis of Ngugi’s oeuvre is

⁶ Refer to Ngugi wa Thiong’O’s *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, p. 15. In order to avoid excessive footnoting, all the references to and from the book will be included in the body of the text with the “D.M.” abbreviation.

encapsulated in the claim saying that “written literature and orature (or oral literature) are the main means of by which a particular language transmits the images of the world contained in the culture it carries” (D.M. 15). Because from this assertion comes the reason for his being intent on appropriating culture, popular culture specifically, to draw a pure African literature from it.

As mentioned earlier, early African writings up to now, to a greater degree, are of foreign expression. They contributed and still do contribute to valorize Africa and undo the stereotypes of the West about the people of that continent. However, they used to resort to the past and popularize it by the means of foreign languages. Ngugi is of the opinion that the utilization of European languages in literature by Africans means a reaffirmation of the cultural domination of the West upon the rest of the world, and more especially on Africa. This situation also denotes, and sadly so, that some African artists and writers are unable to formulate a creative praxis of their own in view of disrupting any hegemony from anywhere. It must be all about a fight for one’s own identity and culture when some people have the propensity of imposing a monocultural world to people with clearly and intrinsically diversified background. No wonder, Ngugi interrogates: “What is the difference between a politician who says Africa cannot do without imperialism and the writer who says Africa cannot do without European languages?” (D.M.26). This question is undoubtedly profound because it speaks to the heart of the issue of Self and Other. For one to be, one must pose the terms of one’s specificities against the background of other people’s characteristic features. Zygmunt Bauman could not be more explicit when he states,

Whether inherited or acquired, culture is a detachable part of a human being, a possession. It is a very peculiar kind of possession, to be sure: it shares with the personality the unique quality of being simultaneously the defining ‘essence’ and the descriptive ‘existential feature’ of the human creature. (Bauman, 1999: 6)

The Self is delineated in the culture before it can be posited as an Other. If one is mostly recognized and recognizable from one’s culture, then culture is expressed through the language of those who claim a given culture. It is a matter of survival as underlined above. Either the African reevaluates his/her relationship with the surrounding space, his/her Other or he/she will be merged into the Other. Hence losing grips of his/her agency as a human being.

The Kenyan writer's question is interesting in more ways than one. He psychologizes the African oppressed and otherized by the West whose languages are loaned. Speaking of the oppressed in his very interesting analysis of the psyche of both the oppressor and the oppressed, Paulo Freire in his seminal book titled *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* has a similar thought. He believes that

The oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom. Freedom would require them to eject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility. Freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift. It must be pursued constantly and responsibly. Freedom is not an ideal located outside of man; nor is it an idea which becomes myth. It is rather the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion. (Freire 47)

Like Ngugi speaking to peasants as being the motive force of social change, Freire sees the decisive implication of the peasant/ poor /oppressed in his/her own freedom. Freedom is possible when the oppressed seeks to overthrow the yoke of the oppressor by way of devising his own scheme and means to operationalize his/her agenda.

The specificity of Ngugi's linguistic project stems from his appeals to peasantry because peasants are the real custodians of African cultural values. The best way to get back one's culture is to go back to the source and identify oneself with the depository of the said culture. The writer needs to get strongly involved in his community rather than staying aloof from the people and displaying a total apathy *vis-à-vis* their problems.

Addressing the issue of the writer as a depository of agency with relation to revolution and the attending social advancement targeted, late Ahmed Sékou Touré, past president of Guinea-Conakry in West Africa says:

To take part in the African revolution it is not enough to write a revolutionary song; you must fashion the revolutionary with the people. And if you fashion it with the people, the songs will come by themselves, and of themselves. In order to achieve real action, you must yourself be 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 the people in the great battle of Africa and of suffering humanity.⁷

This pronouncement clearly shows that a writer pretending to be contributing to the struggle of cultural rehabilitation must get as closer as possible to the representatives of culture. Frantz Fanon makes a similar point when he writes in *The Wretched of the Earth* that

The colonized man who writes for his people ought to use the past with the intention of opening the future as an invitation to action and a basis for hope. But to ensure that hope and to give it form, he must take part in action and throw himself (body and soul) into the national struggle. (Fanon 232)

Obviously, Ngugi chooses peasantry, the Mau Mau of his native Kenya as the vector of cultural revival and a means of subversion, African nationalists like George Padmore and Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah must have influenced him. These African figures had an Africa-first-and the rest-later discourse not necessarily because they sought to set themselves apart and hegemonize. The point is to raise oneself to a position of bargaining vantage point in cultural negotiating with other nations in global politics.⁸ To nativize African creative expressivity (literature, art, sculpture, painting etc.) partakes of the game.

