

Innovation in Cultural Theory

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Abstract

This article re-reads Ngugi wa Thiongo as a proponent of an interesting theory of African agency, cultural empowerment and linguistic re-inscription. This crucial aspect of his work deserves to be more rigorously studied because of its singularity in contemporary times and in the field of African studies and also due to the subtle reformulations it has undergone in the face of often dramatic global ideological events and reversals. It is interesting to observe how Ngugi wa Thiongo's ideological postures are influenced by global discursive practices and events and how in turn he acts upon them. It is also remarkable to observe how some of the formulations of postcolonial theory resonate in his paradigm of decolonization. Finally, we suggest that the transformation of the global ideological structure after the political collapse of the former Soviet Union correlates with a political de-radicalization in wa Thiongo's discursive profile and a slight de-ideologization, in other words, a modification (read as a somewhat innovative development) of his paradigm of decolonization. However, this ideological de-radicalization is accompanied by a greater appreciation of the notion of ambivalence that is inherent in conventional colonial relations.

Ngugi wa Thiongo's conception of decolonization is one of the most radical to be conceived on the African continent (Osha, 2005). Not only is Ngugi wa Thiongo one of Africa's foremost creative artists, he is also a formidable theorist of culture and has published several books on questions of race, class and, of course, imperialism. It is more convenient to read wa Thiongo as a pioneer of African novelistic discourse and not as theorist of decolonization on the level of thinkers such as Cheikh Anta Diop (1974), Frantz Fanon (1967), Leopold Sedar Senghor (1964, 1971), and Kwasi Wiredu (1980, 1983, 1992, 1993, 1995, 1996) and so many other African thinkers concerned with the agency of knowledge and subjectivity such as V.Y. Mudimbe (1988, 1991, 1994).

This article, in this sense, avoids the more convenient route and seeks instead to re-read wa Thiong'o as a proponent of an interesting theory of African forms of agency, cultural empowerment and linguistic re-inscription. This crucial aspect of his work deserves to be more rigorously studied because of 1] its singularity in contemporary times and in the field of African studies 2] and due to the subtle reformulations it has undergone in the face of often dramatic global ideological events and reversals. By these events and reversals, we mean the epistemological rupture in his intellectual itinerary that occurred in 1977 when he decided to cease writing in English and then the transformation in the global ideological infrastructure- on a general level- that happened with the collapse of the former Soviet Union. It is interesting to observe how wa Thiong'o's ideological postures are influenced by global discursive practices and events and how in turn he acts upon them. It is also remarkable to observe how some of the formulations of postcolonial theory resonate in his paradigm of decolonization. In this sense, we refer to how the dynamics of subaltern subjectivity are shaped and in turn shape classical colonial relations. This context of relations operates at the level of theory and also praxis. Again, in this regard, there is a great deal to explore in wa Thiong'o's work.

But before we begin the discussion of wa Thiong'o's conception of decolonization, it is necessary to address two issues; the production of the global imaginary and the implications of the contemporary politicization of culture. Both the production of the global- in this sense, to adapt Arjun Appadurai's notion of the "production of locality" (1995)- and the ideologization of religion and culture within the often problematic West/rest dichotomy (see for instance, Ajayi, 1969; Ekeh, 1975, 1983, 1990; Mamdani, 1996) are underpinned by powerful colonial logics (and invariably its counter-discourses) which need to be discussed in order to understand continuing relevance of wa Thiong'o's constructs on global decolonization. Also, we would maintain that wa Thiong'o's paradigm of decolonization can be addressed within this particular ideological conjuncture; the politicization of culture on a global level on the one hand, and then within an understanding of processes of contemporary globalization (from the South) and its production of ambivalence on the other. This conjuncture is provoking new analyses of subaltern agency within a much broader ideological territory. For instance, in South Africa, discourses on the concept of an African renaissance are advanced within a framework that conjoins

pan-Africanism, ideologies of alterity, multiculturalism as well as views on the processes of contemporary globalization (Muchie, 2003).

Here, we present a particular global ideological structure informed by a view of local and global forces working in combination in the South (India) and then another scenario in which the politicization of culture (political Islam) plays a dominant part. These two scenarios- in which the configurations of subaltern agency play a prominent part- are discussed in order to highlight the negative and positive aspects of contemporary processes of globalization and the loci of subaltern counter-discursivity.

