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## Language, Narrative and Cultural Identity in “Decolonising the Mind” and “The Novelist as Teacher”

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### Abstract

**Aims:** *This paper critically analyses the ideas presented in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Decolonising the Mind and Chinua Achebe's The Novelist as Teacher, which focuses on how both writers explore language and cultural identity to colonial influence. This clearly explains how colonial language policies affected African identity and how literature became a tool for the writers to reclaim cultural pride.*

**Methodology and Approaches:** *This study follows close reading of both essays, examining themes such as language, cultural preservation and resistance. It also includes comparative literary perspectives to understand how Achebe and Ngugi connect literature and language with cultural restoration and social responsibility.*

**Outcomes:** *This critical analysis deepens the understanding of the role of language and culture in shaping African identity during the postcolonial period. It emphasis on how reclaiming one's native language contributes to psychological liberation and cultural continuity.*

**Conclusion and Suggestions:** *The study concludes that both Ngugi and Achebe view literature and language as a powerful tool for cultural resistance. While Ngugi focuses on linguistic decolonisation, Achebe uses the coloniser's language to correct historical misrepresentations. Future researchers may extend their research on how modern African writers continue resisting cultural erasure through literature, films, media, and educational reforms.*

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After World War II, literature became a powerful tool of resistance, as people had a chance to express what they went through in a truly authentic way. Writers articulated the African experience from an insider's perspective. This was not merely an aesthetic attempt but was a political and cultural mission aimed at restoring dignity and identity to African societies. By using the colonial language of English, Achebe strategically reached a global audience while infusing African idioms and rhythms into his works. His work inspired a generation of writers to use literature as a platform for cultural reclamation and historical correction. He admits, though, that Africans have their own respective sins, the most significant being their "acceptance of racial inferiority (Achebe 43)."

In East African literature, Ngugi wa Thiong'o initially used English for writing, but later deliberately chose Gikuyu for linguistic decolonisation. In "*Decolonising the Mind*", Ngugi asserts that language is not merely a means of communication, but it is something deeply connected to our cultural roots. The imposition of English in African schools was a deliberate strategy to alienate Africans from their cultural and traditional identity. Colonial education forced children to think and dream in a foreign language. One of the strongest tools for this psychological control was the education system, which mandated English as the sole legitimate language of instruction.

Ngugi narrated a haunting childhood memory from his school days, in which children were forbidden to speak in their mother tongue, as it was deemed unfit for education and the modern world. If anyone uses vernacular language in the school, the child is forced to wear a 'shame badge'. This badge is passed on to the next student who uses their mother tongue. Ultimately, the final wearer was beaten or humiliated in public. That moment carved a deep scar in Ngugi's heart, and he realised that colonisation was not only about land but also includes mind, language and culture. The students were taught to feel ashamed of speaking their native Gikuyu language, as it was branded as primitive and backward. This process created a split identity, a psychological divide between home culture and school culture.

Ngugi argues that true cultural liberation requires writing in one's own mother tongue, as it carries the nuances of African thought and philosophy. This linguistic domination was a deliberate strategy to control the mind, making

Africans view their own traditions and values as inferior and view English as superior to all. The system made a trademark that English is the language of intellectualism and modernity. Decolonisation of the mind requires an active rejection of colonial mentalities, as they are systematically embedded in our education systems, literature, and media from the colonial period to the present day. In short, decolonising the mind involves embracing native languages and cultural practices that were suppressed during colonial rule. He advocates for writing in indigenous languages to restore cultural identity and traditional values.

His decision to choose Gikuyu over English was therefore not just literary but an act of cultural reclamation, and he believed that true decolonisation starts with language. Reclamation of language is the central theme in his work. He insists on reinforcing the false notion that the colonised are intellectually inferior. An intellectual and cultural shift is more needed than political movements. Ngũgĩ believes that cultural identity can only be restored if Africans reconnect with their linguistic heritage. Literature written in African languages preserves oral traditions and ways of thinking that are lost when translated into European languages. African language literature enables direct communication with communities that have been historically excluded from the literary sphere. He emphasises that reclaiming one's language is essential to reclaiming selfhood. When Africans tell their own stories in their own languages, they resist cultural erasure. African literature, therefore, serves as a vehicle for cultural memory and pride.