Speaking of indigenization by Ngugi, one must think not about use of African ideas with Europhone linguistics as can be testified in Chantal Zabus' question: How can a Europhone text incorporate in its linguistic and referential texture the languages autochthonous to West Africa?" (Zabus 4) The indigenization of African literature as envisaged and practiced by Ngugi goes way beyond writing in Europhone languages though in the past he did exactly the same thing. He writes in his African language.

This project begs for a series of questions including the following: should the artist take up the responsibility of teaching Africans and especially the very custodians of culture about culture? Who is the real beneficiary of this

⁷ Former Guinean president Sékou Touré is quoted by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 206.

⁸ The globalized space is in a weird stature: while the goal is to make a extremely minimal conflict space, some plot to impose their culture on the rest of the world for hegemonic reason. This is the threat of (Euro-)Americanization of the world. This is what Augie Fleras expresses here: "Monocultural multiculturalism: the "tendency to impose a monocultural uniformity because of the proclivity to 'pretend pluralism'" (Fleras 439).

intellectual undertaking? Does the recourse to culture efficiently disprove the paradigm or does it confirm it?

There should be no question about why Ngugi writes. In *Writers in Politics* he makes things clear if we believe that he remained constant in his anti-imperialistic effort with the pen. He submits that

A writer is trying to persuade us, to make us view not only a certain kind of reality, but also from a certain angle of vision often, though perhaps unconsciously, on behalf of a certain class, race, or nation (Ngugi, 1981: 8).

According to Ngugi, writers have a mission: guiding people's perspective for social change. The mission has to be goal-specific and oriented toward a sort of political morality. Two other thinkers on the socio-political duty of the intellectual are of the same opinion though at varying degrees. In fact, the French existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre writes that "Writer to the extent that his/her function demands freedom, cannot serve the dominant ideology; his works should serve liberation ideology" (Sartre 44).⁹

Palestinian-American comparatist, Edward Said, author of "The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals," is of the opinion that

The intellectual's role generally is to uncover and elucidate the contest, to challenge and defeat both an imposed silence and the normalized quiet of unseen power, wherever and whenever possible [...] The intellectual's role is first to present alternative narratives and other perspectives on history than those provided by the combatants on behalf of official memory and national identity-- who tend to work in terms of falsified unities, the manipulation of demonized or distorted representations of undesirable and/or excluded populations, and the propagation of heroic anthems sung in order to sweep all before them. The need now is for de-intoxicated, sober histories that make evident the multiplicity and complexity of history without allowing one to conclude that it

⁹ The original in French thus reads: "[...] L'écrivain, dans la mesure où par fonction il postule et exige la liberté, ne peut fournir d'idéologie à la classe dirigeante ou à n'importe quelle classe, si ce n'est pas une idéologie exigeant la libération des gens qui demeurent encore opprimés."

moves forward impersonally according only to laws determined either by the divine or by the powerful.¹⁰

In Ngugi's case, one would still want to know the targets of his endeavors. They are the disconnected Africans by way of their overemphasizing Western education or the masses of the people that are the true depository of the said culture? In my mind, the narrativization of African (popular) culture will sound paradoxical if it is targeting the people who are supposed to produce this culture. The rural peasants and the urban working class cannot be the addressees of his kind of writing because popular theatre and storytelling are already parts of their everyday life. It can be but political reasons that motivate the writer who gives in such undertakings. Yet, when Phanael Egejuru asks Ngugi about composition his audience he answers, that his writings are, first and foremost, intended to his people, his community with whom he shares the same cultural values and background. The question and answer go as follow:

Q: Who is your audience?