Ngugi wa Thiongo, who is a central focus of this article, began his critique of hegemonic ideological structures as an advocate of overtly leftist ideologies- in this instance, socialism- but as the global ideological structure collapsed after the dismantling of the Soviet bloc, his radical leftist posture was abandoned in favour of one that was though still welfarist in outlook but less radical in tone. In the final analysis, we suggest that the transformation of the global ideological structure after the political collapse of the former Soviet Union correlates with a political de-radicalization in wa Thiongo's discursive profile and a slight de-ideologization of his paradigm of decolonization. However, this ideological de-radicalization is accompanied by a greater appreciation of the notion of ambivalence that is inherent in colonial relations. Indeed apart from engaging with the more obvious implications of wa Thiongo's theory of decolonization, we explore how the notion of ambivalence plays out in his work. As mentioned, the de-radicalization of his original political stance, is, we suggest, accompanied by an appreciation of the logics of ambivalence inherent in typical colonial relations.

In conceptual terms the forms of colonial logic we address foreground two different views of colonial relations. The first view, which deals with a view of "globalization from below" foregrounds a notion of ambivalence in colonial relations. The second, based on the politicization of culture after the 9/11 event, suggests a re-habitation of the old classical colonized/colonizer dichotomy in colonial relations. In spite these basic differences, they are united by a common project of counter-discursivity which attempt to foreground the global South as the site of rational subaltern agency. These two views of colonial relations are expressed using paradigms from social science and postcolonial theory.

A Global Imaginary

It is often argued that the concept of the contemporary global is extremely problematic and difficult to theorize (van Binsbergen, 2003). Yet, it is often useful to attempt to theorize it in order to make sense of the multiple disjunctures that characterize the contemporary world. Perhaps a major starting point would be to de-universalize the global, to look for the parochial within the global and the ways in which it ends up being universal.

In a way, Himadeep Muppidi's book, *The Politics of the Global*, adopts this approach. He begins by examining the local/global politics in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh and the efforts of its chief minister, Naravarapally Chandrababu Naidu, to make his state efficient and thus a destination for global capital. In order to accomplish this, he intends to create a situation whereby "the public will expect government services to be comparable with the best services available from the private sector in terms of quality, accuracy, timeliness and user-friendliness. Clients will no longer tolerate delays, bureaucratic mistakes or excessive time-consuming and difficult procedures" (Muppidi, 2004: xiv). This means accepting a certain model of the global in which major U.S. economic decisions such as the American Competitiveness Bill, in a way, become far more significant within the context of Andhra Pradesh than in the U.S. itself. In making this point, that is, in advancing this sort of reading, Muppidi privileges a notion of globality that is counter-hegemonic and which is at the same time de-universalized and also devoid of the atavism of a certain kind of parochialism or what might be termed under less harsher circumstances, the imperatives of the local. However, what isn't projected in Naidu's understanding of globalization is that national economies often lose autonomy and the scope for self-determination becomes narrower. This crucial bit of knowledge is almost totally absent. So in some respects he connects with the sort pro-globalization ethic fostered by figures such as Thomas Friedman (2001) and thus further complicates various notions of the global.

Muppidi's main brief is "an exploration of the spaces and strategies for resisting the colonization of the global" (2004: xviii). It sounds clear enough but it might not be always that simple. He reminds us that globalization for the majority of the world's people is often believed to be a form of colonization and so for this reason ought to be resisted. There is also the claim that there is a 'democratic deficit' in global affairs and the global institutional order. This means there are grave contradictions within the

current world system. For instance, Chinese and Indian nationals make up the majority of the world's population yet this fact hardly matters within the existing structure of the global institutional order as Muppidi suggests. There are extremely difficult problems to be encountered in attempts to construct a unified global political constituency. And this better explains the notion of democratic deficit.

Up to this point, Muppidi spends a great deal of time re-reading the theories of some social scientists on the politics of the global which he often finds wanting. And then he raises a very evocative point on the question of identity; "If identities are constitutive of interests and practices, and the corporate identities of states are historical products, shouldn't this historical constitution of state identity be open to meaningful analysis?" (Muppidi, 2004: 9). Another important point in this regard is that "actors normally have multiple social identities that vary in salience... Social identities have both individual and social structural properties..." (Muppidi, 2004: 10). Similarly, the constructions of these various identities are often mediated by different relations of power.

But let us return to the more prominent features of the politics of the global. There present crises of global capital is partly as a result of the "increasing disjuncture between the 'territorial reach' of capital and the boundaries of the nation-state" (Muppidi 2004: 14). The multiple forms of accumulation engendered by global capital have ended up creating new layers of inequality, new structures of colonization that we have to find new ways to conceptualize. The postmodern West conceives of its modern/premodern Other as incomplete and oftentimes as a threat that must be contained; "the 'incompleteness' of the developing state, a 'lack' awaiting completion, which arises primarily because non-Western states are defined, framed, and judged within a framework of categories that takes the Western experience as the universal norm" (Muppidi 2004: 16). To this hegemonic view, Muppidi posits another: "Given the diversity of human beings and political communities in the world, it is reasonable to assume that there are multiple social realities, multiple ways of imagining and inhabiting our world" (2004: 20). Consequently, two models of globality are proffered, "a colonial globality structured around the silencing of difference and a postcolonial one that relates to difference through democratic engagement and dialogue" (Ibid.). Not surprisingly, the latter model informs the thrust of Muppidi's argument.

