

Ngugi Wa Thiongo and Chinua Achebe on the Politics of Language and Literature in Africa



Most African literature is oral. It includes stories, riddles, proverbs and sayings. In *Decolonizing the Mind*, Ngugi Wa Thiongo discusses the importance of oral literature to his childhood. He says: "I can vividly recall those evenings of storytelling around the fire side. It was mostly the grown-ups telling the children but everybody was interested and involved. We children would retell the stories the following day to other children who worked in the fields." The stories' main characters were usually animals. Ngugi said, "Hare being small, weak, but full of innovative wit, 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."

According to Ngugi's way of seeing, you can't study African literatures without studying the particular cultures and oral traditions from which Africans draw their plots, styles and metaphors.

So where does all of this leave us in a discussion of current African literature? It leads to an ongoing debate—what is African literature? Ngugi sees a structural problem, however. He says that in a given discussion over this subject we may see some of the following questions: "Are we talking of literature about Africa or the African experience? Was it literature written by Africans? What about a non-African who wrote about Africa? What if an African set his work in Greenland—does this qualify?" These are good questions, but, Ngugi explains, they were raised at the conference of African Writers of English Expression which included only English writing African authors because those that wrote in African languages were not invited.

This blindness to the indigenous voice of Africans is a direct result, according to Ngugi, of colonization. Ngugi explains that during colonization, missionaries and colonial administrators controlled publishing houses and the educational context of novels. This means that only texts with religious stories or carefully selected stories which would not tempt young Africans to question their own condition were propagated. Africans were controlled by forcing them to speak European languages—they attempted to teach children (future generations) that speaking English is good and that native languages are bad by using negative reinforcement. This is a process recognized by the great Martinique writer, Franz Fanon. Language was twisted into a mechanism that separated children from their own history because their own heritage was shared only at home, relying on orature in their native language. At school, they are told that the only way to advance is to memorize the textbook history in the colonizer's language. By removing their native language from their education they are separated from their history which is replaced by European history in European languages. This puts the lives of Africans more firmly in the control of the colonists.

Ngugi argues that colonization was not simply a process of physical force. Rather, "the bullet was the means of physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation." In Kenya, colonization propagated English as the language of education and as a result, orature in

Kenyan indigenous languages withered away. This was devastating to African literature because, as Ngugi writes, "language carries culture and culture carries (particularly through orature and literature) the entire body of values by which we perceive ourselves and our place in the world." Therefore, how can the African experience be expressed properly in another language?

The issue of which language should be used to compose a truly African contemporary literature is thus one replete with contradictions. Ngugi argues that writing in African languages is a necessary step toward cultural identity and independence from centuries of European exploitation. However, let us consider critic Susan Gallagher's account below wherein Nigerian author Chinua Achebe discusses why he chose not to write or translate *Things Fall Apart* into "Union Igbo." How does Achebe use the "weapon" of the English language to accomplish in *Things Fall Apart*?

"In response to the now infamous declaration of Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o that African writers should write in African languages, Achebe commented [in a talk at West Chester Univ.]: 'The British did not push language into my face while I was growing up.' He chose to learn English and eventually to write in English as a means of 'infiltrating the ranks of the enemy and destroying him from within.'....'It doesn't matter what language you write in, as long as what you write is good,' Achebe stated.... Yet Achebe fully recognizes that English is symbolically and politically connected with the despoiler of traditional culture with intolerance and bigotry. 'Language is a weapon, and we use it,' he argued. 'There's no point in fighting a language'" (qtd. in Gallagher).

"When someone asked if *Things Fall Apart* had ever been translated into Igbo, Achebe's mother tongue, he shook his head and explained that Igbo exists in numerous dialects, differing from village to village. Formal, standardized, written Igbo -- like many other African languages -- came into being as a result of the Christian missionaries' desire to translate the Bible into indigenous tongues. Unfortunately, when the Christian Missionary Society tackled Igbo, they brought together six Igbo converts, each from a different location, each speaking a different dialect." The resulting 'Union Igbo' bore little relationship to any of the six dialects--"a strange hodge-podge with no linguistic elegance, natural rhythm or oral authenticity"--yet the missionaries authorized it as the official written form of the Igbo languages. Achebe would not consent to have his novel translated into this "linguistic travesty" Union Igbo. "Consequently, one of the world's great novels, which have been translated into more than 30 languages, is unable to appear in the language of the very culture that it celebrates and mourns. This irony seems an apt symbol for the complex ways Western Christianity has both blessed and marred the cultures of Africa" (Gallagher).

Achebe rejects the Western notion of art for its own sake in essays he has published (e.g. in the collections *Morning Yet on Creation Day* and *Hopes and Impediments*). Instead he embraces the conception of art at the heart of African oral traditions and values: "art is, and always was, at the service of man," he writes. "Our ancestors created their myths and told their stories with a human purpose;" hence, "any good story, any good novel, should have a message, should have a purpose."

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Gallagher, Susan VanZanten. "Linguistic Power: Encounter with Chinua Achebe." *The Christian Century* 12 March 1997, 260.

Ngugi wa Thiongo, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, 1986.

- Taken from:

<http://www.glpinc.org/Classroom%20Activities/Kenya%20Articles/Ngugi%20Wa%20Thiong%207o-On%20Language%20and%20Culture.htm>