A: It is very difficult for any one writer to know who his audience is. But I take it that mine is the East African audience. I have, in fact, an African audience in mind, at least those who can read. But they are primarily a Kenyan audience or rather people who are in some ways affected by the kind of conditions and issues that I write about. (Egejuru 29)

This runs counter to the idea of literature insofar as one writes in order for his/her idea to get known as much as possible, and most importantly by those who do not know about the culture that is getting popularized. Besides, the idea of writing to such a restricted audience as in Africa –and specifically in “indigenous” languages– means that the readership has a written medium, which does not happen to be the case in most African nations. For instance, the medium that Ngugi uses now to write his fiction is his native Kikuyu. He utilizes alphabets inherited from the colonizer. The peasants and urban working class have to be educated, even though it is not clear what type of education

¹⁰ According to Cheikh anta Diop, African art has to be Africa-centered. He writes that “L’art doit toujours être l’art de son époque, c’est-à-dire au service des besoins de la société qui l’a engendré, [et] l’artiste africain qui écrira pour le seul plaisir de chanter la beauté des nuages, qui fera des descriptions par pure virtuosité, ou qui sculptera des formes pour elles-mêmes, vit en dehors des nécessités de son époque.” [Art has to always be the product of its own time. In fact, it should serve the society that made it possible. If the African artist/writer’s productions are meant for the celebration of beauty for its own sake, or to show how able they are, then he/she is simply not part of his/her time] (Diop 1979: 535).

Ngugi refers to. Importantly, they have to perform literacy training. Clearly, they have to know how to read and write Kikuyu. Yet, illiteracy is still a rampant in Kenyan and on the continent in general. This issue therefore needs to be addressed if the peasants and working classes are in truth the target of the writer. There is the need for a true readership in interaction with the type of writings not only targeting the people, but also which they use. The point is that so long as there is no script that identifies itself with a people as their property, it becomes seriously hard and wrong to pretend to address that people with a written medium.

As the questions go on during Ngugi's interview with Egejuru, the critic and writer gives an answer deserving much attention. This is so because it unravels the true rationale behind the idea of writing or literature in general, elitism. When asked about the inability of writing to get to people due to either illiteracy or economic limitations he answers:

That's true, but then writing itself is still a minority occupation by its nature. It is not a public art form, it's very *elitist* in itself. In Africa, to be able to read is still a minority preoccupation. I see it as part of a wider structural problem. *This is a problem that will continue even if one is writing in one's own mother tongue because the question of reading habits is controlled by the economic condition.* There is a need for structural change. For instance, if illiteracy is abolished, more people will have an opportunity for an education. In that case books would no longer be a privilege, but a right. [Italics mine] (Ibid 53)

The truth of the matter looks more like the idea of writing in African language is not necessarily motivated by the will to revitalize African cultures, but to politicize and bring the elite into the limelight.

The Western educated are ostensibly those who the writer addressees; these are the literate. As Ngugi says, illiteracy and dire economic conditions are not amenable to blossoming literature as utilitarian literacy: writing used African people (and the peasants) in order to change their living conditions and their perspectives on themselves and others. As he subverts the Us/Them dichotomy prevailing in literacy and the lack thereof among African people, Ngugi consciously or unconsciously builds up another one: elite/peasants. In fact, literature, as Ngugi himself admits, is elitist by nature. It is classist because it conveys the values and worldviews of a special class, and more especially the

bourgeois. If one remains in this logic, then the peasants and the urban working class in Africa already have their medium of social representation; it oracy – oral communication. Appropriating it and turning it into a written form appears suspicious. It is my opinion that there is a preliminary job to do in the regard of scripturalizing the message targeting a community that is in majority rural and highly dependent on orality as a medium of its relationality. One can recall Ngugi, in prelude to writing in his native Kikuyu language, that

As a writer who believe in the utilization of African ideas, African philosophy and African folklore and imagery to the fullest extent possible, [he] of the opinion the only way to use them effectively is to translate them almost literally from the African language native to the writer into whatever European language he is using as a medium of expression (Ngugi 1986: 8).¹¹

Here, it can be noticed that Ngugi has a project; it is an anti-imperialist and culturalist approach to literature serving a distinctively African readership with Africa as the ground of operation and applicability. He clearly sees a future for African literature:

The future of the African novel is then dependent on a willing writer (ready to invest time and talent in African languages); a willing translator (ready to invest time and talent in the art of translating from one African language into another); a willing publisher (ready to invest time and money) or a progressive state which would overhaul the current neo-colonial linguistic policies and tackle the national question in a democratic manner; and finally, and most important, a willing and widening readership. (Ngugi, 1986: 85)

Ngugi makes a very interesting point here though. Independence passes through using African languages in writing novels and other genres in Africa. However, there are some remaining questions to answer: How many non-African publishers will be willing to promote African languages with their money? Why should they proceed with such a financially ingrate undertaking?