He then contemplates the possibilities for the evolution of “a global morality that seemingly transcends politics, context, and issues of agency and social power” (Muppidi 2004: 23). On this particular point, he argues that global morality can be made to be ‘intersubjectively desirable’. We would think this notion requires far more elaboration.

The question of social imaginaries plays an important role in relation to issues of agency, identity and social power as Muppidi clearly demonstrates. Accordingly, we are informed that “the social imaginary exists in a mutually productive relationship with social actors and is thus either reproductive or transformative of their social identities and relatedly their powers, interests, and practices” (Muppidi 2004:25). Also, “the social imaginary works to produce specific relations of power through the production of distinctive social identities” (Ibid.). This constant attention to matters of individual and collective agency and its framing in the language of humanism (together with discourses of counter-hegemony) in the age of triumphant neoliberalism is quite pleasing to find in the domain of social science. It means the domain is beginning to take note of the important advances that have been made in postcolonial theory and cultural studies.

This awareness of postcolonial theory as praxis for resistance is brought to bear on the critique of the projects of liberalization and modernization. Consequently, Muppidi makes the point that “liberalization is articulated as a process that would make the state more responsive to the outside, threaten its internal autonomy, and hurt its capacity to look after domestic interests” (2004:34). In other words, it is a project of political and economic disempowerment. Sometimes there is a repetitiveness about the way Muppidi recounts these now fairly old gains of postcolonial theory; “the postcolonial identity is thus characterized by a strongly ambivalent identity-logic: a strong articulation of repugnance and a repudiation of the colonizer, but also its mimicry” (Muppidi 2004: 43). Views such as this do not begin with Homi Bhabha (1994) alone. We can trace them back to the figure of Fanon, to the ideologies of resistance and blackness and then back to a host of notable contemporary figures; Said (1993), Ahmed (1996), Irele (1983, 1992, 1995, 2001), Spivak (1999) and Gates Jr. (1987, 1988) Indeed these views have almost become standard fare in cultural studies.

More importantly, the notion of ambivalence in the realm of practical politics does have its extremely startling moments. For instance, the figure of non-resident Indian (NRI) evokes significant moments in postcolonial

theory and history. Muppidi describes it thus: “The NRIs are neither Self nor Other, both Self and Other. They inhabit the spaces of the West and of India. As residents of the West, NRIs are very intimate with modernity. But as persons of Indian origin (it doesn’t really matter how many centuries ago they originated), NRIs are also coded as successfully reproducing Indianness in alien spaces and of forever desiring to return home” (Muppidi 2004:56). Indeed the figure of the NRI disrupts the logic colonial globality by its own logic of ambivalences. This logic of ambivalences resonates everywhere most especially in contexts that attempt to negotiate the tradition/modernity divide.

Colonial globality which Muppidi condemns not only affects the non- West sector, the weak and the poor as he suggests. Through its homogenizing tendencies, it strips the world of its diversity and both consumers and the consumed become victims of its violence. Corporate capitalism is destroying difference on a global scale and the demarcations between sites of consumption and sites to be consumed become blurred. Muppidi makes this point eloquently.

On another level, the book is a graphic demonstration of the much-needed meeting between theories of international relations and postcolonial studies. Such meetings provide ways in which to resist the violences of corporate capitalism and re-configure the postcolonial self as a self of rational global agency. Of course one wished this meeting between Bhabha and the icons of global social science theory had been staged much earlier. One also wished they are staged with even greater frequency. And as for the pervasive phenomenon of colonization, two major (among many others) trends emerge; on the one hand, one is powered corporate capital and then on the other, one which is motivated by the presence of the postcolonial self and which deflects the singular logic of capital with its own particular projects and tropes of [re]colonization. These global largely lop-sided and inadequate binaries are the polarities between which we wage various struggles over self, meaning, identity (both of which can be subsumed under the category of representation) place and belonging.

If Muppidi’s narrative is concerned with the general implications of the construction of a global neoliberal ideological infrastructure and how the postcolonial notion of ambivalence plays out within it, Mamdani explores

the same structure from the perspective of a singular incident- the 9/11 event. The following part of this article addresses Mamdani's analyses.

On the Politicization of Culture

Mahmood Mamdani argues that the 9/11 incident is the main cause for the contemporary politicization of culture and not the 'clash of civilization' arguments as propounded by the likes of Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington. Mamdani's thesis is important because it refocuses attention to the logic and violence of colonialism within the present age of contemporary globalization.

