

# Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language, Culture and Identity

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**ABSTRACT:** : *Language plays very crucial role in determining the individual's personality. It is indeed an identity marker, a way of communicating one's identity. Language, Culture and Identity are interrelated and interdependent terms. Language defines the culture, which is the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings, transmitted from one generation to another, and culture becomes the essence of identity of an individual. Thus the identity of a person can be annihilated by extinguishing the language. Language has often been used as a colonial tool by the white colonizers to assimilate and exploit the colonized. This paper attempts to explore the significance of language in shaping the identity of an individual and, as a site for both colonization and resistance by substantiating it with the views of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o.*

*Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, a Gikuyu writer from Kenya has been the most radical among those writers who have chosen to turn away from English. Thiong'o was the first writer known for open resistance to English language. In his most influential work Decolonizing the Mind, he talks about language and its constructive role in national culture, history, and identity. He says that all African writers and intellectuals should write in their own native languages if they want to decolonize their mind. He theorizes language as the foundation and carrier of culture. Language is the means by which culture and its traditions and shared values may be conveyed and preserved. Culture disappears when language dies. Language is central question in post-colonial studies. Language practices are destroyed by the colonizer to have control on native culture. The paper will provide the detailed study of all the facets stated above by studying Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's Decolonizing the Mind.*

**Key Words:** *Language, Identity, Culture, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Colonization, Decolonization.*

Language is an act of communicating and expressing oneself in the society. It is an entity that strengthens the familial and traditional bond. Language is communicated or transmitted mainly in two forms: oral and written. The former exists as orature and the latter as literature. In earlier times prior to written literature, there was the tradition of oral storytelling. The traditions and customs of a family were transmitted orally from one generation to another. This was the way of keeping the culture alive.

Literature written in a particular native language and oral storytelling, both are a medium of acquiring and preserving the cultural heritage which defines the identity of a person. Identity implies knowledge of the self. It is "the individual's concept of the self, as well as the individual's interpretation of the social definition of the self, within his/her inner group and larger society" (Kim, 3). It is the language that gives an identity to a person. It indeed is the identity marker and one of the major symbols of identity. To quote Warschauer:

Language has always played an important role in the formation and expression of identity. The role of language and dialect in identity construction is becoming even more central in the postmodern era, as other traditional markers of identity, including race, are being destabilized. (Warschauer, 1) Language thus serves as a primary factor while determining the belongings of a person. Michael Ignatieff, the Canadian author and Journalist in his famous work *Blood and Belonging* says, "It is language, more than land and history that provides the essential form of belonging." (5)

Language involves the process of communication. Communication is not possible without language. When a person communicates he does so in a particular language and the accent he uses reflects his cultural background. Culture is the way of living in a particular manner following particular norms set up a particular society. It is a defining feature of a person's identity, contributing to how they see themselves and the groups with which they identify. Culture may be broadly defined as the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings, which is transmitted from one generation to another. Every community, cultural group or ethnic group has its own values, beliefs and ways of living. ("Understanding Racism", sect. 1)

Language and culture therefore are interrelated. Loss of one results in the loss of other. In the field of linguistics culture holds a significant place and always exists with language. In the words of Kim, "without

culture, language cannot exist". (Kim, 1)

Language also serves to create cultural differences in the society. People are divided racially and ethnically speaking different languages across the world. Speaking their native language make them feel connected to their native land. The immigrants living in America never stop using their native language despite their assimilation. They keep using it to create a cultural difference in the society and to show their real existence.

Language also serves as an important factor in assimilation process. Language has been used as an important tool in postcolonial studies. It has been a site of colonization and decolonization. The colonizer continuously tries to kill the native culture by destroying the language of the colonized. The Aboriginal writers thus deliberately choose to write in their mother tongue so that the future generation must learn their language and also get acquainted with the native roots.

