

# **Book Review - Decolonising the Mind by Ngugi wa Thiong'o – Africa, A New Perspective**

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## **Abstract**

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's groundbreaking work, "Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature," challenges the dominant Eurocentric and American-centric narratives that have long overshadowed African voices and experiences. The essence of Thiong'o's book is shedding light on his impassioned call to decolonize African history, dismantle harmful stereotypes, and usher in a new perspective on the continent. "Decolonizing the Mind" is a potent call to action, urging readers to engage in the collective effort to liberate Africa from historical misrepresentations. It underscores the resilience, cultural richness, and determination of the continent and its people. Through these efforts, we can contribute to a more equitable and just future for Africa and its diverse population.

**Keywords:** *Contemporary Africa, Africa, History, Socioeconomics, Literary Criticism, Decoloniality,*

**IJARBAS**

Accepted 18 September, 2023  
Published 20 September, 2023  
DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.8365008



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### Africa: A New Perspective

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, in his book *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, is a reproach to mainstream Eurocentric/American-centric narratives that emphasize non-African voices and experiences to tell a story. Many scholars have often mischaracterized African history during colonial and post-colonial rule while not correctly investigating the consequences to contemporary Africa. The depiction of the African continent holistically as the third world frequently perpetuates assumed classifications that portray it as primitive, uncivilized, and backward. Subsequently, the illustration of Africa, coupled with factors of difficulties within society, further spreads and disorients audiences in the belief that the mainstream portrayal is the only perspective. For instance, African countries' difficulties in maintaining and creating economic opportunities, providing adequate health care to their citizens, suitable infrastructure that can support domestic travel and trade, and the insufficient distribution of resources encompass problems that affect the history of Africa and its current classification. Phyllis M. Martin and Patrick O'Meara explain this phenomenon as the "popular view," which regards Africa as secluded and fixed, underscoring an unchanging lifestyle among its peoples (Martin & O'Meara, 1995, p. 7). To combat the "popular view," Thiong'o uses his own experiences intending to challenge long-time myths of Africa and highlight the denigration of the African way of life (primarily in the context of language) due to imperialism from the West. By using his own experiences, he not only challenges the simplistic and dangerous mainstream narrative due to its one-dimensional Eurocentric view but highlights the continent's resistance and liberation from imperial rule. Conducive to understanding African history, Thiong'o focuses on two major themes. First, by conceptualizing imperialism, audiences can draw a clear connection to the legacies of the West and their interest within the continent of Africa. Second, the author begins to show resistance to English (since Thiong'o was from Kenya, his experiences accentuated in the book rely solely on British rule) as the main form of spoken language in Kenya.

#### Historical Context

Africa, throughout history, has been under siege by outside interaction. Specifically, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, robber barons wanted to capitalize on the free market system and went to Africa to monopolize, conquer, and govern (Thiong'o, 1981, p. 65). However, "mercantile and industrial capital [was] brought to Africa... but at the same time it denied the conquered races and peoples the means of knowing and mastering that world...thus the very means and basis of a progressive ordering of their own lives were taken away from them" (Thiong'o, 1981, p. 66). Thus, external forces of European involvement (the colonialization and pillaging of natural resources) during the colonial and post-colonial periods have subjugated the people of Africa and stole the very materials that Europeans built their nations. The African continent is still bound and shackled by its colonial rulers, who

extend their hands in contracts (Martin and O'Meara, P7). Thiong'o describes the bondage in the context of contracts as neocolonialism (Thiong'o, pp. 2,16).

By subjugating a people, the oppressor needs to take into consideration multiple factors. Imperialism is the total domination of a country's economic and political status, which denies the people from self-regulation and self-determination. The total domination transcends time through the use of contracts. Thiong'o agrees and defines imperialism as the exercise of authority over wealth, social production, political governance, and how colonized individuals' minds, all of which is achieved through culture (Thiong'o, 1981, p. 16). By shackling the institutions to have full governance autonomy, the West was able to imprint a negative view of the oppressed systematically. As the book mentioned, the first step of the process was to send missionaries under the guise of a "civilizing mission" that would, in turn, make the oppressed sway away from their "devilish" ways (Thiong'o, 1981, p. 37). In other words, the oppressor must first entice their own population to justify the subjugation of other people in the name of "God or civilization." These justifications not only transpired from the missionary mission taking place but soon began to masquerade the demonization of the oppressed throughout literature. For instance, Rudyard Kipling, in his poem *The White Man's Burden* (1899), proclaims the moral duty of the West to bring civilization to the less enlightened populace, as Kipling stated, "Your new caught, sullen peoples... half devil and half child" (Kipling, 1899).<sup>2</sup> By ingraining that a whole group of people are "less than" others, the oppressor begins to colonize not only the identities of a people but incrementally annihilate a people's belief in "their names, in their languages," because the imperialist nations saw language as a carrier of culture (Thiong'o, pp. 3,16). Thus, English became the benchmark by which intelligence and a child's progress were measured (p.12).

