

**Ngugi's African Language in *Decolonising the Mind***

A. Syed Rehanas & Dr. P. Mythily

---



Ngugi Wa Thiong'o

Courtesy: <https://abagond.wordpress.com/2011/12/28/ngugi-wa-thiongo-the-language-of-african-literature/>

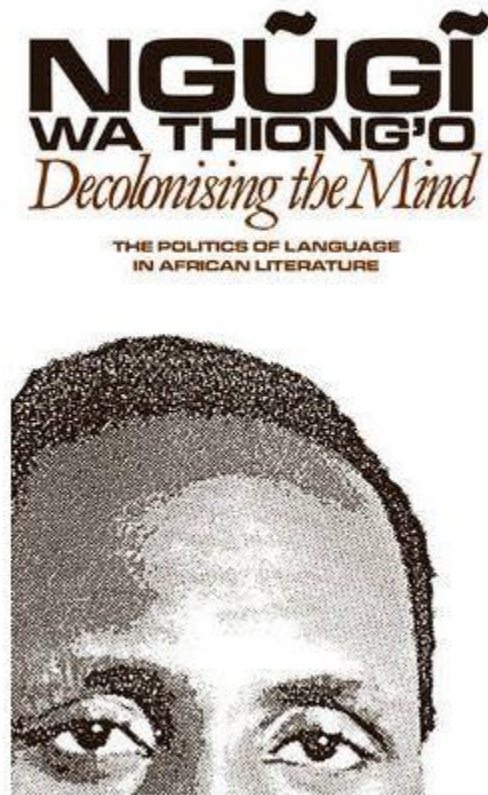
**Abstract**

Language as communication and as culture is a products of each other. Communication creates culture: culture is a means of communication. In this context, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o makes the call to African writers to begin writing literature in their own languages, and to make sure that literature is connected to their people's revolutionary struggles for liberation from their (neo) colonial contexts.

**Keywords:** Amalgam, language and culture, African language, language and communication, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o

***Decolonising the Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature***

*Decolonising the Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature* is written by Kenyan novelist and post-colonial theorist Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o. It is a collection of non-fiction essays about language and its constructive role in national culture, history, and identity. The book, which advocates linguistic decolonization, is one of Ngũgĩ's best-known and most-cited non-fiction publications, helping to cement him as a preeminent voice, theorizing the "language debate" in post-colonial studies.



Ngũgĩ describes the book as "a summary of some of the issues in which I have been passionately involved for the last twenty years of my practice in fiction, theatre, criticism, and in teaching of literature..."

## **Four Essays**

*Decolonising the Mind* is split into four essays: "The Language of African Literature," "The Language of African Theatre," "The Language of African Fiction," and "The Quest for Relevance." Several of the book's chapters originated as lectures.

Apparently this format gave Ngũgĩ "the chance to pull together in a connected and coherent form the main issues on the language question in literature.... The book offers a distinctly anti-imperialist perspective on the "continuing debate...about the destiny of Africa" and language's role in both combatting and perpetrating imperialism and the conditions of neocolonialism in African nations. The book is also Ngũgĩ's "farewell to English," and it addresses the "language problem" for African authors. Ngũgĩ focuses on questions about the African writer's linguistic medium (should one write in one's indigenous language, or a hegemonic language like French or English?), the writer's intended audience, and the writer's purpose in writing.

## **Multi-dimensional Focus on a Variety of Features**

*Decolonising the Mind* is a meld of autobiography, post-colonial theory, pedagogy, African history, and literary criticism. Ngũgĩ dedicated *Decolonising the Mind* "to all those who write in African languages, and to all those who over the years have maintained the dignity of the literature, culture, philosophy, and other treasures carried by African languages."

## **Resistance to the Use of Native Tongues**

Many post-colonial scholars and writers detail the colonial practice of imposing the colonizer's own native languages onto the peoples they colonized, even forbidding the use of the colonized people's native tongue. They examine this practice as part of the systematic oppression of imperialism in neocolonial societies, and they investigate its ramifications on the psychological, physical, and cultural well-being of colonized peoples. Within the context of post-colonial studies, language is a weapon and a site of intense neocolonial conflict.