Violence, Mamdani tells us, is the very condition of modernity. Political modernity and the emergence of the modern nation-state owe much to the centralization of statist violence. In his words, "political modernity is equated with the beginning of democracy, but nineteenth-century political theorists- notably Max Weber- recognized that political modernity depended upon the centralized state monopolizing violence" (Mamdani 2004:5). In the construction of political unities- identities and communities- the state employed its monopoly of violence using strategic rationality to either foster political belonging or exclusion as was the case during the period of the Spanish Inquisition. Indeed, there were "two kinds of victims of European political modernity: the internal victims of state building and the external of imperial expansion" (Mamdani, 2004: 5-6). Thus both natives and foreign subjects were always vulnerable to the projects of rationalized violence of the modern nation-state.

In order to foster its imperialist aims, political modernity employed both race (South Africa) and bureaucracy (Algeria, Egypt and India) for the capture, containment and control of subject peoples. But containment and control were not the only strategies of the imperial motive. Genocide was also a vital aspect of the project in which the Maoris of New Zealand and the Herero of German South West Africa were exterminated in line with the imperatives of the colonial ambition (see also his *When Victims become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda* [2001]). Indeed, "imperialism had served civilization by clearing inferior races off the earth found widespread expression in nineteenth-century European thought, from natural sciences and philosophy to anthropology and politics" (Mamdani 2004:6). Genocide was always close to the heart of the imperial project but its violence and destructiveness were always rationalized by Western orders of knowledge that were devoted to the overall project of

colonization. Similarly, a distinction was made between civilized wars and colonial wars. As such, “the laws of war applied to wars among the civilized nation-states, but laws of nature were said to apply to colonial wars, and the extermination of the lower race was seen as a biological necessity” (Mamdani 2004: 7).

The genocidal aspect of the imperial project was also based on scientific knowledge. Indeed, “the German geneticist Eugen Fischer’s first medical experiments focused on a “science” of race mixing in concentration camps for the Herero. His subjects were both Herero and the offspring of Herero women and German men. Fischer argued that “mulattoes,” Herero-Germans born of mixed parentage, were physically and mentally inferior to their German parents” (Mamdani 2004: 8). In this instance, the supposed objectivity of science is cast aside for the overriding imperial agenda. To further the aims of science, the Herero subject was also feminized according to its underlying imperial logic. Hence, a binary colonial logic was instituted; German/male, Herero/female, science/ignorance, active/passive, developed/undeveloped etc. The binary logics of the colonial project were unequivocal, quite unsophisticated and also uncomplicated.

Mamdani re-reads how the violence of this colonial logic works within the contemporary moment. Within the post-9/11 global political configuration, Mamdani strongly suggests that this very colonial logic is still very much in place. In the name of Culture Talk, categories such as premodernity and (post)modernity have been granted greater ideological- as well as emotional-force. As such, two contrasting notions of premodernity are advanced: “one thinks of premodern peoples as those who are not yet modern, who are either lagging behind or have yet to embark on the road to modernity. The other depicts the premodern as also the antimodern. Whereas the former conception encourages relations based on philanthropy, the latter notion is productive of fear and preemptive police or military action” (Mamdani, 2004:18). Mamdani also advances the argument that “during the Cold War, Africans were stigmatized as the prime example of peoples not capable of modernity. With the end of the Cold War, Islam and the Middle East have displaced Africa as the hard premodern core in a rapidly globalizing world” (2004:19). Political Islam, Mamdani also suggests, is not a creation of Muslim fundamentalists. Rather, in its contemporary form, political Islam in its current violent phase, emerged from the ashes of the Cold War. In his words, “political Islam was born in the colonial period. But it did not give rise to a terrorist movement until during the Cold War” (Mamdani, 2004:14).

Mamdani's conclusions ought to be clear enough. The contemporary ideological categories of premodernity and (post)modernity are underpinned by an old colonial logic and in the present age of advanced weapons systems, an extremely violent one. Also politically, economically and technologically disempowered peoples within the current moment of contemporary globalization are forced to partake in the same old colonial struggles over identities and representation. Mamdani also suggests that the contemporary politicization of culture can prove to be ultimately harmful. In the ossification of cultural and political differences, violence in general, might increase. In another context, he illustrates how the Rwandan genocide that occurred because the Hutus and the Tutsis were unable to negotiate the politics of difference and identity (Mamdani, 2001).

