

## RECONSTRUCTING IDENTITY THROUGH LANGUAGE: A STUDY OF NGUGI WA THIONG'O REJECTION OF ENGLISH AND THE IMPACT ON POSTCOLONIAL IDENTITY

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### ABSTRACT

*Ngũgĩ's philosophy, in Decolonising the Mind, critiques colonial and neo-colonial systems and puts emphasis on language as a repository of culture, history, and identity. Writing in Gikuyu, Ngũgĩ rips up the colonial language hierarchy and rediscovers his native languages as the pride and authentic voice of the culture. He opposes the dominant voice of English and argues about cultural alienation and how native narratives could be reclaimed. This paper examines the role of language in the reconstruction of postcolonial identity through concentrating on Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's rejection of English and his promotion of indigenous languages as tools of cultural resistance and liberation. It discusses Ngũgĩ's reasons and the broad implications of linguistic decolonization for African literature and identity reconstruction. It deals with how indigenous language restoration serves as an antidote to the erasure of culture, asserts self-determination, and rejects neo-colonialism. It also addresses the global implications of Ngũgĩ's critique in linguistic diversity preservation amid globalization and postcolonial bilingual education. It contributes to the discourse on language, power, and cultural sovereignty, inasmuch as it centers Ngũgĩ's perspectives and continues to encourage efforts toward maximizing indigenous languages in literature and society.*

**Keywords:** Identity, Post-Colonial, Language, Ngũgĩ and Africa.

### Introduction

Postcolonial theory focuses on the cultural, political, and social effects of colonialism and its aftermath. It seeks to reconstruct identity by reclaiming indigenous identities eroded or suppressed during colonial rule. Thinkers such as Fanon, Said, and Bhabha give insight into hybridity, resistance, and cultural sovereignty. Identity is a core concern, as Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (1989) note, focusing on themes of place and displacement (Dizayi, 2019). Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o argued that language is the fulcrum of cultural imperialism, whereby the colonial language estranges an individual from their culture. This he postulates, one should retrieve indigenous languages as a means to reclaim cultural sovereignty (Panwar, 2024).

Homi Bhabha's idea of hybridity addresses the question of identity formation in postcolonial contexts. He imagines hybridity as a form of resistance where colonized subjects negotiate their identities between conflicting forces (Khan et al., 2024). Edward Said writes about the alienation of colonized subjects between indigenous and imposed identities (Dizayi, 2015). It is commonly portrayed in postcolonial literature because it shows the psychological after-effects of colonialism. Reason why postcolonial theory is relevant: it depicts how individuals and their communities redefine identities as a way of response to both historical and modern-day domination. The same type of dynamics is proven through scholarly works on postcolonial literature (Türkmen, 2003).

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Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o is an icon in the postcolonial context. He talks of language, culture, and identity. He pleads for a decolonized mind and the use of local languages as instruments to combat cultural imperialism. In *Gikuyu*, Ngũgĩ recovers cultural sovereignty and repudiates colonial hegemonies (Goleš, 2020). Books like *Decolonising the Mind* and *Petals of Blood* criticize how colonization upsets the native structures and reveal neo-colonial imbalances in post-independence communities (Wang & Law, 2017). Ngũgĩ's interest in linguistic and cultural self-determination inspires further discussions on identity and resistance in postcolonial studies.

Postcolonial theory critically analyzes the long-term legacy of colonial rule on societies and focuses on the cultural, political, and economic changes. Arising in the 1960s, it underlines the need for post-colonized peoples to retake their histories and to affirm their identities (Ashcroft et al., 2007). Essentially, the postcolonial discourse concerns itself with the implications of colonialism, decolonization, and identity reconstruction. Colonization did not only impose foreign governance but also marginalized indigenous traditions, erasing native cultural systems and instituting hierarchies where colonial languages and ideologies dominated. Decolonization, therefore, is not only political emancipation; it demands cultural and intellectual sovereignty to restore lost identities (Makoni et al., 2023).