¹¹ It is the same view that Chantal Zabus takes on the use of Europhone languages in African literatures: “If one posits that language, in its tropological and epistemic structure (as *langue* and *langage*), is an expression of culture, to make the foreign language one’s own entails using the European language as the conveyor of African culture. The West African writer of English or French expression has thus superposed two apparently irreconcilable sets of elements – foreign and indigenous – which *in vivo* have remained separate; he has ‘indigenized’ the foreign language, thereby redefining and subverting its foreignness” (Zabus 5).

Anyways, the ideal driving Ngugi seems to be same guiding the artistic understanding of major African cultural nationalists like Senegal's Cheikh Anta Diop. The African Egyptologist has this to say:

An African educated in any African language other than his own is less alienated, culturally speaking, than he is when educated in a European language which takes the place of his mother tongue. [...] European languages must not be considered diamonds displayed under a glass bell, dazzling us with their brilliance. Our attention must rather be fixed on their historical development. (Cheikh Anta Diop, 12)

Some writers, and mostly Francophone, have more mitigated view about this kind of project. To them, African writers erring on the side of realism in these day and age are those who combine, mix African languages with the colonial and foreign languages in use in their countries. This is an idea shared by a young Francophone African writer, Fatou Diome the author of *Préférence nationale* and *Ventre de l'Atlantique (Wolves of the Atlantic)*.¹² Diome claims that:

Let us be realistic! The multiplicity of languages in Africa does not allow for the use of one single language as a unifying factor. Far from being sold out to the colonizer, one should objectively acknowledge that, without French or English, African leaders at AU meetings would continue to communicate by means of tom-tom. [...] If I had written in Serere language, my works would not have been read by the Japanese. I am read because of the French language. I know: some Africans willing to be populist will tell me that I ought to write in African languages, not in the colonizer's language. This is stupid. When I use Voltaire's language, I do not have the impression of using the language of the French people. This language is now is as much theirs as it is African people's. French language is war booty. Booty is meant to be kept. (Dijon 70)¹³

¹² This is a translation by Helen Dickinson as published in "Wolves of the Atlantic." *World Literature Today* (Sept.- Oct. 2010) 38-39.

¹³ The original in French reads as follows: "Soyons réalistes, la profusion de langues africaines en Afrique nous empêche d'avoir une langue africaine capable de servir de trait d'union. Sans être vendu aux anciens colons, on peut objectivement reconnaître que, sans l'anglais et le français, les chefs d'Etats réunis au sein de l'Union africaine continueraient de communiquer avec un tam-tam. [...] Si j'avais écrit en sérère, je n'aurais jamais été lue au Japon. C'est l'écriture en français qui m'a donné accès au monde. Maintenant, un Africain qui veut faire du populisme me dira 'écrivez dans vos langues, pas dans la langue des Blancs.' C'est stupide. [...] Quand j'utilise la langue de Voltaire, je
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Views like Diome's predicate on the belief that the languages imposed on the African continent and the people are a full-fledged part of African history and dismissing this sounds somewhat unpractical and anti-historical. In fact, those who champion the radical return to the source are already contaminated by Western values and have to deal with them as such. Furthermore, opponents to borrowing from the West and others seem to realize that cultures and peoples are made of interexchange and borrowing. This is the act of culture Amilcar Cabral has been referring to.

Although one must understand Diome and like-minded people, their view is no less symptomatic of those who believe that the world should be scripted according to the desires of the powerful nations that subjugated others based on the belief that the second had no culture or civilization at all. It is warmongering to appropriate someone else's language, reconfigure it and call it one's own when one has a language that is natively one's own. In Diome's native Senegal, Wolof language is spoken by the majority and comports itself as the *lingua franca* of the country. It is scripturalized both by her peers seeking to indigenize literature and the average Senegalese who repudiate interacting in French or other languages than their native Wolof.

To refuse African languages the same status accorded to the so-called European languages wrongly believed to be superior by way of their ability to carry convoluted and sophisticated thought is simply a civilizational mistake. Each language on earth has its own complexity and kind of sophistication. Failure to acknowledge this is anti-historical and self-deprecating when coming from an African educated in Western schools. Such a person should have known better. George Steiner writes that "Each language is an 'epiphany' or articulate revelation of a specific historico-cultural landscape" (Steiner 76). Any language is a full language in its own rights.