In view of the analyses by Muppidi and Mamdani, we have tried to demonstrate the new form of colonial globality together with the new ideological architecture that grew into prominence following the 9/11 event. These twin configurations of political developments compel us to reconceptualize the notion of the *human* in the age of virtuality. Accordingly, it has been argued that "while there is much to be learned from the metaphysical lineage that stretches from Plato to Kant, there is no need for- or possibility to- base a viable notion of human rights on an original or transcendental notion of the human" (Ian Balfour and Eduardo Cadava, 2004: 284). Furthermore, "human rights, as encoded in the incipient documents, such as the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, always rely on a *certain* conception of the human, and it seems that not all humans share the same conceptions of the human" (Ibid.). That is why incidents of genocide such as those directed at Armenians, Jews and Tutsis have not elicited the same kinds of responses as say the 9/11 event. This realization necessitates a critique of global apartheid and a greater liberation of difference.¹ As a theorist of culture, Ngugi's work offers one of the ways in which to initiate this vital critique as it addresses both the status of the human as well as the general logic of colonialism.

Also, it is significant to note that if Muppidi's analyses foregrounds the notion of ambivalence, Mamdani's critique of the global ideological infrastructure reflects upon the re-habitation of an old colonial logic based on the colonized/colonizer divide. In addressing wa Thiongo's work, we will explore how these two views of classical colonial relations work.

Decolonization and Transformation

The question of decolonization within the African continent continues to draw a great deal of attention (Kebede, 2004). The range of Ngugi wa Thiongo's project of decolonization is a product of his long study of the dynamics of colonialism and its attendant phenomena. He began by questioning the neo-colonial educational arrangement in Kenya as far back as the late sixties when he was still a rather young scholar. In his important book *Writers in Politics* (1981), he states:

Let us not mince words. The truth is that the content of our syllabi, the approach to and presentation of the literature, the persons and the machinery for determining the choice of texts and their interpretation, were all an integral part of imperialism in its classical colonial phase, and they are today an integral part of the same imperialism but now in its neo-colonial phase (wa Thiongo, 1981:5).

Ngugi wa Thiongo goes on to examine the relationship between literature and society and how this linkage in turn radically affects a people's cultural orientation. A central assertion of his is that "literature was used in the colonization of our people" (Ibid.). To transform this situation, it is then necessary to employ literature for the subversion of imperialism. Throughout *Writers in Politics*, wa Thiongo maintains a decidedly Marxist ideological stance and so his analyses of the forces that control the economy, politics, education and culture are based upon the socialist conception of class and society.

At the early stages of his career, wa Thiongo had reasoned:

For the last four hundred years, Africa has been part and parcel of the growth and development of world capitalism, no matter the degree of penetration of European capitalism in the interior. Europe has thriven, in the words of C.L.R. James, on the devastation of a continent and the brutal exploitation of millions, with great consequences on the economic political, cultural and literary spheres (Ibid. p.11).

Colonialism gave way to neo-colonialism, which wa Thiongo defines thus:

Neocolonialism... means the continued economic exploitation of Africa's total resources and of Africa's labour power by international monopoly capitalism through continued creation and encouragement of subservient weak capitalistic structures, captained or overseered by a native ruling class (Ibid.p.24).

In turn, this compromised ruling class makes defence pacts and other unequal agreements with its former colonial overlords so as to secure its grip on political power. The underclass, for its part, is effectively alienated from the structures of power. wa Thiong'o urges that "we must insist on the primacy and centrality of African literature and the literature of African people in the West Indies and America"(Ibid.p.90) so as to present a unified front against cultural and psychological effects of global imperialism. In this regard the oral literature of our people is of particular importance. Secondly, he states that:

Where we import literature from outside, it should be relevant to our situation. It should be the literature that treats of historical situations, historical struggles, similar to our own (Ibid.).

This is a point wa Thiong'o stresses repeatedly in his numerous texts, and one reason that his conception of decolonization can be recognised to be not only radical but also broad in the range of its discursive investments. As such, his understanding of decolonization has an undoubtedly global dimension, as will be discussed later. Furthermore, wa Thiong'o agrees with Fanon that decolonization is a radical process in which the oppressed classes of subalternity all over the world would have to "adopt a scientific materialistic world outlook on nature, human society and human thought" (Ibid.p.31). Hence it is not enough to indulge in "a glorification of an ossified past" (Ibid.). Indeed, he is always critical of the more unsavoury aspects of traditional cultures, as well as of imperialism. As he posits:

The embrace of western imperialism led by America's finance capitalism is total (economic, political, cultural); and of necessity our struggle against it must be total. Literature and writers cannot be exempted from the battlefield (Ibid.p.73).

Since wa Thiongo's project of decolonization is concerned with imperialism on a global scale, he stresses the need for oppressed people all over the world to unite in order to confront it. In other words, if the dynamics of imperialism are global in nature then the counterpower to them should equally be global in its articulation. wa Thiongo describes the situation in the United States thus:

The ruling robbing minority has always been Euro-American. The Afro-American has, by and large, been part of the robbed working majority. But the Afro-American worker has been the most exploited, the most oppressed section of the working majority. Racism and racist theories have been effectively used by the ruling Euro-American minority of robbers and thieves to divide the robbed majority—Afro-American, Euro-American, Asio-American—by bribing the Euro-American working class with titbits of the loot cruelly robbed from the Afro-American workers, and also by feeding the Euro-American worker with spurious fascist notions of racial superiority and the Afro-American worker with equally spurious notions of racial inferiority (Ibid.p.125).