The crucial component involved in this is language, used as a form of oppression, as well as resistance. Establishing hegemony structures by means of colonial English and other European languages has degraded indigenous languages as inferior to theirs and, accordingly, native self-perception decreased with cultural values (Prabavathy et al., 2024; Shamma, 2009). Even within postcolonial societies, colonial languages continue to preserve neo-colonial inequalities; they continue to facilitate or legitimize the same power imbalances decolonization tries to dissolve (Ongolo & Krott, 2023). According to scholars, rediscovery and promotion of indigenous languages are part of the process of regaining cultural sovereignty and opposition against the remnants of colonial dominance.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, a prominent postcolonial theorist, emphasizes how language is important in liberation movements. *Decolonising the Mind* implores that colonial languages estrange people from their own heritage, thus bringing about cultural amnesia. He faults neo-colonial systems saying "The people were slowly dying under the weight of the colonial system, and after independence, the new rulers merely inherited the language and practices of the colonizers. The tools of oppression remained unchanged, and in many cases, they were even more effective." (Thiong'o, 1977). To Ngũgĩ, language is more than a means of communication-it stands for memory, culture, and identity. His works, such as *Petals of Blood* and *Weep Not, Child*, advocate for the inclusion of indigenous languages in education and governance as a form of true decolonization (Sibanda, 2021; Adam, 2019). Through linguistic reclamation, postcolonial societies can stake their claims on cultural and intellectual independence, shaping a future unencumbered by colonial heritage.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's linguistic journey deep into his personal experience lies in the colonial subjugation in Kenya and the resistance against cultural erasure. His rejection of English as a medium of expression was not merely a literary choice but a profound political statement: a defiant stand against linguistic imperialism. His education in colonial Kenya exposed him to a system where English was the dominant medium, reinforcing a hierarchy that equated intelligence and social mobility with fluency in the colonizer's language. This structure alienated him from his cultural roots, prompting a radical shift toward writing in his native Gikuyu, which was a symbolic gesture of both resistance and identity reclamation.

Ngũgĩ's musings in *Petals of Blood* (1977) epitomize the profound heritage of colonialism: "The past is not dead. It is not even past. It is alive and well. It is the past that controls the present. It is the past that determines what the present can be. It is the past that teaches the present how to look at itself" (Thiong'o, 1977, p. 245). These words highlight the deep rooting of historical narratives in shaping contemporary realities. For Ngũgĩ, the dominance of English in African societies is not just a relic of the past but an ongoing mechanism of cultural control that dictates self-perception and national identity.

In his formative years, Ngũgĩ realized the systemic bias that validated his intellect through an English-centric education while devaluing his indigenous linguistic heritage. His eventual decision to write in Gikuyu was an act of defiance and decolonization. He expressed this position in *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), stating, "The decision to write in my mother tongue, Gikuyu, rather than English was a political one. It was an act of resistance against colonial domination, an assertion of cultural independence and autonomy" (Thiong'o, 1986, p. 16). This declaration asserts that language is not only a means of communication but rather a carrier of culture, history, and identity.

By switching to Gikuyu, Ngũgĩ aimed to regain dignity for African languages and literature by challenging the forced supremacy of European tongues. He famously compared English to a "cultural

bomb" that erases pre-colonial traditions, disconnecting people from their indigenous epistemologies (Margulis, 1996). This metaphor aptly describes the destructive power of linguistic imperialism: indigenous knowledge systems and oral traditions are pushed to the periphery in favor of Western narratives.

Ngũgĩ's theoretical framework in *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) critiques colonial language policies that disrupt native self-perception and cultural cohesion. He asserts that reclaiming indigenous languages is crucial for self-determination, as it fosters authentic storytelling rooted in lived experiences (Andersen, 2019). Scholars like Al Farabi (2015) reinforce this perspective, emphasizing that writing in native languages fortifies cultural resilience and resists psychological colonization.

Ngũgĩ's linguistic rebellion is an inspiration that endures, showing how language revitalization can be a powerful tool for cultural independence. He understood that postcolonial societies must prioritize indigenous languages to safeguard their histories, maintain oral traditions, and counteract the homogenizing forces of globalization (Mills, 2024). His work continues to influence cultural policies and educational reforms, encouraging societies to embrace linguistic diversity as a means of reclaiming their heritage (Inani, 2018).