Dealing with the second question as to whether it is possible to lead a battle on the premise of literature, it ought to be said that the very notion of literature becomes debatable when it is overemphasized here. This is not to claim that there was no language in Africa. Most certainly, there was and there is and will always be a heap of languages in Africa. This is sheer truism considering the multitude of languages spoken per country. The only West

n'ai pas le sentiment de l'emprunter aux Français. Cette langue nous appartient autant qu'à eux. [...] Le français est un butin de guerre. Un butin de guerre, on le garde."

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Africa's Côte d'Ivoire counts over sixty-three national languages. The specificity of all of them, and by extension most African languages, is that they are alive, they are spoken and this stands out as their only warrant of life safety. Maybe, weren't they spoken, they would have all gone extinct.

To those who believe in the so-called "verba volant, scripta manent," they ought to be reminded that this may be altogether true for European languages where the claim emerged, but it is not necessarily valid for African languages. The more an orality-bound African language stays in the confine of orality (which evolves live dialogue and plurilogue, and memory), the livelier in Africa will languages be until the end of times. To say that literature *stricto sensu* is consubstantial in Africa is an overemphasization of a reality that was in actuality different on the continent. Apart from, among the few African written languages, Ge'ez in Ethiopia which served for fixing records, or the Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, all know that Africans for the most part, used to rely on memory. The griotic experiences and functions testify to this reality in Africa. A literature that is not amenable to creating a formulation like "oral literature" should rather be the normal course of conceiving of literature in Africa. Yet, in an older debate that was declared obsolete by oralists, Walter Ong had considered oral literature/orature as being untenable. He states, "Thinking of oral tradition or a heritage of oral performance, genres and styles as 'oral literature' is rather like thinking of horses as automobiles without wheels" (Ong, 2002: 12). In some sense, the formulation sound redundant because one cannot be the same and the other at one and the same time. Either literature is about textualization of verbal practice or it is not an essence. When oral verbalization becomes written it ceases to be.

The problem was taken care of when African scholars of orality chose to recast the reality of oral communication in imaginative creativity for social purposes (art, literature, painting, sculpture, etc.) in its real domain of occurrence: oral tradition. Perhaps, if these elements of creativity (fables, legends, epic poetry) were reinforced by way of maintaining their orality, the debate would not arise in the first place. This is, in my opinion, the sense of Ong's lines when he states,

Since the oral mind is holistic, it adapts to the new context with a wording that presumably fits the new context, not the original context, a wording which we would regard as interpretative but which to the oral mind

represents in the new context essentially what the original statement represented in the original context. (Ong, 1988: 260)

It is imperative to come back to the idea of a possibly pristine African literature. A sacrosanct definition of African literature, i.e., a literature that does not suffer any external influence, cannot be given because the kind of literature in Africa is orality or orature as N’gugi and many others call it. In fact, literature is part the human’s cultural development. It is culture par excellence if not an act of culture. The introduction of the novel into the African literary scene is attributable to the contact of Africa with the West. The characteristically African genres are oral. These include legends, myths, fables, epics, among others, really sufficed to carry out of the job of education qua socialization, memorialization of great deeds of honor and valor. The novel, drama (known in its European forms in Africa), written poetry and all, are new and unAfrican without exaggeration.

Advocacy for the use of African languages in literature raises another multifaceted question, and not of the least, which is the sociological and cultural diversity of the African continent. Whose language should be used for literary purpose and what are criteria to be considered in Africanizing literature in Africa? Who will read a text in another people’s language while the dominant language is foreign and internalized for long years? The question of language in Africa is therefore a complicated and one. It is true that European languages have been instrumental in the subjugation of African people. However, they have been equally instrumental in the realization of national cohesion and communication among the various African people with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The ethnic heterogeneity of African nation-states makes it extremely difficult to use an indigenous language in present-day Africa. It is possible to explore the alternative, but this possibility will no less be contingent upon the homogeneity of indigenous cultures and languages, which is far from being the case.

Subversion of Western cultural domination in Africa can make sense if African writers use the foreign languages without regard to the conventions and rules that govern these languages. Perhaps, this is the sense of Diome’s reference to European languages in Africa as war foils. Besides, subversion must be recognized by the emphasis on orality, which is the form par excellence of African artistic expressions. This will work as a real subversion insofar as the African reader will empathize and identify with it by reason of the tone with

which he/s/he is familiar, whereas the Westerner will frown on it for the simple reason that his/she language is being distorted. Instances of this option already exist in African literature. Chinua Achebe, for example, explores Ibo culture and traditions in his novel *Things Fall Apart* by his abundant use of proverbs and words that he doesn't bother to insert in his text even if he explains them in the glossary. This way of writing is subversive in that the writer creates a sort of African English profoundly marked by his/her social realities and traditions, the way his/her people express themselves without regard to conventions and other governing principles of the adopted languages. The use of African traditional values and ways of life, and ways of doing things in the African novel makes it unmistakable. It cannot be taken for a Western one.