In this instance, he identifies two major consciousnesses within the American social system, the one positive and the other negative. The negative tendency, according to wa Thiongo, is represented by the position of figures like Phyllis Wheatley and Booker T. Washington, who in turn have been followed by figures like Martin Luther King Jr., James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Whitney Young, Eldridge Cleaver and "other thinkers and spokesmen who have allied themselves with the consciousness of the exploiting and oppressing minority" (Ibid.p.134). The other tendency, which is the positive one, according to him, is represented by the position of the following activists and thinkers; Benjamin Banneker, David Walker-Douglass, Du Bois, Paul Robeson, Richard Wright, Malcolm X and George Jackson. How he arrived at his classifications and illustrations is not explained.

Nevertheless, Africa remains wa Thiongo's primary ideological site. More importantly, his book *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) carries the discourse of decolonization even further. In a statement at the beginning of the book he declares, "*Decolonising the Mind* is my farewell to English as a vehicle for any of my writings; from now on it is Gíkúyú and Kiswahili all the way".ⁱⁱ

Indeed, it can be said that language forms the major thrust of *Decolonising the Mind*. Obi Wali, the Nigerian critic, broached the important issue in 1963 and this stance had a tremendous impact in the field of literature, literary criticism and African studies generally. In view of this, it could be argued that African writers and literary theorists have not only been in the forefront of the processes of decolonization but have also defined the stakes and trajectories of the debate. African philosophers (in the strictly professional sense) have a lot to gain from those writers and literary theorists who foresaw some of the problematics they (African philosophers) are now addressing.ⁱⁱⁱ Obi Wali's now-famous thesis was that:

The whole uncritical acceptance of English and French as the inevitable medium of educated African writing is misdirected and has no chance of advancing African literature and culture. In other words, until these writers and their western midwives accept the fact that any true African literature must be written in African languages, they would merely be pursuing a dead end, which can only lead to sterility, uncreativity, and frustration... (African literature lacks any blood and stamina) because it is severely limited, to the few European-oriented few college graduates in the new universities of Africa, steeped as they are in European literature and culture.

The ordinary local audience with little or no education in the conventional European manner and who constitute an over-whelming majority has no chance of participating in this kind of literature (wa Thiongo, 1981: 55-56).

Ngugi wa Thiongo reminds us that Abiola Irele believes that indigenous African texts, that is, writing in African languages, constitute "the classical era of African literature"(wa Thiongo, 1993:20). So one can understand why

decolonization as a topic in literary and cultural studies has always generated a tremendous amount of argument. In *Decolonising the Mind*, wa Thiong'o continues to draw attention to what he regards to be the corrupting power of Western imperialism and the equally detrimental political and economic subservience of the African neo-colonial bourgeoisie, which in turn leads to "a culture of apemanship and parrotry enforced on a restive population through police boots, barbed wire, a gowned clergy and judiciary"(wa Thiong'o,1986:2). But as mentioned earlier, language remains his primary concern, and the following lengthy quotation (from *Decolonising the Mind*) reflects this preoccupation:

Why, we may ask, should an African writer, or any writer, become so obsessed by taking from his mother-tongue to enrich other tongues? Why should he see it as his particular mission? We never asked ourselves: how can we enrich our languages? How can we "prey" on the rich humanist and democratic heritage in the struggles of other people in other times and other places to enrich our own? Why not have Balzac, Tolstoy, Sholokov, Brecht, Lu Hsun, Pablo Neruda, H.C. Anderson, Kim Chi Ita, Marx, Lenin, Albert Einstein, Galileo, Aeschylus, Aristotle and Plato in African languages. And why not create literary monuments in our own languages?(Ibid.p.8).

Ngugi wa Thiong'o not only poses these vital questions but also sets out to address them in the realm of practice. Herein lies his significance as a radical theorist of decolonization. We have noted that since the late 1970's he had started composing his novels, plays, children's books and even academic essays in Gĩkũyũ. Nonetheless, this approach has its shortcomings as one hopes to demonstrate later. wa Thiong'o argues that:

Language was the most important vehicle through which power fascinated and held the soul prisoner. The bullet was the means of the physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation (Ibid.p.9).

He also avers that language possesses a dual character, since it is both “a means of communication and a carrier of culture” (Ibid.p.13). In more ways than one he emphasizes the role of culture in the evolution of language as the store of a people’s collective identity, memory and development. As he puts it:

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 (Ibid.p.16).