Finally, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's rejection of English testifies to the power of language in the construction of identity, memory, and resistance. Through writing in Gikuyu, he not only reaffirmed his cultural roots but also illuminated a path for future generations to reclaim their narratives. As he so eloquently puts it, "Language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture.". The domination of the language of the colonized by the languages of the colonizers was the condition for the domination of the colonized' mental universe" (Thiong'o, 1986, p. 13). Such a view sets out the eternal struggle for linguistic and cultural independence in postcolonial Africa and beyond.

Language is the site of postcolonial identity formation, bearing both the wounds of colonial oppression and the pathways of modern progress. English is one such language that occupies a paradoxical position; it is a relic of imperial dominance that once marginalized indigenous tongues and enforced cultural subjugation (Zeng & Yang, 2024). During colonialism, the native tongues were degraded to unsophisticated ones that slowly led to the loss and devaluation of the native culture (Ashcroft, 2015). Through this imposition of English as a language for government, education, and social ascension, deep inferiority sentiments were inculcated into the native tongue users. However, in modern days, the language has become a tool of modernization, providing access to the global market, political participation, and economic development (Zeng & Yang, 2024). This dualism creates a dilemma for postcolonial societies, which must balance the practicality of English with the pressing need to preserve their indigenous linguistic and cultural heritage.

Central to reconstructing postcolonial identities is the reclaiming of native languages, for these languages encompass rich cultural histories, philosophical frameworks, and collective worldviews (McCarty et al., 2018). The colonial suppression of indigenous languages placed many at risk of extinction, with several on the cusp of disappearing (Bigelow & Engman, 2020). Revival and promotion of these languages are an attempt to express greater resistance to cultural imperialism and ways of retrieving the autonomy and dignity (Guerrettaz & Engman, 2023). Revival is evident in the literary efforts of authors such as Chinua Achebe, who integrated Igbo phrases and proverbs into *Things Fall Apart* to contradict the view that English was the only medium of articulation for African identity (Relli, 2024). Similarly, Gabriel García Márquez's commitment to writing in Spanish breathes a Latin American cultural uniqueness even as it connects with the global literary traditions (Chandra 2021).

Beyond literature, the "reintroduction of indigenous languages is key to re-engaging students with their own cultures and, ultimately ensuring that these cultures survive for generations to come" (Leonard, 2017). Language becomes the impetus through which tradition, values, and philosophy are passed, and this guarantees cultural continuity (Maheshwari, 2023). A native tongue's marginalization or abolition may jeopardize an entire knowledge system, isolating a community from its historical and intellectual past. Revitalizing indigenous languages helps postcolonial societies overcome their colonial past, reconstruct their narratives, and reclaim their own identities (Relli, 2024).

Moreover, in the realm of literature and academics, a similar element of how native tongues are included disrupts the hegemony of colonial languages, thus presenting new space for cultural expression. Now, bilingual and multilingual education ensures not just the survival of native languages but also instills the pride that comes with them among the younger generations, as underscored by Maheshwari in 2023. Their presence in public life and administrative systems strengthens cultural resilience and a collective

identity. In this way, language goes beyond the level of communication as a tool. It evolves as a symbol of resistance and revival, allowing postcolonial societies to redefine themselves on their own terms (Wang & Bai, 2024). This can help communities, by embracing their linguistic heritage, construct narratives that honor their histories and articulate their aspirations, reshaping national identities in ways that transcend the lingering shadows of colonial rule (Margulis & Nowakoski, 2018).

