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Reading Ngugi

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

I met Ngugi wa Thiong'o in 1968, when he was a member of the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa and I was an assistant professor there. Paul Engle, himself quintessentially "American," even "mid-western," had thought of this program and implemented it. He himself came from a kind of Bretton Woods-to-Bandung internationalism (he might not have known much about Bandung) that Ama Ata Aidoo powerfully stages in *Our Sister Killjoy*.

Bandung - the small Indonesian town, where, with Nkrumah of Ghana and Nehru of India in starring roles, 29 nations, mostly recently independent, had met to decide that they were not going to be aligned either to the Eastern or the Western Bloc, but rather be a "third" world -- gave great hope to such people as Paul Robeson and Richard Wright. As is well known, the political experiment came to rather little, but an ideology remained, and "Third World" became a much translated phrase in many languages. A remote side effect of this was the possibility of a world (of) literature(s), and a new impetus to translation, mostly into English.

The writers who flocked to the Iowa program generally represented what would alter this possible side effect. They most often connected with the local transformation of the Beat, beat from the indigenous Writers Workshop. They came not from Bandung, but from the brilliant and unruly spirit of the 60s. Looking back, I realize that there for the first time I knew what would be a second wave of the possibility of literatures of the world, rather different from the biases of Bandung. Even in that crowd, Ngugi stood out, with the characteristic that later became his signature: an unmarked modernity. Yes he was "African," deeply indebted to orature (he speaks of this in his preface to this collection) - but why should "modernity" be synonymous with "Europe?" Why should Europe have history, and we tradition? In spite of his own assessment of the stages in his own writing, it seemed to me then that these questions were already merely rhetorical in Ngugi's already calm and confident presence. It is my mature judgment that this is the chief definitive characteristic of what we can call contemporary world literature, developing as a reaction to the benevolence of Bandung's failure. Paradoxically, this characteristic may seem an obsession with tradition if it is not shared by the reader. This has led to problems when it comes to reading gendering in Ngugi's texts. Feminist readers know that gendering must sometimes choose "the wrong side," as it were. Even there, however, if one pays attention to word choice and conduct of language in the Gikuyu, it is hard simply to sit in judgment. Let me ask the reader to imagine John Updike as "local," ignore all linguistic contrivances, and simply diagnose a problematic gender politics as a result. These issues (not Ngugi and Updike, of course) are discussed by the essays in this collection.

I saw him again in the eighties in Birmingham - when we were both speaking at a Third Focus event on "Exile and Displacement." By then my old friend had become a hero. *Decolonising the Mind* had appeared, and had immediately become the controversial classic it remains to this day. His political commitment and courage, his imprisonment and exile, had given him an aura. Yet what I remember from that occasion is his infinite kindness, his gentleness. The picket-line third-focusers objected to my love for theory, which immediately spelled "elitism" to them. He came to my defense, and no one could, of course, question his authority.

Decolonising the Mind was so suited to its moment in Africa, that we may not notice its timeliness now. Globalization requires a few hegemonic languages - mostly European, "for international communication," although Mandarin is fighting hard. In order, however, to sustain a world that the near-abstract structures of even the impossible dream of a welfare-world globalization can nurture, this requirement must be "supplemented" by a deep immersion in that world's richness of language. Ngugi was not simply arguing for his mother tongue, as his subsequent career has shown. He was arguing for inhabiting non-hegemonic languages with the depth of imaginative use, while retaining English (or *mutatis mutandis* the other imperial languages) as the "first language of international communication."

Notice that this is not principally a counter-globalizing or alter-globalizing argument. I do not mean to underestimate Ngugi's tremendous contribution in the struggle to establish "African literature" as the center of literary instruction in Africa. (How can I, when, reading Hannah

Arendt's *On Violence* for a coming conference, I see her describing African literature, in 1969, as "a nonexistent subject"?) The fact that Ngugi is a counter-canon also has little to do with this. It is an acknowledgment that English has its uses, though it must not usurp the entire epistemic and affective space of the former colony. Not to acknowledge this, to oppose this full tilt, is to legitimize by reversal, simply give us a malevolent in place of a benevolent empire, rather than dream of using capital as socialism would: welfare-world globalization. Thus does one decolonize the mind into a realistic acknowledgment of the violence of history rather than monumentalize the opposition seemingly (only seemingly) inherent in national liberation.

Decolonising the Mind has had a long history in a somewhat different and specific debate among African and Indian writers. Should one write in one's native language and achieve an incopious yet culturally prepared audience, or write in English and claim an international readership, become world literature instantly, as it were? For Ngugi there was the additional desire to produce for a subaltern audience in the native language. There are essays in this book that discuss what is lost when Ngugi's books are read in English, a gift that would have withdrawn into sub-textuality if his first writing had been in English. The course of that debate is too well known to recount here. What must, however, be noted is that for Ngugi himself the position has become a double bind, where contradictory instructions come at the same time, and the writer must learn how to occupy the space of that contradiction. Write in Gikuyu and write again, the same thing, in English "to continue dialogue with all." "Polycentric" translation in an activist definition, Ngugi's special care as the director of the International Center for Writing and Translation at the University of California-Irvine, where I have the honor to be a member of the Board.

The first language of the colonized as double bind gives us a figure for the postcolonial predicament in globality in the most vivid way. This is the secret of the struggle against dictatorship after Independence. And it is also from this position that Ngugi's care radiates toward all the non-hegemonic languages of the world, and, in principle, thinks of the possibility of translation between and among them.

From *Weep Not, Child* to the massive phenomenon of *Wizard of the Crow* these are some of the threads that have bound the work together. An account of these bindings and their many unbindings has been painstakingly recorded in the present collection. □□□

*Preface to *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Ngugi wa Thiong'o*, New York: MLA, (forthcoming)