The final alternative to explore is giving the choice of using either the oral form of art, which more African than ever if one is to agree on the fact that the novel form is external to Africa or the written form as it is in use since long ago. Failing to do so, then African critics will have to clearly define what literature is in general and African literature in particular. Chidi Amuta's case is one in point. For instance, state that:

If literature *qua* literature is to play its sectoral role as a cultural force in the transformation of society, then the language question needs to be redefined in more pragmatic terms. The problem [...] is not that of language in the sense of verbal signification- that is, European vs. African- but rather that of strategies for cultural communication in a neo-colonial situation. In effect, language needs to be reconceptualized to mean the totality of means available for communicating a cultural form to the greatest majority in a manner that will achieve a clearly defined cognitive-ideological effect in the consciousness of the audience so defined. (Amuta 113)

The critique here lashes out at those who engage in fashionable writing over and against addressing practical issues and strategies converging into change in behavior and people's condition. The literature leading to this is one focusing on the content rather than the form/carrier of the message. Secondly, the type of literature needed is one that truly decolonizes and takes off the imperialist hooks holding the potentials of the people, and more importantly their leadership in post-colonial Africa.

One understands the exigencies of Ngugi's call. In a world of organized chaos –or the global(ized) village – where only selfish interests are served rather than collective good, any candidate for world concert of nations has to prepare for the race: be a fully constituted partner ready to give while taking from others who also give. This is actually what Ngugi rightly calls globalectics. The latter “combines the global and the dialectical to describe a mutually affecting dialogue, or multi-logue, in the phenomena of nature and nurture in a global space that's rapidly transcending that of the artificially bounded, as nation and region” (Ngugi, 2012: 8).

Lastly, African literature as defined by Ngugi is exclusionist and historically blind because it overlooks the cultural and historical complexities of African literature. There are literatures in Africa; Francophone literature is not synonymous with Anglophone or Lusophone literatures because they all have their specificities to calculate when speaking about a broader African literature. Besides, indigenizing all these literatures ill entail some Babelian hullabaloo whereby none will be ready to listen/read the other African. Linguistic multiplicity such as known in multi-linguistic post-colonial Africa means necessary translation. The task of translation would have been easy to handle if translation were happening at a low scale with umbrella or unifying languages.

CONCLUSION

It ought to be underlined that by its content, the literary revolution of Ngugi in *Decolonising the Mind* falls in the category of the subversive discourse, which is in vogue; finding a voice and challenging the West's monolithic conception of literature, and thought in general. Ngugi's book partakes in breaking the monologue that discourse seems to be, for it is concentrated in the hands of a very few, the West par excellence, and creates what Peter Hitchcock terms as “polyvocality” or many-voicedness in his *Dialogics of the Oppressed* (Hitchcock 6). Opportunities to create dialogue among cultures have to be reinforced. Thus, “[T]he dialogics of oppression are not the dire logics of dialogue: they are the concrete manifestations of resistance in the face of a will to deny dialogue” (Hitchcock 201).

Polyvocality is the outcome of the counter-hegemonic battle that the oppressed (the colonized, oppressed women) wage against the dominant culture in order to have their voice heard. In Ngugi's terms- in *Moving the Center*, another book of his, to have a voice requires that the center be moved from its

“assumed location in the West to a multiplicity of spheres in all the cultures of the world” (Ngugi, 1993, Preface xvi).

The language question, as Ngugi discusses it in Africa border, somehow, on the unpractical and the infeasible and if it does happen the way he proposes it, then African literature as we know it will be signing its death warrant. For literature in Africa, at least in the written form, is borrowed from the colonizer. The latter used it, along with other materials of foreign domination, to subjugate African people, and yet, the same tool has been appropriated by the colonized to have his voice heard. This voice could not easily be heard through the only medium of orality in currency in Africa of old. Rather, it was heard through the utilization of writing, the Western machine of domination par excellence.

The language question needs to be rethought, not in extremist and exclusionist terms, but through a concerted effort of all the sensibilities, i.e., those who are favorable to linguistic indigenization and those who still prize literature as inherited from the colonizer.

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