Another point wa Thiongo makes is that colonialism sought to dominate a people’s productive forces and distributive capabilities and in so doing it also controlled “the entire realm of the language of real life” (Ibid.). Thus the imposition of a foreign language on a people “could never as spoken or written properly, reflect or imitate the real life of that community” (Ibid.). Furthermore, wa Thiongo argues that the system of education most formerly colonized regions came to adopt was fraught with serious defects, since it was culturally alienating. Accordingly:

Since culture does not just reflect the world in images but actually, through those very images, conditions a child to see that world in a certain way, the colonial child was made to see the world and where he stands in it as seen and defined by or reflected in the culture of the language of imposition.(Ibid.p.17).

The colonial child then was compelled to view his own indigenous languages through the lens of “low status, humiliation, corporal punishment, slow-footed intelligence and ability or down right stupidity, non-intelligibility and barbarism” (Ibid.p.18). However, formerly colonized peoples were often at pains to adopt languages of imposition, which usually meant English, French, Spanish or Portuguese. The adoption of these metropolitan languages often provided sites of intense contestation. In other words they were indelibly marked by resistance and/or ambivalence on the part of the colonized. This resistance gave rise to new African languages like Krio in Sierra Leone and Pidgin in Nigeria.

This brings us to what one would consider to be the most radical proposition that wa Thiongo makes as regards the question of decolonization. He simply asks for the jettisoning of European languages of colonial imposition in favour of indigenous African languages. For Africans who continue to write in a European language, it is his view that they are merely creating “another hybrid tradition, a tradition in transition, a minority tradition that can only be termed as Afro-European literature” (Ibid.pp26-27). Those who fall into this category include Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ayi Kwei Armah, Sembene Ousmane, Agostino Neto, Sedar Senghor and several others. At this juncture, it should be pointed out that wa Thiongo’s classification of Euro-African literature would also have to include texts written by Africans in European languages in the fields of political science, sociology, anthropology and, of course, philosophy.

In 1977 wa Thiongo states that he made what could be regarded as “an epistemological break” (Ibid.p.44) with his past by his active involvement with the Kamiriithu Community and Education and Culture Centre. This break was decisive because it sought to connect the masses of Kenyan people with a truly indigenous theatrical practice.

If both *Writers in Politics* and *Decolonising the Mind* are shaped by a decidedly socialistic persuasion as well as a revolutionary fervour, the same cannot be said of wa Thiongo’s book, *Moving the Centre* (1993), where a subtle de-politicization of his thought occurs and which expresses his more recent reflections on the thematics of decolonization. In his preface to the book he declares:

I am concerned with moving the centre in two senses at least. One is the need to move the centre from its assumed location in the West to a multiplicity of spheres in all the cultures of the world. The assumed location of the centre of the universe in the West is what goes by the term Euro-centrism, an assumption which developed with the domination of the world by a handful of Western nations (wa Thiongo, 1993:p.xvi).

He continues:

Moving the centre in the two senses—between nations and within nations—will contribute to freeing of world cultures from the restrictive walls

of nationalism, class, race and gender. In this sense, I am an unrepentant universalist. For I believe that while retaining its roots in region and national individuality, true humanism with its universal reaching out, can flower among the peoples of the earth, rooted as it is in the histories and cultures of the different peoples of the earth (Ibid. p.vii) .

These two excerpts form the predominant thrust of *Moving the Centre*. More importantly, wa Thiongo equates the ideological struggles to “move the centre” with a vast process of decolonization that transformed global geopolitical relations at the end of the Second World War. The book, to be sure, is subtler than his previous books and appears more cautious about the contradictions and logic of global capital. The colonial problematic – as conceived in the colonized/colonizer divide- is refashioned to reflect a greater awareness of the notion of ambivalence in colonial relations, a notion that wa Thiongo had not dwelt upon specifically in his earlier works. Obviously, as he states, “the fax, the telex, the computer, while facilitating communications, also mean the instant spread of information and culture across national boundaries”(Ibid.p.13). Perhaps the advent of the information age and advanced communications technology are part of what caused a re-consideration of his previous radical stance. Ngugi wa Thiongo highlights these new developments in technology and as we mentioned, they might have prompted a re-evaluation of original stance where an understanding of classical colonial relations is predicated on a not fully problematized colonized/colonizer dichotomy. In addition, wa Thiongo remains a powerful theorist of Third Worldism as the following extract should evince:

The twentieth century is a product of imperialist adventurism, true, but also of resistance from the people of the Third World. The resistance is often reflected in the literature of the Third World and it is an integral part of the modern world, part of the forces which have been creating and are still creating the heritage of a common culture. They come from Asia. They come from South America. They come from Africa. And they come from the oppressed national sectors and social strata in

North America, Australasia and Europe. The Third World is all over the world (Ibid.p.18).