In "The Novelist as a Teacher" by Chinua Achebe, the author explores the ethical dimension of writing by stating that novelists have the power to influence thought, shape perceptions, and challenge societal norms. In Western literature, African characters were stereotyped as primitive, violent, or helpless, reducing rich cultures to caricatures. This perpetuated racial prejudice and reinforced colonial ideologies." He confesses that not only others need to be blamed; African people, too, would have to "find out where they went wrong (Achebe 43)." This made him write novels that portrayed African societies with complexity, providing a counter-narrative that would educate both African and global readers. Through words, novelists convey social lessons, cultural values, and moral dilemmas. Achebe justifies this point by discussing *Things Fall Apart*, his own

novel. Here, readers learn about the consequences of societal norms and gain insight into the richness of Igbo culture before colonial disruption, as Fiction can be a mode of moral and cultural education that has the power to shape people. It is necessary to engage them with the characters' experiences.

Both writers consider literature as a site of resistance against cultural erasure resulting from colonialism. Ngugi views language as an opportunity to retrieve identity, while Achebe uses narrative as a weapon to rectify historical misrepresentation. Their works demonstrate that cultural identity is not static or safe, but must be actively reclaimed. According to African writers, literature must act as a mirror that allows Africans to see themselves in it, rather than distorted images and characters invented by colonial ideology, which would fail to provide clarity on African traditions and experiences.

Therefore, literature in postcolonial Africa was not merely an art but was considered a political and cultural plan. Literature enabled many societies to recover from the psychological displacement caused by imperialism as it helped to assert their place in the global narrative. Achebe and Ngugi utilised indigenous values in conjunction with modern literary forms, transforming literature into a dynamic tool for cultural affirmation and resistance, ensuring that African identity remained vibrant and self-defined. Ngugi, who witnessed the Mau Mau uprising in his adulthood, which is considered a major nationalist struggle for independence, was convinced that colonialism controlled people not only through violence but also controlled their culture, language, and tradition. Ngugi began teaching the realities of African life and the challenges they face to younger minds when he became a teacher. He wrote groundbreaking novels in English, such as "Weep Not, Child" and "A Grain of Wheat," which were globally recognised and appreciated. Later, he began to wonder whether writing in English truly served the cause of African liberation. Then slowly he recollected that language carries culture; therefore, the dominance of European languages in African literature eventually led to the supremacy of European cultures. He then chose to start writing in Gikuyu, which marked a radical moment in African literary history.

According to Thiong'o and Achebe, writing was not simply considered as an art but a cultural and political way of resistance. In societies that are recovering

from colonisation, literature is given a revolutionary role. The writer must unmask oppression and inspire resistance. His concept of the ‘decolonizing the mind’ extends the writer’s responsibility, by writing in Gikuyu, Ngugi demonstrates the writer’s role in empowering communities to value their own cultures. The writer’s social responsibility is to fight for freedom not only national but also linguistic, cultural, and psychological freedom. Ngũgĩ’s ultimate goal is the recovery of African pride and the liberation of African minds. He argues that colonialism succeeded not only through physical domination but through a “cultural bomb” that destroyed self-belief and glorified foreign values. Psychological freedom, in his view, occurs when Africans no longer compare themselves with European standards. It occurs when African children learn in their own languages and take pride in them. It occurs when African cultures are treated as sources of strength rather than obstacles to progress.

In “The Novelist as Teacher”, Achebe declared that an African writer’s duty is to help their society regain belief in itself. Colonial narratives had portrayed Africa as a cultural void, and Achebe presented the authentic African realities with his works. Achebe argues that novelists have a big responsibility to change the future of their society. Nigeria was under British colonial rule for decades: the colonial education system privileged English and marginalised African histories and cultures. Achebe grew up in this environment, exposed to both Igbo traditions and British schooling. He found that in European novels, Africans are represented as barbaric, childlike, or invisible. Achebe became a national, and later, an international figure representing African literature with his book, *Things Fall Apart*. Ngugi was persistent in using the native language by rejecting English, but Achebe used the same colonial language to express the regional society and its conflicts.

Achebe’s literary success reached worldwide, prompting publishers to invest in his works. Although the English language has inflicted conflicts among African societies, Achebe strategically used English in his works to reclaim African identity and address the cultural conflicts caused by colonisers. Society that he wrote about, he wrote about the actual realities of his region, unlike the distorted images created by Europeans. He intended to use Literature as a tool to restore cultural values and to foster pride.

Both Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Chinua Achebe clearly state that a writer has a moral duty to provide proper insights to society. In most European writings, we can find false statements about Africans. Therefore, it is the duty of African writers to counter these falsehoods, which will lead people towards the truth and encourage unity in diverse societies. Achebe reclaimed identity without rejecting tools inherited from colonialism. Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Chinua Achebe differ in their approaches, especially when it comes to language. Still, they view literature as an essential tool for Africa's cultural, historical, and psychological liberation. Ngugi emphasises linguistic decolonisation, whereas Achebe focuses on uncovering the truth of Africans through Literature. Together, their works elucidate the ongoing journey toward reclaiming African identity and achieving psychological freedom.

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