

Cultural Resistance and Neo-Colonialism in Literature: The Case of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o

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Abstract—This article critically examines cultural resistance and neo-colonialism in literature, focusing on the works of Ngugi wa Thiong’o. Ngugi’s writings, particularly *Devil on the Cross*, *The River Between*, and *Petals of Blood*, serve as powerful critiques of both colonial and post-independence neo-colonial exploitation. The study highlights how Ngugi uses language as a tool of cultural resistance and portrays the socio-economic and cultural exploitation of the Kenyan people under colonial and neo-colonial influences. The article emphasizes Ngugi’s advocacy for cultural liberation as a precursor to political freedom, underscoring the detrimental impact of cultural imperialism and the erasure of indigenous identities. The research demonstrates that Ngugi’s narratives challenge the mimicry and cultural subjugation imposed by imperial powers, advocating for the preservation and promotion of native languages, traditions, and cultural consciousness. This study contributes to understanding the intersection of literature, resistance, and decolonization in postcolonial African societies.

Index Terms—Cultural Resistance, Neo-Colonialism, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Postcolonial Literature, African Identity.

I. INTRODUCTION

The legacies of colonialism persist long after the formal end of imperial rule, manifesting in economic, political, and cultural structures that sustain foreign dominance over former colonies. This phenomenon, termed neo-colonialism, ensures that the influence of colonial powers remains entrenched, particularly through language, education, and economic policies that continue to benefit the West. Literature has long been a battleground where the struggles of decolonization and cultural resistance are articulated. Writers from postcolonial nations have used fiction, essays, and drama to challenge the ideological

frameworks imposed by colonial rule and sustained by neo-colonial forces.

According to Jean Paul Sartre (2001:03) in his book ‘Colonialism and NeoColonialism’, and Noam Chomsky (1979:42), in his ‘The Washington Connection and Third World Fascism’; in post-colonial studies, the term neo-colonialism describes the influence of countries from developed world in the respective internal affairs of decolonization that occurred in the aftermath of the Second World War (1939-1945) the colonial powers continued to apply existing and past international economic arrangement with their colony countries, and maintain their control. The political science term ‘neo-colonialism’ became popular usage in reference to the continued European economic and cultural control of African countries that had been decolonized in the aftermath of the Second World War (1939-1945).

NeoColonialism became the standard term describing a type of foreign intervention because of its practical and historical application to the international economic, social and political affairs of the countries of the usage in the Bandung Conference –Asia-African Conference) in 1955, from which derived the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961. The formal definition of ‘neo-colonialism’ was established by the All-Africans People’s Conference (AAPC) and published in the ‘Revolution on Neo-colonialism’ of the organization. At the Tunis Conference (1960), and at the Cairo Conference (1961), the AAPC specifically identified as Neo-colonial behaviour, the actions of the French community of independent states which was organized by France. Neo-colonialism, the last stage of imperialism (1965:98) by Kwame Nkrumah.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, one of Africa’s most influential literary figures, emerges as a decisive anti-colonial activist and thinker, whose writings reflect an

unwavering commitment to exposing and resisting the legacies of colonial and neo-colonial oppression. His works, marked by boldness, aggressive critique, and unflinching truthfulness, embody narratives deeply rooted in the struggles of life and livelihood in postcolonial Kenya. Like his contemporaries in the postcolonial literary movement, Ngũgĩ's texts provide a compelling exploration of cultural, political, and social resistance against the residues of colonial dominance. His fiction not only scrutinizes the historical and ongoing effects of colonialism but also serves as a clarion call for decolonization and cultural reclamation.

Central to Ngũgĩ's narrative is the critical examination of colonial and post-colonial existence. His works highlight the traumatic experiences of slavery and cultural abrogation that marked the colonial period, emphasizing how the lack of early resistance shaped his own consciousness and drive for cultural defiance. This psychological imprint of colonial subjugation emerges powerfully in his writings, where resistance becomes both a personal and collective endeavor. Ngũgĩ skillfully crafts characters that embody the socio-political and emotional challenges faced by Kenyan society under colonial rule and the lingering aftermath in the post-colonial era. Through both male and female protagonists, he explores the catastrophic and ruinous existential realities of the native population, exposing the ambivalence and complexities that define the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized.

Ngũgĩ's major fictional works, including *The River Between* (1965), *Petals of Blood* (1977), and *Devil on the Cross* (1980), grapple with themes of decolonization, liberation, and cultural autonomy. These novels portray the intense struggle of the Kenyan people to attain political and cultural independence and resist subjugation by colonial forces. In *The River Between*, Ngũgĩ illustrates the tension between tradition and colonial modernity, focusing on the resilience of indigenous culture. *Petals of Blood* provides a harsh critique of post-independence corruption and neo-colonial exploitation, while *Devil on the Cross*, written in Ngũgĩ's native Gikuyu language, becomes an act of linguistic resistance, emphasizing the reclamation of indigenous identity. Through these narratives, Ngũgĩ seeks to rewrite history, eradicating the distortions of

colonial narratives and advocating for a genuine state of decolonization.

