

# “Securing One’s Base in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s Ongoing Literary Theory”: An Interview

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**Abstract-** *In this interview, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o shares his current ongoing thoughts on the definition of African literature, issue of language and positionality, and decolonization of African resources. Ngũgĩ argues that English and European languages are stealing African literary identity. His personal commitment to write in Gĩkũyũ is less motivated by a wider readership than a concern to secure “his base”. He lays the blame on Africans for lacking self-esteem or self-conception. Decolonizing African resources, including reforming language policies, stands as a mental sanity challenge in a world where African people are stereotyped and ethnicized in comparison to their Western counterparts. He concludes his thought humorously by calling for a full control of African resources and spaces.*

**Keywords-** Language; African literature; postcoloniality; identity; decolonization

## INTRODUCTION

African intellectuals have adopted different viewpoints regarding the issue of European languages on the continent. More specifically, in the domain of literature, two trends can be spotlighted, starting from the independence era. The early generation of writers tended to consider European languages, such as English, French, and Portuguese, as a boon for linguistically disparate African communities. These foreign languages were often even seen as much more sophisticated to express the complex social and cultural realities of the African people. Senegalese poet Leopold Sédar Senghor’s stance in this respect is a case in point. Still along the same vein, some asserted that these foreign languages could work out on the conditions that they become Africanized, provincialized, to meet the writers’ needs. The opponents of this school of thought, although they are mostly educated in European languages, rebelled against the idealization of English or French as the most appropriate means of communication for writers, more particularly. They spurned the existence of circumstances substantiating “the use of European languages and literary forms as instruments of post-colonial literary expression” (Asante-Darko, 2003, p.4) to address the colonizer in a language that he can understand. Rather, they rail against these foreign mediums, lampooning their imperialist function and neo-colonial character. Ngũgĩ’s ideological perspective and struggle can be inscribed in this last trend. For him, “English, like French and Portuguese, was assumed to be the natural language of literary and even political mediation between African people in the same nation and between nations in Africa and other continents” (Ngũgĩ, 2005, p. 145). African writers should spearhead the battle of linguistic emancipation of the continent in shifting from European languages to African languages when producing literature.

But, he says that “unfortunately, writers should have been mapping paths out of that linguistic encirclement of their continent also came to be defined and define themselves in terms of the languages of imperialist imposition” (Ngũgĩ, 2005, p. 143). African writers, for Ngũgĩ, are responsible for the impoverishment of African literature in refusing to express themselves in their native tongues, and languages of the masses in Africa. His philosophical belief is that foreign languages, made to convey realities of their owners, can never express the African realities as African languages do. Ngũgĩ spent seventeen years writing in European languages, but was still unhappy with relegating his native tongue to the sideline. In 1977, he resolved to write in Gĩkũyũ. His first major literary work released first in Gĩkũyũ was *Devil on the Cross*. He argues that writing in African languages is the sole weapon of writers to fight against imperialism and to trigger the decolonization of African literature. This interview held with him during the African Association Conference, Washington, DC, 2016, was meant to check his foregoing thoughts about that thorny issue of language in the definition of African Literature.

This interview is centered on his views about the role and significance of African languages in relation to African literature. Emphasis has been placed on his motivations for writing in Gĩkũyũ first and foremost. Ngũgĩ stresses the need to decolonize Africa and its multifaceted resources, a decolonization that, he argued, is primarily mental. Questions of identity theft, cultural rootedness, and translation have been addressed throughout the interview as well.

**Moustapha** I would like to ask you a question about literature, especially the African literature. My interest is in African literature and issues of languages. What is your thought about African literature and language issues?

**Ngũgĩ** I was going to ask: which literature are you talking about? African literature? Not the Euro-phone African literature?

**MN** Not the Euro-phone.

**NG** You know what. I am developing these days the concept of stolen identity, literally meaning identity theft. That means that language takes on the identity of another language. When you say African language, and then it is in English, there is a contradiction there. What about African literature that is actually in African language? If you say the Yoruba literature written in English is African literature, what about the Yoruba literature in Yoruba language? English language is stealing the identity of African literature. Literally, it is identity theft.

**MN** Why are literary writers from Africa called African writers on the global stage instead of literary writers like others from Europe or America? We never say this is an American writer, but we say this is an African writer.

**NG** It is because we (Africans) are writing in European languages, and to make a distinction, we are called African writers. To be normal, we are writers. I write in Gikũyũ. But we cannot simply be just writers because we have borrowed other European languages.