### **Ultimatum: Peace, Democracy and Theft**

Imperialism, led by the United States, has used Eurocentric ideals of white supremacy to oppress African nations. However, the discourse presented through media became the conduit that has presented Africa holistically as the struggling peoples of the earth, therefore needing U.S. intervention to provide peace, democracy, and stability (Thiong'o, 1981, p. 3). By perpetuating a simplistic narrative that Africa was unable to provide for themselves, the U.S. implemented a media strategy (which still goes on today) to propagate the lie of "helplessness." As a consequence of the justification of "helping" African nations, Africans have encountered an ultimatum from the U.S. to "accept theft or death" (Thiong'o, 1981, p. 3). Haig Aram Bosmajian complicates matters further by highlighting that language has the power to dehumanize people and justify their bondage (Valentine, 2004, pp. 5,6). Thus, the language used by the U.S. to make Africans believe that they need the U.S. or Europe to rescue them from poverty is another way that language was used to circumvent the reality of the need to rob Africa to enrich Europe and the U.S. (Thiong'o, 1981, p. 28).

<sup>2</sup> I have attached the poem at the end of the paper for reference.

## Language and Resistance

Culture is at the epicenter of liberation. As stated by Thiong'o, the cultural renaissance of Africa must first begin with the teaching and study of African languages because the colonial systems have historically imposed their tongue on the subjugation of Africans (through assimilation schools, etc.). The process of imposing a language was an attempt to discourage the indigenous peoples' use of regional languages and erect a hierarchical system that places intellect with the ability to speak English (Thiong'o, p, 72). In discussions of the importance of using native languages, a point of contention has been whether language or resistance could act as active agents to dismantle neocolonialism.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, some argue that resistance must take the form of violence. On the other hand, however, others argue that education should be the means for liberation in Africa. The new consensus, supported by Thiong'o, is that language can and should act as a pump to cultivate culture to help understand the present situation and that of the future ones (Thiong'o, 1981, p. 60). When taken together, it is clear that though there is a common consensus on the essential need to be liberated from the Western nations, what role does language have in the manumission?

Thiong'o claim that the European language must be disregarded as the primary form of communication within Africa rests upon the questionable assumption that a regional language itself in the twenty first century would be able to cultivate a united front among Africans to fight back against neocolonialism (Thiong'o, p. 7, 26, 84, 85). Instead, I believe that English (in the context of Kenya) should be used as the "common language" to unite against neocolonial policies. For example, the Pan-African movement, to create a sense of brotherhood and collaboration among all people of African descent, launched their campaign in English to reach the largest audience possible. Using the "common language," the movement was able to unsettle political, economic, and imperialistic policies. However, I do not advocate for the erasure of regional languages, as I find it essential to concede that African experiences must be at the forefront of the conversation and, therefore, should use the English language to go back to the grassroots of rediscovering themselves. It is essential to acknowledge that the author, from Kenya, brings a distinct perspective that should be duly recognized. Subsequently, the use of languages should be used to rediscover themselves.

## Peasantry and Resistance

Language itself is not advocated as the end to the oppression inflicted on Africa. Thiong'o suggests that the way to "defeat colonialism is through organized peasantry and working class" (Thiong'o, pp. 29, 30). He used a wide array of examples that explain agency among the peasantry and working class. For example, the two groups made technical breakthroughs like the Spinning Jenny, waving loom, steam engine, wheel for irrigation, windmill, and water mill (Thiong'o, 1981, p. 68). It becomes evident that the author believes that a united front could spread across Africa. Though

<sup>3</sup> I agree that neocolonialism is the biggest hurdle that faces the African continent.

he constructs examples to underscore the value of the peasantry and the working class, he believes that “African literature can only be written in African languages, that is, the languages of the African peasantry and working class, the major alliance of classes in each of our nationalities and the agency for the coming inevitable revolutionary break with neo-colonialism” (Thiong’o, 1981, p. 27). In other words, the inescapable truth that Africa will not always be tied to the West is an unavoidable fact.

### **Liberation?**

One question that *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* does not answer is “What comes next” (in the context of a liberation movement)? Thiong’o does suggest that the “neo-colonial bourgeoisie is reflected in its culture of apemanship... [and] their ideas are spread by a corpus of state intellectuals, the academic and journalistic laureates of the neo-colonial establishment” (Thiong’o, 1981, p.2). In other words, Thiong’o believes that imperialism changes over time and its veil looks differently. Though the neo-colonial establishments aim to perpetuate and propagate the “status quo,” the author states that resistance must be recognized and vigorously pursued by “patriotic students, intellectuals (academic and non-academic), soldiers and other progressive elements of the petty middle class” (Thiong’o, 1981, p.2). Therefore, the means for liberation will transpire through the lower and middle classes of society because the tradition of resistance has historically been carried out by the average citizen (Thiong’o, 1981, p. 2). I agree with Thiong’o assessment. The current economic system of capitalism creates a class system that entices the working class to believe they are in a better position than the peasant class, even though both groups experience adverse effects of the same imperialist capitalist system (Thiong’o, 1981, pp. 55, 56). Capitalism cannot create equality if the majority of society is struggling. Simultaneously, the fearmongering of socialism and communism depicts these systems as dangerous, which would destroy the way of life (the very thing that the imperialist systems are doing) (Marx, 1888, p. xii)