Key thematic concerns in Ngũgĩ's work include hybridity, racialism, exoticism, alterity, essentialism, ethnicity, ambivalence, hegemony, and cultural and individual identity. His exploration of these themes underscores the complexities of post-colonial identity formation and the challenges of cultural survival amid external domination. Ngũgĩ's commitment to realism and his desire to safeguard and protect the cultural heritage of his native Kenya stand as testaments to his vision of liberation and authenticity. His narratives not only confront the historical injustices of colonialism but also engage with the ongoing struggle for cultural self-definition and political autonomy.

This research will look into how Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's fiction and theoretical writings articulate a powerful form of cultural resistance. By critically analyzing his key texts, the study will explore how Ngũgĩ deconstructs colonial narratives, critiques post-independence leadership, and advocates for linguistic and cultural decolonization. The research will also try to find how Ngũgĩ's engagement with themes of identity, resistance, and cultural heritage contributes to broader postcolonial discourse, positioning his work as a pivotal force in the global conversation on decolonization and cultural autonomy.

II. THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN CULTURAL RESISTANCE

Language is one of the most powerful tools of cultural identity, and for Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, it became a central focus in his fight against colonial and neo-colonial oppression. Ngũgĩ believes that language is not just a means of communication but also a carrier of culture, values, and identity. During colonial rule, the imposition of foreign languages, particularly English, served as a method of erasing African cultures and promoting Western ideologies. Ngũgĩ argues that this linguistic domination continued even after independence, as the use of colonial languages in education, literature, and governance alienated Africans from their indigenous identities.

Ngũgĩ's seminal work, *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), presents his belief that language is a key battleground in the fight for cultural freedom. In this text, Ngũgĩ reflects on his decision to stop writing in English and instead embrace his native Gikuyu language. He

argues that using indigenous languages in literature helps to preserve and promote African culture, enabling people to express their experiences and worldviews authentically. For Ngũgĩ, writing in Gikuyu is not merely a personal choice but an act of political resistance against the lingering control of colonial structures.

One of the most significant examples of Ngũgĩ's linguistic resistance is his novel *Devil on the Cross* (1980), which he wrote in Gikuyu while imprisoned by the Kenyan government. This act was revolutionary, as it challenged the dominance of English in African literature and emphasized the importance of indigenous narratives. By choosing to write in Gikuyu, Ngũgĩ empowered his community and encouraged other African writers to embrace their native languages. This novel is not only a critique of post-colonial exploitation but also a statement on the need for cultural and linguistic liberation.

Ngũgĩ's focus on language highlights the broader issue of cultural survival in postcolonial societies. Colonial languages often continue to dominate education systems, media, and governance, sidelining indigenous languages and cultures. Ngũgĩ argues that this marginalization leads to a loss of cultural identity and reinforces neo-colonial structures. He emphasizes that reclaiming and promoting indigenous languages is essential for genuine decolonization. This approach helps people to reconnect with their cultural heritage and resist the internalized oppression that colonialism has left behind.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's emphasis on language as a form of cultural resistance reflects his broader commitment to decolonization. By advocating for the use of indigenous languages in literature, Ngũgĩ not only challenges colonial legacies but also empowers African communities to reclaim their identities and heritage. His work underscores that true liberation involves both political independence and cultural self-determination. Language, as Ngũgĩ illustrates, is a vital tool in this struggle for freedom and authenticity.

III. CRITIQUE OF POST-INDEPENDENCE NEO-COLONIALISM

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's literary works are powerful critiques of post-independence neo-colonialism, exposing how the end of colonial rule did not necessarily lead to true freedom for African nations. In

his novels, Ngũgĩ highlights how the new African elites often continued the oppressive structures introduced by colonial powers. He exposes the exploitation, corruption, and betrayal that characterized post-independence governance, demonstrating that political independence without economic and cultural liberation is incomplete.