His work as a powerful critique of language politics in colonized and postcolonial Africa is deeply embedded in themes on identity, oppression, and resistance. Ngũgĩ's novel *Weep Not, Child* (1964) poignantly captures the struggles of the colonized within Kenya, specially in terms of cultural alienation. Njoroge, the protagonist, becomes worried about his submissive status in the colonial community. He is dismayed at why black people stay poor and subservient: "He had often wondered why they, the black people, were the ones to be poor and to be always ruled. Were they of a different make? Or was it true what he had heard that long ago the country had belonged to black people?" (Thiong'o, 1964, p. 45). This inner turmoil is a microcosm of the larger crisis in colonial identity, where language is at once a means for social mobility and alienation (Arjona et al., 2017). For Njoroge, it means that the more he commands the English language, the further he drifts from his Gikuyu heritage and the more he clashes with his father, who is a prickly advocate of indigenous culture. Ngũgĩ thus rips into the colonial system that purposely rids a native culture. He shows how language works as a tool of control and cultural dislocation (Parthasarathi, 2022).

In *Petals of Blood* (1977), Ngũgĩ extends his criticism to post-independence Kenya, showing how the ruling elite continue to perpetuate colonial structures of power through language. The idealistic promise of a new Kenya rings hollow when examined against the realities of continued exploitation: "We are going to have a new Kenya, a Kenya of milk and honey," he had said, pointing at the sky. "Up there in the heavens, we shall build new economic and political structures, new relationships between men and men. Gone are the days of cringing servility" (Thiong'o, 1977, p. 12). This liberationist rhetoric, though, remains entrenched within a dominant linguistic paradigm-English-being used as the tongue of power and sustaining social stratifications as well as exacerbating cultural alienation (Ordu, 2022). Ngũgĩ's story is one of betrayal, revealing how the postcolonial elite abandon revolutionary ideals as language continues to entrench neo-colonial oppression rather than act as an instrument of liberation (Olotola, 2023). Linguistic alienation in Ngũgĩ's work reveals a necessity of genuine re-appropriation of identity through native voice.

*Decolonising the Mind*, by Ngũgĩ, a book written in 1986, states in the very words his outright refusal to use English as a weapon of psychological control. He claims that language is not just a tool for communication but a vehicle for cultural self-definition: "The domination of a people's language by the languages of the colonizing nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonized. To control a people's culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others" (Thiong'o, 1986, p. 16). This argument throws emphasis on the ways in which colonization systematically eliminated the native language for the deculturalization process. This brought forth inferiority in the colonized (Rani, 2022). In Ngũgĩ, recuperation of mother tongues becomes resistance and an affirmation of the self, thus belonging to the larger decolonial process (Thiong'o, 1986).

Through his novel *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), language acts as a signifier for resistance. The fight for Kenyan independence is shown not only as a political but as a cultural and linguistic fight to regain one's heritage: "The struggle of the people of Kenya was not just against the British; it was against a system that had transformed us into creatures who could no longer speak the language of our ancestors. The language of the oppressor was now our language, and in it, we had lost our true selves" (Thiong'o, 1967, p. 114). This sentiment reverberates across his works, where colonial languages are shown to displace indigenous ones, thereby severing cultural continuity and instilling a fractured identity.

Ngũgĩ, in *The Devil on the Cross* (1980), champions his critique of postcolonial capitalist structures, showing how the elites have perpetuated colonial legacies by continuing to use English as the language of governance: "When the leaders of the new nation spoke, they spoke the language of the oppressor, and in their speeches, they spoke of freedom but acted with the same colonial oppression. They had inherited the language, and with it, they had inherited the colonial mindset" (Thiong'o, 1980, p. 143). Here, he finds irony in the concept of independence; when colonial rulers are out of sight, their ideological and linguistic tools remain embedded in the structures of power.

It reflects through his play *I Will Marry When I Want* (1982), where language is located as the groundwork of cultural consciousness: "The language we speak is not just words. It is the mirror of our

history, our heritage, and the very fabric of our struggle. If we speak the language of the colonizers, then we have betrayed our ancestors" (Thiong'o & Mirii, 1982, p. 80). This powerful statement encapsulates Ngũgĩ's advocacy for linguistic decolonization, emphasizing the intrinsic link between language and freedom.

His later work, *Wizard of the Crow* (2006), is a continuation of this theme but within the backdrop of political corruption and societal decay: "Our identity has been stolen from us, not just by the foreign invaders, but also by the language they left behind. We must reclaim our tongues, for in them lies our true history, our struggle, and our collective future" (Thiong'o, 2006, p. 324). This further underpinning his call for linguistic and cultural renaissance where indigenous languages provide the forming of national and personal identity.