**MN** Exactly that is where I was getting at. You are writing in Gikũyũ, right?

**NG** Yes.

**MN** My question is: What is the rationale behind your writing in African languages? This has brought about a lot of debate among scholars today.

**NG** An answer is my work called “Upright Revolution or Why Huma Talk Upright” previously written in Gikũyũ as *Itũika Rĩa Mũrũngarũ: Kana Kĩrĩa Gĩtũmaga Andũ Mathiĩ Marũngiĩ*. This work has been translated by the Jalad Team into 30 languages. It is a story whose base is in an African language, but has found expressions in other languages, including French, Spanish and Portuguese. It is very different when we know the African part of it and then it goes into French. We secure our base, and from our base, we go to the world. That is the key to African literature, not literature alone, but everything, economics, etc. there is no other way. Any other way is borrowing space, no matter; either it is language space, economic space or political space. Even a rocket starts from a base to go to the Moon or to Mars. It concerns political space, natural resources, language that belongs to us. Without that, we are beggars in the political space, no matter what. If we don’t, we become beggars. In other words, we need to understand the people and the continent, then, we need to understand from their point of view. And then, it is okay if you bring in other views. When you are not secured in your own base, you are like a floating flower.

**MN** I am curious professor since you write in Gikũyũ. What is the rationale behind the fact of translating your books that have already been written in Gikũyũ in English? Is it a matter of reaching a wider audience?

**NG** For me it is one point, because when I write in Gikũyũ, I knew that argument was going to come immediately, people saying, “your books are not yet

available”. I write my books in Gikũyũ and then I translate in English. My answer to your question is this: if I write in Gikũyũ it is my work. [...]

**MN** It is not a matter of readership, then.

**NG** It is a mental problem, because we don’t complain if other authors write in their languages, for example, when a French writer writes in French. I never have any African writer or intellectual wondering why a French writer is not writing in Yoruba. They don’t write in Yoruba, why are they denying us to write in Yoruba.

**MN** On the one hand, I always thought that you pick to write in Gikũyũ in order to contribute to the promotion of African languages. On the other hand, I thought that Professor wa Thiong’o, as a monument in African literature, wanted to have his work translated into English for his wider audience, those who could not read in Gikũyũ.

**NG** Let me tell you this. Do you know the population of Yoruba in Nigeria? It is 40 million people. Do you know the population of Sweden? It is 8 million, Denmark, 4 million, and Ireland 300,000. Why these Irish people can stay in an intellectual history and understanding that the Yoruba cannot? When we talk about the Yoruba and Hausa, we refer to them as ethnic groups. Ethnic groups that make up forty million people! But Sweden and Denmark are nations. The Hausa in Nigeria are 70 millions. All is a problem of self-conception. The problem is in our own self-conception phase. Let’s put the house in order first. Nobody is going to come to put the house in order for us.

**MN** How do you start putting the house in order first and identifying the structure or the foundation we talked about? If we start talking about the foundation, do we need to decolonize the already existing foundation?

**NG** Yes, we need to decolonize our resources, first of all, because the biggest problem is the decolonization of African resources. The West consumes 90% of our resources. This cellphone you are holding cannot be made without some material from the continent. This entire industry is rooted in the metal from Congo. But it reaches everybody else, but not the Congolese people. Nigeria produces the best oil by the quality. It is high and very rare. You go to Nigeria to look for oil-based industries, they are arriving more and more. But who is controlling those industries in Nigeria? That is what I mean when I talk about decolonizing our resources. If we are going to change language policies, the government language policies, it is not just about writers. We all must be conscious of it.

**MN** How are we going to decolonize our materials?

**NG** Getting control of them [laughter].

**MG** Thank you again for your enlightening contribution.

## CONCLUSION

This interview aimed to offer Ngũgĩ’s foregoing thoughts on African literature and language issues. It provided surprising definitions of what African literature is vis-à-vis

Euro-phone literature written by Africans. For him, literature rests on and is inseparable from language. Translated literature in European languages denotes a subtle identity theft that reflects the mental alienation of African writers who never question why others are not writing in African languages, but the other way round. The neocolonial domination, for him, encompasses all aspects of African resources, including natural and political spaces. Literature, he revealed, is like a rocket that quits its local base to conquer the universal space, not the reverse.

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Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, from ASA Annual Meeting (Washington, DC, 2016)