Ngugi describes Neo-colonialism, the last stage of imperialism, as a new system of colonization discovered by western people and currently applied upon black Africans to exploit them via the neocolonial leadership. In *Devil on the Cross*, the major incident is set between fictional Kenyans representing the black natives. In fact, Neo-colonialism is relevant in the novel. It is obviously viewed through the novel that workers and peasants are exploited in miscellaneous ways by the neo-colonial ruling class, i.e., imperialists via their puppets. Theft, robbery, corruption, violence, etc. are the different 156 (2022), *Ann. Unigom*, XII, 2 aspects that specify the manner in which neo-colonizers ill-treat the working class. The exploiters use priests and pastors to defeat workers and peasants. As stated in the novel, schools, churches and mosques are places where workers and peasants are given brainwashing poison: the interpretation of the gospel in the favour of neo-colonialism. Priests and pastors tell the workers to endure in suffering for they will have a reward in heaven: "Happy are the poor since heaven is theirs." (Ngugi, *Devil on the Cross* p.188).

So, black natives are not aware of the foreigners' cunningness and thus, they cannot react against injustice due to exploitation. However, the workers and peasants' conscience are later awakened thanks to some educated people who are appointed leaders and spokespeople of the society. Therefore, the population decides to react against the corrupted neo-colonial government. Ngugi denounces the disturbing economic, social and political exploitation for it can never contribute to the welfare of the African societies. He is against the degrading treatment of the neo-colonial leadership not only in Kenya, but also in most African countries.

In *Petals of Blood* (1977), Ngũgĩ presents a scathing critique of post-independence Kenya. The novel portrays the lives of ordinary Kenyans who suffer under the weight of poverty, inequality, and exploitation. Ngũgĩ reveals how political leaders, who were once champions of liberation, become corrupt

and oppressive once in power. They align themselves with foreign corporations and exploit local resources for personal gain, perpetuating the economic disparities established during colonial rule. The novel highlights how neo-colonialism manifests through economic dependence, where foreign interests continue to dictate the fate of African nations.

Devil on the Cross (1980) exposes the harsh realities of neo-colonial capitalism. The novel critiques the exploitative practices of the Kenyan elite, who collaborate with foreign capitalists to oppress the working class. Ngũgĩ uses the allegorical depiction of the "Devil's Feast" to illustrate how local and foreign elites collude to exploit ordinary citizens. The characters in the novel symbolize the struggles of common people who are trapped in a cycle of exploitation and poverty. Ngũgĩ's critique is sharp and unyielding, emphasizing that the fight for liberation must include economic justice and the dismantling of neo-colonial power structures.

Ngũgĩ also addresses the issue of cultural neo-colonialism, where Western values and systems continue to dominate African societies. He critiques the education system, which still prioritizes foreign knowledge and marginalizes indigenous cultures and languages. Ngũgĩ argues that this cultural domination undermines African identity and perpetuates colonial mindsets.

IV. CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC EXPLOITATION

In *Devil on the Cross*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o exposes the intertwined nature of cultural and economic exploitation in postcolonial Kenya. He portrays a society where the wealthy bourgeoisie, fascinated by Western ways, blindly imitates the colonizers' customs, language, and ideologies. This mimicry, however, does not bring empowerment but instead deepens cultural subjugation and loss of identity.

Ngũgĩ critiques how imperialists used Christianity, language, and education as tools to erode indigenous culture. The novel illustrates this through characters who take pride in their children speaking English "through the nose," viewing it as a mark of sophistication. However, Ngũgĩ satirizes this attitude, highlighting how such mimicry reduces individuals to mere caricatures, disconnected from their roots. This blind imitation is depicted as shameful and

detrimental, emphasizing the loss of authentic African identity. As one character laments, cultural imperialism leads to "mental blindness and deafness," persuading people to let foreigners dominate their national affairs.

The novel underscores that cultural liberation is inseparable from political and economic freedom. The loss of cultural heritage results in mental slavery, making it easier for neo-colonial structures to persist. Ngũgĩ argues that the colonial and neo-colonial systems uprooted people from their cultural identities, fostering a slave mentality that venerates European achievements while neglecting African values and traditions. In *Devil on the Cross*, this is seen in the characters who uncritically adopt Western customs, viewing them as superior, while disregarding their indigenous knowledge and practices.

Furthermore, Ngũgĩ critiques how the colonial education system contributed to this exploitation. Schools, universities, and publishing houses were controlled by colonial administrators, and indigenous knowledge systems were systematically suppressed. The novel portrays how Kenyans were forced to abandon their native languages and cultures in favor of English, leading to a profound cultural disconnection. This erasure of indigenous knowledge is highlighted by a character's poignant question about the loss of "our stories, our riddles, our songs, our customs, our traditions."

Ngũgĩ emphasizes that economic exploitation is closely linked to cultural domination. The novel portrays a postcolonial society where wealth and power are concentrated in the hands of a few elites who collaborate with foreign capitalists. These elites, portrayed as thieves and robbers, benefit from a system that continues to oppress the majority. This economic exploitation is not just about material wealth but also about cultural subjugation, as those in power perpetuate Western values and systems to maintain their dominance.

