

## Linguistic Decolonization in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Decolonizing the Mind*

Mamta Rani\*

Assistant Professor, Department of English, CRSU, Jind, India. Email: mamta@crsu.ac.in\*



DOI: <https://doi.org/10.38177/AJBSR.2022.4411>

**Copyright:** © 2022 Mamta Rani. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Article Received: 25 November 2022

Article Accepted: 27 December 2022

Article Published: 30 December 2022

### ABSTRACT

*Decolonizing the Mind* by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o is a seminal work that highlights the importance of language in the process of decolonization. Thiong'o argues that colonization is not just a political and economic phenomenon but also a linguistic one. He asserts that colonizers imposed their languages on the colonized peoples, which led to the loss of cultural identity and self-esteem for the colonized. He refers to this as linguistic imperialism. He believes that decolonization must involve a rejection of the imposed languages and a return to native languages to reclaim cultural autonomy. He emphasizes the importance of linguistic decolonization as a necessary step in the broader process of decolonization. He asserts that language is the most potent vehicle of culture, and any attack on language is an attack on culture. Therefore, decolonization must involve the reassertion of the linguistic heritage of the colonized people. He argues that education plays a crucial role in promoting linguistic decolonization. Education should be restructured to reflect the linguistic and cultural diversity of the colonized people. The imposition of the colonizers' languages in the education system is detrimental to the cultural identity of the colonized. This paper highlights Thiong'o strong rejection of European languages from Africa's educational, cultural and political sphere to decolonize the very thought process.

**Keywords:** Colonization; Decolonization; Linguistic; Imperialism.

### INTRODUCTION

Decolonization refers to the process by which a colonized nation or people gain independence and autonomy from the colonial power. It involves a complex set of political, social, cultural, and economic transformations that seek to undo the legacies of colonialism and restore the sovereignty and dignity of the colonized. The term decolonization emerged in the mid-twentieth century in response to the growing movement for independence in Africa, Asia, and other parts of the world. It was a time of intense political struggle, as colonized peoples fought for their rights and dignity in the face of colonial oppression and exploitation.

Decolonization involved a range of strategies and tactics, including armed resistance, nonviolent protests, negotiations, and international pressure. It also involved the creation of new political institutions, the development of new cultural forms, and the establishment of new economic relationships. However, decolonization was not a straightforward process, and it often led to new forms of domination and inequality. It was marked by tensions between the desire for national self-determination and the challenges of building new postcolonial states and societies.

At the present time, decolonization remains an ongoing struggle, as many of the legacies of colonialism continue to shape the world in which we live. It involves a critical examination of the ways in which colonialism continues to impact contemporary politics, economics, and culture, and a commitment to creating more just and equitable societies. Decolonization has been a significant global movement, particularly in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with many formerly colonized nations gaining independence from their colonizers. However, the process has been far from complete, with many ongoing struggles for decolonization in various forms, such as land rights, cultural autonomy, and economic justice. It is an ongoing process that requires ongoing work and attention to address the deep-rooted impacts of colonization. Basil Davidson's *The Black Man's Burden* focuses on some of the dreadful consequences

of decolonization, while Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children* describes the vast movements of people and the deaths caused by the partition of India and Pakistan when independence was granted in 1947. Anita Desai tells in her novel, *Clear Light of Day* of the night-time fleeing of the local Muslim family of Hyder Ali from Delhi at the same moment, since the decolonization and independence process led to violence and confusion, as people traveled to whichever side of the partitioned land represented their religious beliefs—that is, Muslims to Pakistan, Hindus and other non-Muslims to India. Some changes, therefore, were radical and some gradual, as people began to learn or re-learn the ways of governing themselves and taking on the roles powerful in any infrastructure—of politicians, police, educators, doctors, lawyers, and so on roles which had previously been played by the colonizers or those they employed. Rules and practices which operated under colonial rule might well continue into the new postcolonial situation or are gradually changed. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin note that, ironically much resistance and decolonization were initially carried out using the forms and language of the colonizer, pointing out that, “Macaulay’s infamous 1835 ‘Minute on Indian Education’ had proposed the deliberate creation in India of just such a class of ‘brown white men’, educated to value European culture above their own. This is the locus classicus of this hegemonic process of control, but there are numerous other examples in the practices of other colonies” (Ashcroft 74). A dynamic population disturbs insularity and historically constructed notions of racial homogeneity. Susheila Nasta points out:

*Many cultural critics and postcolonial scholars have already exposed the extent to which the myth of a homogenous and white British nation, an ‘imagined community’, was part not only of the agenda of the Empire but of an insular Eurocentric modernity which has consistently failed to acknowledge the true colors of its immigrant past. Although heterogeneity has always been the norm, an indisputable part of the crucible of cultural and racial ‘mixtures’ that has historically constructed British life, the nationalist myth of purity has nevertheless long endured (Nasta 2).*

Decolonization was accompanied by challenges such as political instability, economic uncertainty, and social inequality. In India, the partition of the country into India and Pakistan led to violence and displacement, while in Kenya, land ownership remained a contentious issue. The new governments in both countries faced the task of creating stable political systems and addressing the needs of their citizens. Decolonization in India and Kenya had different dynamics, with India achieving independence through non-violent means, while Kenya’s path to independence was more violent. However, both countries faced challenges during the process, including political instability, economic uncertainty, and social inequality. Ultimately, the two countries achieved independence, and their governments worked to create stable political systems and address the needs of their citizens.