On the literary and theoretical level, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o so poignantly and trenchantly exposes how language plays a crucial role in relation to postcolonial identity. In doing this, his works condemn the persistence of colonial languages and expose them to be tools of oppression and dislodgment. In urging the adoption of indigenous languages, Ngũgĩ envisions a decolonized future when language is about empowerment rather than subjugation. His strategy of narration brings to light issues in linguistic imperialism and offers cultural revival based on authentic self-expression (Thiong'o, 1986).

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's rejection of English as a literary language is a moment in African literature and postcolonial thought that will continue to reverberate and influence debates over language, identity, and decolonization. His position enlightened the deep relationship between language and self-definition, which he expanded in *Decolonising the Mind*, where he stated, "The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe" (Thiong'o, 1986, p. 16). Ngũgĩ, by embracing Gikuyu, directly challenged the linguistic hegemony of colonial powers, a language that would express authentic African identities. His rejection of English, therefore, became a symbol of intellectual autonomy and resistance to colonial impositions, rallying other African writers and thinkers like Mariama Bâ and Ayi Kwei Armah, who explored linguistic identity in their works (Tobusun, 2016).

Ngũgĩ's impact went beyond literature; his work had implications for postcolonial African language policies. Even though most African countries continued using colonial languages in government and development, his promotion of the indigenous languages initiated moves to integrate them into school and public life. In Kenya and Nigeria, he fought for the restoration of indigenous languages in schools and the media, as well as cultural revitalization and national identity (Rodrigues, 2011; Wade, 2018; Hollingsworth, 2022). Even though English is the dominant language in international affairs, Ngũgĩ's appeal for linguistic sovereignty continues to motivate movements that strive to resist cultural homogenization (Smoleń, 2016; Kamwangamalu, 2016).

As globalization deepens, his critique of the linguistic imperialism remains in place and presses on, especially in an era where English dominates markets and in matters of diplomacy and education. "The domination of a people's language by the languages of the colonizing nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonized" (Thiong'o, 1986, p. 16). This appraisal still underscores the contradiction of universal engagement and cultural identity maintenance. This means a need for a voice in the linguistic conception with cultural autonomy in postcolonial context (Zeng & Yang, 2024; Mufwene & Vigouroux, 2008). Ngũgĩ's legacy still lies within any power, autonomy, and identity debate in relation to cultural and linguistic sovereignty.

## Conclusion

The rejection by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o of using English has created an intricate interaction between language and power with regards to post-colonial identity. Writing in Gikuyu for him does not merely signal a change of language but the act of de-colonialization against all odds that lasted even after political independence (Thiong'o, 1986). By advocating for indigenous languages, Ngũgĩ underscores how linguistic sovereignty is essential for cultural preservation, self-determination, and intellectual autonomy (Ashcroft et al., 2007; McCarty et al., 2018). His work critiques how colonial languages reinforce neo-colonial hierarchies, restricting authentic self-expression and sustaining cultural subjugation (Ongolo & Krott, 2023).

Through writings such as *Weep Not, Child* (1964) and *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), Ngũgĩ depicts how language is both a tool of oppression and a means of resistance (Parthasarathi, 2022; Rani, 2022). His position contradicts linguistic imperialism, stating that regaining mother tongues is a necessity in building an identity for a postcolonial hegemony based on historical and cultural truthfulness.

(Maheshwari, 2023; Relli, 2024). Although English is the dominant language in political and educational fields, Ngũgĩ's work has inspired movements against cultural homogenization and towards linguistic pluralism (Smoleń, 2016; Kamwangamalu, 2016).

Ngũgĩ's legacy goes beyond literature, as it has been an influence in the contemporary debates of language policies, autonomy, and national identity in postcolonial societies (Zeng & Yang, 2024). His work is a powerful testament to the role of language in shaping identity, proving that linguistic decolonization is central to reclaiming cultural agency and ensuring the survival of indigenous heritage in the face of globalization.

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