### **Conclusion**

Mainstream narratives of Africa have often perpetuated a falsehood of the continent, leading audiences outside the continent to believe Africans are impoverished and uncivilized, for example. Instead, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* aims to decolonize African history by emphasizing his lived experiences that challenge mainstream narratives and history. Thiong’o interweaves the notions that not only is there the need for political and economic independence from the West but also underscores the legacies of imperialism that have shaped contemporary problems within the continent. It is clear that this book serves as a powerful call to action and the need for the decolonization of Africa and liberation.

By acknowledging the need for decolonization, “Decolonizing the Mind” urges us to engage in a collective effort to liberate Africa from the confines of historical misrepresentations. It is a reminder that Africa's story is one of resilience, cultural



richness, and unwavering determination. As we strive for a more accurate and holistic understanding of Africa, we must actively participate in decolonizing the mind, dismantling old narratives, and championing the narratives that honor the continent's diverse and complex history. In doing so, we contribute to the ongoing journey towards a more equitable and just future for Africa and its people.

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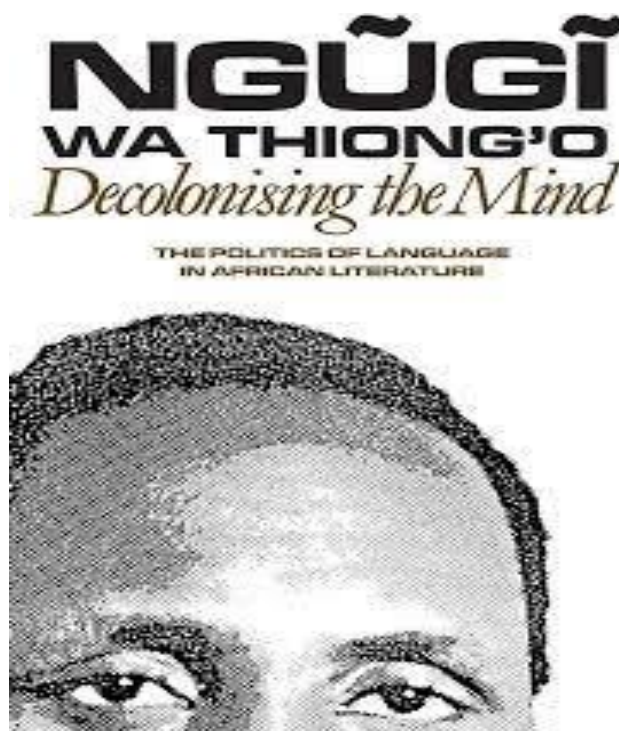
## Appendix

Take up the White Man's burden—  
 Send forth the best ye breed—  
 Go send your sons to exile  
 To serve your captives' need  
 To wait in heavy harness  
 On fluttered folk and wild—  
 Your new-caught, sullen peoples,  
 Half devil and half child  
 Take up the White Man's burden  
 In patience to abide  
 To veil the threat of terror  
 And check the show of pride;  
 By open speech and simple  
 An hundred times made plain  
 To seek another's profit  
 And work another's gain  
 Take up the White Man's burden—  
 And reap his old reward:  
 The blame of those ye better  
 The hate of those ye guard—  
 The cry of hosts ye humour  
 (Ah slowly) to the light:  
 "Why brought ye us from bondage,  
 "Our loved Egyptian night?"  
 Take up the White Man's burden—  
 Have done with childish days—

The lightly proffered laurel,  
The easy, ungrudged praise.  
Comes now, to search your manhood  
Through all the thankless years,  
Cold-edged with dear-bought wisdom,  
The judgment of your peers!

**Source:** Rudyard Kipling, "The White Man's Burden: The United States & The Philippine Islands, 1899." *Rudyard Kipling's Verse: Definitive Edition* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1929).

### BOOK COVER PAGE





**Cite this article:**

**Author(s)**, Robert Lynn, (2023). "Book Review - Decolonising the Mind by Ngugi wa Thiong'o – Africa, A New Perspective". **Name of the Journal:** International Journal of Academic Research in Business, Arts and Science, (IJARBAS.COM), P, 1-9 , DOI: [www.doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8365008](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8365008) , Issue: 9, Vol.: 5, Article: 1, Month: September, Year: 2023. Retrieved from <https://www.ijarbas.com/all-issues/>

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