In *Devil on the Cross*, Ngũgĩ advocates for reclaiming indigenous culture as a means of resisting both economic and cultural exploitation. He calls for the revival of African languages, literature, and traditions as essential steps toward true liberation. Cultural pride and authenticity are portrayed as powerful tools against neo-colonial oppression. Ngũgĩ's message is clear: without cultural liberation, political and economic independence is incomplete. Ngũgĩ wa

Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross* offers a profound critique of cultural and economic exploitation in postcolonial Kenya. Through his sharp portrayal of mimicry, cultural loss, and economic oppression, Ngũgĩ highlights the need for cultural reclamation and resistance. His work serves as a powerful reminder that true freedom encompasses not only political sovereignty but also the preservation and celebration of indigenous identity and heritage.

V. CULTURAL IDENTITY, HYBRIDITY, AND AMBIVALENCE

Cultural identity is a central theme in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's works, where he interrogates the impact of colonialism on the African consciousness. His early works, such as "The River Between" and "Weep Not, Child," depict the tension between traditional African values and the imposition of Western ideologies. Ngũgĩ portrays characters grappling with the loss of cultural heritage and the fragmentation of identity resulting from colonial domination. For instance, the character Waiyaki in "The River Between" embodies the conflict between embracing traditional Gikuyu customs and adopting Western education as a means of empowerment.

Ngũgĩ's commitment to cultural identity is also evident in his advocacy for African languages. He argues that language is a carrier of culture and that the marginalization of indigenous languages leads to cultural erosion. His decision to abandon writing in English and adopt Gikuyu as his medium of expression symbolizes a reclaiming of cultural identity and a rejection of neo-colonial cultural domination.

The theme of hybridity is intricately woven into Ngũgĩ's narratives, reflecting the cultural syncretism that arises from colonial encounters. Hybridity in his work is portrayed as both a source of conflict and a potential space for negotiation and creativity. In "A Grain of Wheat," characters like Gikonyo and Mumbi embody the hybrid identities formed under colonial influence. Their experiences highlight the complexities of navigating multiple cultural allegiances and the struggle to reconcile indigenous and foreign elements.

However, Ngũgĩ's treatment of hybridity is ambivalent. While he acknowledges the inevitability of cultural mixing, he is critical of the loss and alienation it can bring. He emphasizes the importance

of grounding hybridity in a conscious understanding of one's cultural roots. For Ngũgĩ, authentic hybridity must stem from an empowered position, where African cultures engage with external influences on their terms, rather than from a position of subjugation. Ambivalence permeates Ngũgĩ's exploration of cultural identity and hybridity. His characters often exhibit ambivalent attitudes towards colonialism and modernity, oscillating between resistance and accommodation. This ambivalence reflects the broader socio-political complexities faced by postcolonial societies. In "Petals of Blood," Ngũgĩ exposes the moral and ideological ambiguities that arise in the wake of independence. The characters' disillusionment with the postcolonial elite and their betrayal of the revolutionary ideals underscore the ambivalence inherent in the postcolonial experience. Ngũgĩ himself displays a degree of ambivalence in his literary journey. His initial embrace of English as a medium of expression and subsequent rejection of it in favor of Gikuyu illustrates an evolving understanding of cultural identity and resistance. This transition signifies not just personal growth but also a broader commentary on the necessity of decolonizing the mind and reclaiming indigenous epistemologies.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's exploration of cultural identity, hybridity, and ambivalence provides profound insights into the postcolonial condition. His works challenge readers to confront the enduring impacts of colonialism and to consider the complexities of cultural negotiation and self-definition.

VI. CONCLUSION

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's literary contributions are a critical lens through which the legacies of colonial and neo-colonial exploitation are examined. His works, particularly *Devil on the Cross*, highlight the profound impacts of cultural mimicry, economic exploitation, and the erasure of indigenous identities. Ngũgĩ's insistence on the significance of native languages and cultures as tools for resistance underlines his commitment to true decolonization. He illustrates that reclaiming one's cultural heritage is not just an act of defiance but a pathway to restoring dignity and autonomy. The narratives crafted by Ngũgĩ emphasize that genuine independence must transcend political boundaries and embrace cultural sovereignty. His call for the revival of African traditions, languages, and

philosophies reflects a broader struggle for mental and cultural liberation. Ngũgĩ's works serve as a reminder that the battle against neo-colonialism is ongoing, and the empowerment of indigenous identities is crucial for achieving holistic freedom. His enduring legacy lies in encouraging societies to cherish and defend their cultural roots, ensuring that liberation is both political and profoundly cultural.

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