Some post-colonial theorists advocate for, if not a complete abandonment of the English language, at least a conscious and pronounced preference for indigenous languages as a literary or scholarly medium. Ngũgĩ sits firmly on this side of the debate. Others, however (Salman Rushdie, for example), see the practicality of utilizing hegemonic languages like English and French as too immediate to permit the abandonment of such languages. On this side of the argument, writers and activists see using the colonist languages as a practical alternative, which they can employ to improve conditions of colonized peoples. For example, a colonist language can be used both to enhance international communication (e.g. people living in Djibouti, Cameroon, Morocco, Haiti, Cambodia, and France can all speak to one another in French). This side also views the subversive potential of the appropriation of a colonist language by an indigenous people; it is seen as a “counter to a colonial past through de-forming a 'standard' European tongue and re-forming it in new literary forms.”

### **Renouncing Writing in English**

Ngũgĩ's contribution to the language debate is widely known and studied, and he has theorized on the topic extensively. He passionately advocates for the overall development of African languages and their use in African literatures—in 1992 he founded the Gikuyu-language journal *Mũtĩri*, and continues to edit it—and he famously renounced writing in English. First, he committed to abandoning English in his fiction writing, and in a note on *Decolonising the Mind*, he bids a final "farewell" to English in all of his writings.

### **Products of Each Other**

Language as communication and as culture are then products of each other. Communication creates culture: culture is a means of communication. Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through oration and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture, at their places politics and at the social production of wealth, at their entire relationship to nature and to other beings. Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world —*Decolonising the Mind* (16)

## Human Consciousness

Communication between human beings propels the evolution of a culture, he argues, but language also carries the histories, values, and aesthetics of a culture along with it. As he puts it, "Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history. Culture is almost indistinguishable from the language that makes possible its genesis, growth, banking, articulation, and indeed its transmission from one generation to the next". (15)

Furthermore, in *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ sees language, rather than history or culture, as the enabling condition of human consciousness: "The choice of language and the use of language is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to the entire universe. Hence language has always been at the heart of the two contending social forces in the Africa of the twentieth century". (4)

Ngugi describes language as the carrier of culture. Written, spoken, and "real life" or body-language is all used in harmony to define different cultures. Language conveys a culture's standards and values, something that can't be picked up by someone who doesn't understand the language. When English was imposed into Ngugi's culture, textbooks and teachings made his culture look inferior. The use of language can be used to convey complex messages, as in with the stories told, or used to control, as seen with colonization. Language is an extremely powerful tool that defines the human race, and its use can create amazing literature/media, or can be used to manipulate and control.

---

## References

1. Language Association of America. ISBN 978-1-60329-113-2.
2. Brown, D. A. Maughn (1987). "Decolonising the Mind by NgũgĩwaThiong'o". *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*. 20 (4): 726–8. doi:10.2307/219661.
3. Lovesey (2000). NgũgĩwaThiong'o. p. 109.
4. Booth, James (April 1988). "Decolonising the Mind by NgũgĩwaThiong'o; Wole Soyinka by James Gibbs – Review". *African Affairs*. 87 (347): 292–3.
5. Gikandi, Simon (2000). NgũgĩwaThiong'o. p. 274.

6. Spivak, Gayatri (2012). "NgugiwaThiong'o: In Praise of a Friend". In Lovesey. Approaches to Teaching the Works of NgugiwaThiong'o.
7. NgugiwaThiong'o (1993). Moving the Centre. ISBN 978-0-435-08079-2.
8. Sicherman, ol (1990). NgugiwaThiong'o: The Making of a Rebel.

---

A.Syed Rehanas, M.A., M.Phil., Research Scholar  
Government Arts College (Autonomous)  
Salem-636007  
Tamil Nadu  
India  
[zasr1979@gmail.com](mailto:zasr1979@gmail.com)

Dr. P. Mythily., M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of English  
Government Arts College (Autonomous)  
Salem-636007  
Tamil Nadu  
India  
[mythusadha@gmail.com](mailto:mythusadha@gmail.com)