Re-membering the Dismembered

—— Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Language, Resistance, and Identity-Formation

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‘In which language do you dream?’: An Overview

Sometimes in the 1980s, the Department of Literature at the University of Nairobi erupted into an interesting but curious debate at the centre of which was the question: “In which language do you dream?” If your answer to this question was that you dreamt in any of the indigenous African languages, you were perceived to be ‘mentally decolonized’; if you dreamt in English, French or any other non-African language, you were deemed ‘mentally colonized’.

This anecdote, perhaps, provides a fitting start to this essay which analyses Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s commitment to and advocacy for writing in indigenous African languages. In this essay, I examine Ngũgĩ’s mission of resisting past and present foreign domination and of forging an authentic African identity through writing in Gikuyu.

This analysis is based on four of Ngũgĩ’s books of essays: Decolonising the Mind; Homecoming; Moving the Centre; and Writers in Politics. It is noted that, since he launched the movement in the late 1960s to rename the Department of English at the University of Nairobi, the Department of Literature, Ngũgĩ has continued to ceaselessly explore ways of defining the true identity of the African. Convinced that the African body and soul are dismembered, Ngũgĩ is committed to ‘re-membering’ these broken and scattered parts.
Which is why he ‘decolonized his mind’ by writing the following works in Gikuyu: *Caitaani Mutharaba-ini* (translated as *Devil on the Cross*), *Matigari Ma Njiruungi, Ngaahika Ndeenda, Maitu Njugira* (with Ngũgĩ wa Mirii), *Njamba Nene na Mbaathi i Mathagu*, and *Murogi wa Gagogo* (translated as *The Wizard of the Crow*), among others. It should also be mentioned that, in keeping with this vision, Ngũgĩ founded the Kamiriithu community theatre troupe that performed plays in the Gikuyu language.

I will explore this Ngũgĩan standpoint for its strengths and weaknesses. While drawing on the (post)colonial approach, I analyse Ngũgĩ’s use of language to shape both a dominated people’s resistance to asphyxiating foreign influence(s) and the formation of their distinct identity. The essay also seeks to answer the question: Can literature in indigenous languages communicate to a wider audience?

In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ declares:

In 1977, I published ‘Petals of Blood’ and said farewell to English language as a vehicle of my writing of plays, novels and short stories. All my subsequent writings have been written directly in Gikuyu language. ‘Decolonising the Mind’ is my farewell to English as a vehicle for any of my writings. From now on, it is Gikuyu and Kiswahili all the way. […] The call for the rediscovery and the resumption of our language is a call for a regenerative reconnection with […] the real language of humankind.¹

For Ngũgĩ to make such a bold (rather controversial) statement, there must have been certain experiences and observations that motivated him. One may recall that Ngũgĩ had published *Weep not Child, The River Between, A Grain of Wheat*, and *Petals of Blood*, as well as *Homecoming*, in English.

So, what are the factors that impelled Ngũgĩ to not only advocate but also take practical action by writing in an indigenous African language? He contends that

I am lamenting a neo-colonial situation which has meant the European bourgeoisie once again stealing our talents and geniuses as they have stolen our economies. One of Imperialism’s potent weapons is the cultural bomb to annihilate a people’s belief in their names, languages, their environment, their heritage, their unity and capacity. […] This makes them want to identify with other people’s languages rather than their own. […] Language and literature were taking us further and further away from ourselves to other selves, from our world to