Aditya Mukherjee has conclusively contradicted this view and demonstrated that British imperial control intensified considerably during the war and the economic exploitation of India increased manifold—“the colony, far from ceasing to pay, was subjected to a greater and most blatant appropriation of surplus through currency manipulations, forced loans, large military expenditures and numerous other unilateral transfers” (Mukherjee 53). B.R.Tomlinson is critical of the theory which sees decolonization only as a technique by which formal empire became informal in the interests of maximizing advantages to Britain. He concedes that there was an Indian angle to the end of the empire, apart from changes in the metropolitan and world economies, but the Indian factor in his

view was not nationalist pressure, but discontent with the ever-increasing financial burdens imposed by the colonial government on its subjects.

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's seminal work, *Decolonizing the Mind* explores the notion of linguistic decolonization and its profound implications for post-colonial Africa. Published in 1986, the book examines the cultural and psychological consequences of colonialism's linguistic legacy and advocates for the reclaiming and revitalization of indigenous languages as a crucial step towards decolonization. In this research paper, I will delve into the key ideas and arguments put forth by Ngugi in *Decolonizing the Mind*, highlighting the significance of linguistic decolonization in the African context. At the heart of Thiong'o's analysis is the recognition that language serves as more than a mere vehicle for communication—it is intertwined with culture, identity, and collective memory. Colonial powers recognized this inherent connection and understood that to establish and maintain control, they needed to suppress indigenous languages. By imposing European languages like English, French, or Portuguese, the colonial project aimed to displace native languages and undermine local cultures. This deliberate strategy served to disrupt the transmission of indigenous knowledge, sever the link between language and culture, and perpetuate a sense of cultural inferiority among the colonized populations.

Thiong'o asserts that language and culture are inextricably bound together, each dependent on the other for sustenance and expression. By subverting native languages, colonizers sought to erode the cultural foundations of the colonized peoples, replacing them with European cultural norms and values. As a result, generations of Africans grew up alienated from their linguistic and cultural heritage, internalizing the superiority of the colonial languages and experiencing a sense of cultural dislocation.

Thiong'o argues that the process of decolonization cannot be complete without a simultaneous decolonization of language. For him, linguistic decolonization entails a rejection of the dominant colonial languages and a re-embrace of indigenous languages as the primary medium of communication and literary expression. This shift in language is not simply a linguistic matter; it represents a profound transformation of consciousness, a reclaiming of identity, and a restoration of cultural autonomy. He illustrates his argument through his own personal journey. Born and raised in colonial Kenya, he initially embraced English as a means of upward mobility and assimilation into the Westernized world. However, his experiences and growing awareness of the power dynamics embedded in language led him to a radical shift. In the late 1970s, Ngugi made the conscious decision to write exclusively in Gikuyu, his native language, renouncing English as a tool of expression. This decision was met with skepticism and resistance, even within African literary circles, where proficiency in English was often regarded as a mark of literary excellence. His choice to write in Gikuyu was a powerful act of resistance—a refusal to continue the linguistic and cultural subjugation imposed by colonial powers. By returning to his native language, he aimed to reclaim his identity, engage with his cultural heritage, and contribute to the revitalization of Gikuyu as a language of literary excellence. His commitment to linguistic decolonization extends beyond his own personal practice; he emphasizes the necessity for African writers and intellectuals to write in their indigenous languages to tell their stories from their own perspectives. Through this act of linguistic rebellion, Thiong'o envisions a collective reclamation of African languages as a means to challenge the dominance of colonial languages and shape the narrative of Africa's past, present, and future.

**CONCLUSION**

Through his work, Thiong'o emphasizes the need for African writers and intellectuals to write in their native languages, as this enables them to tell their stories from their own perspectives. He challenges the notion that mastery of a European language is a prerequisite for literary excellence, arguing that true literary greatness can only be achieved through the languages of one's cultural heritage. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Decolonizing the Mind* is a powerful manifesto that calls for the liberation of African nations from the cultural and linguistic shackles of colonialism. By advocating for linguistic decolonization and the restoration of indigenous languages, he offers a path towards reclaiming cultural autonomy, restoring identity, and fostering self-determination. His work serves as a vital reminder that language is a potent tool in the struggle against oppression and the reclamation of one's heritage.

**Declarations*****Source of Funding***

*This study did not receive any grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.*

***Competing Interests Statement***

*The author declares no competing financial, professional, or personal interests.*

***Consent for publication***

*The author declares that she consented to the publication of this study.*

**Works Cited**

Ashcroft, Bill, et al. (2013). *Postcolonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. Taylor & Francis Group.

Mukherjee, Aditya (2002). *Imperialism, Nationalism and the Making of the Indian Capitalist Class, 1920-1947*. SAGE Publications India.

Nasta, Susheila (2017). *Home Truths: Fictions of the South Asian Diaspora in Britain*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Thiong'o, Ngugi W. (1992). *Decolonising the Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature*. East African Publishers.