Bill Ashcroft, Garth Griffiths, and Helen in *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) addressed the ways in which the writers are choosing their native language, replacing it with the colonial language. The aboriginal writers deliberately refuse to use the language of the colonizer in a correct or standard way. Bill Ashcroft et al. call this process as abrogation which means 'a known resistance'. In their words, "Abrogation is a refusal of the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standard of normative or 'correct' usage, and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning 'inscribed' in the words. (*The Empire Writes Back*, 38) Ngugui Wa Thiong'o was the first writer known for open resistance to English language. He started his writing career with his native language, Gikuyu over English. Thiong'o is a Kenyan born novelist, playwright, essayist and a social activist who writes on social, cultural and political themes. With famous books like *Weep Not, Child* (1964), *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) and *The River Between* (1965), he is regarded as one of East Africa's most eminent literary figures. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o is the most radical author in advocating and promoting the use of indigenous language. He says that they will tell their agonies in their own way using their own language.

Thiong'o actively participated to free his country from colonial legacy. He wrote many articles questioning and critiquing the colonial authority, for which he was even imprisoned. His novels explore the colonial period and the exploitation of the poor, working class people. He had empathy with the suppressed and poor people of his nation. Even after independence, he continued to depict the exploitation of the suppressed people of his nation by Kenya's own established elite.

He wrote many cultural and political essays and the most prominent among them is *Decolonizing the Mind*:

*The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986). The book advocates linguistic decolonization. It is an anthology of essays about the role of language in developing the culture and identity of a nation. The book is dedicated to all those African writers who write in their mother tongue and addresses the issues of language for African writers. This book bids adieu to his use of colonial language and endorses the use of indigenous language.

Thiong'o says that language acts as a connecting link among the communities in a society. Each community has its own culture communicated through language. It is indeed an inseparable part of human life. Human beings are connected to the world through communication by using particular language. Thiong'o states:

[A] specific culture is not transmitted through language in its universality, but in its particularity as the language of a specific community with a specific history. Written literature and orature are the main means by which a particular language transmits the images of the world contained in the culture it carries. Language as communication and as culture is then products of each other. Communication creates culture: culture is a means of communication. Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. How people perceives themselves and affects how they look at their culture, at their places politics and at the social production of wealth, at their entire relationship to nature and to other beings. Language is thus inseparable from us as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world. (*Decolonizing the Mind*, 15-16)

Ngugi talks about the dual nature of language: language as a medium of communication and as a vehicle of culture. Both he states are, "products of each other. Communication creates culture: culture is a means of communication. Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world" (*Decolonizing the Mind*, 13-16)

Thiong'o further says that the aim of the European colonizers is to have control on colonizer. They kill the native culture by setting up the colonial schools where the native children are beaten and humiliated for speaking in their native language. They are forced to speak in English language which they are taught is

superior to the native language. They impose their language, literature and culture on the colonized in order to brainwash the entire native people. Their language and religious practices are officially banned. They are not allowed to live the way they want to live.

The Aboriginal writers have vividly explored the harsh treatment given to the children. The young children are usually targeted because they represent the future of the nation and will carry their culture in future. The Native Canadian Playwright Tomson Highway recounts the Residential Schools set by the white Canadian government. The Children were beaten and humiliated; they were punished severely if caught speaking their mother tongue, needles were pricked in their tongues for speaking their native language. Drew Hayden Taylor, another native Canadian playwright describes about the 'Scrap up' policy of 1960's where Native children were taken away from their native homes to put in white foster home, where they were made to speak only English and adopt English culture.

Like other native children, he was also sent to colonial school in his childhood. Africa was under British rule when he was in his childhood. He was forced to speak white language. African languages are considered inferior and are not taught in these schools. Only English language is taught to kill their cultural identity. Thiong'o claims that it is the duty of the African writers to tell their true native stories in their ancestral language so that their children and future generation learn and practice it. English is the language of the oppressor, and he calls it as linguistic imperialism. The only way to overcome this type of imperialism is by writing in indigenous language.

It can be concluded that identity is affected by language and language plays a crucial role in defining the personality of a person. The three terms, language, culture and identity are interconnected. Each one is described in relation to other. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o is asking for cultural reclamation, it helps to maintain relation with the ancestors. He recommended that Africans need to return to their pre-colonial culture in order to create their authentic African identities.

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