This is a definition that cuts across the entirety of his corpus. On some grounds, wa Thiongo has still not shifted his arguments. For instance, he affirms that “despite the hue and cry about reductionism, nativism, backward lookingness from the Europhonest opponents of this development, writing in African languages still holds the key for the positive development of new and vital traditions of literature as we face the twenty-first century”(Ibid.p.21). However, this objective is far from being realized due to several practical problems as wa Thiongo himself notes:

Writing in African languages has many difficulties and problems. Problem of literacy. Problems of publishing. Problem of lack of a critical tradition. Problems of orthography. Problems of having very many languages in the same country. Problems of hostile governments with a colonised mentality. Abandonment by some of those who could have brought their genius—demonstrated by their excellent performance in foreign languages—to develop their own languages (Ibid.).

Even wa Thiongo himself has not found a way to circumvent these numerous problems and this in my opinion remains the greatest shortcoming of his theory of decolonization. The irony is that he now wages his struggles against neo-colonialism from the site of the greatest capitalist power in the world—the US— and he now needs Western capital to facilitate the articulation of his views in institutional bases are largely funded by the West. However, in many instances in *Moving the Centre*, one observes him achieving admirable theoretical dexterity such as when he argues for cross-fertilization among languages and cultures. In the same vein, it is encouraging that wa Thiongo notes:

It is important to remember that social intellectual processes, even academic disciplines, act and react on each other not against a spatial and temporal ground of stillness but of constant struggle, of movement, and which brings about more struggle, more movement, and change, even in human thought (Ibid.p.29).

It is views such as these that have made him the subject of this discussion. But wa Thiongo himself acknowledges the difficulties of translation and that the status of a particular language is dependent on the influence of the people who speak it. Nonetheless, in spite of the numerous physical difficulties of his approach he has maintained many of his original ideological preoccupations even though they have somewhat been modified. wa Thiongo a corpus of novelistic discourse, in part, emerged out of a direct engagement with the public sphere and out of the furnace of popular struggles. It is also from this nexus of praxis that he formulates his general theory of culture and his epistemology of decolonization. This epistemology is not confined within an ahistorical framework but is often re-worked and re-formulated according to the vicissitudes of hegemony and ideology, in other words, according to changes in the global ideological architecture. This should not be read as a form of theoretical inconsistency but rather as re-workings of parts of his conceptual infrastructure that need to be reconstituted. It is this capacity for self-re-evaluation within contexts of extreme ideological contestation that makes him such an interesting theorist of culture. In other words, he is important for his critique of the conventional structure of colonialism and also the ideological synthesis that emerged after that configuration.

Conclusion

Since the end of the Cold War and 9/11 event, there has been even greater intensification of modes of conflict due to the politicization of culture and consequently, a systematic suppression of subjectivities of difference that lie outside the cultural and political hegemony on the North Atlantic hemisphere. Co-optation and suppression seem to be the only alternatives for the subaltern. Economic globalization is usually disruptive of various forms of interests and modes of socio-political organization in the South. Some of the pressures exerted by Western cultural hegemonic blocs have also been duly criticised by scholars such as Edward Said (1988, 1993, 1996). Nonetheless, in spite of the general politicization of culture in the contemporary world, the articulation of subaltern agency is always possible, agency in this sense, is always present (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1991, 1997). Ngugi's philosophy of culture and decolonization is not only a powerful symbolic form of cultural empowerment but it is also an articulate socio-political counter-discourse to hegemonic notions of culture. Also, it can be said that a significant part of wa Thiongo's outlook has been transformed by some of the changes in the global ideological structure. Ngugi wa Thiongo begins by operating within the classic colonial structure

based on the colonized/colonizer divide. And then he transcends that structure in order to function- in discursive terms- within a context of postcoloniality conditioned by multiple ruptures, overlappings and variables of interconnectedness. Needless to add, in transcending the paradigm of conventional colonial relations, wa Thiongo foregrounds a discourse of multiculturalism. So even when the admirers of his former ideological stance may denounce the de-radicalization of his political postulates, he manages to articulate a new politics of inclusiveness. While some African theorists of decolonization have been able to overcome this classical structure of colonial discursivity (e.g. Appiah, 1992; Quayson, 2003) some others have not (e.g. Chinwezu et al, 1980). By extension, wa Thiongo's theory on the agency of knowledge also transcends the speciality of culture thereby having implications for a post-Fanonian mode of African philosophy on the one hand, and post-Bruhlian projects of Africanist anthropology on the other.

As mentioned earlier, one observes a somewhat de-radicalization of his old ideological posture perhaps this serves, in part, to reflect the global changes brought on by the politicization of culture (which even in the context of a reiteration of old cultural loyalties also projects an ethic of multiculturalism) on the one hand, and the more obvious manifestations of contemporary processes of globalization on the other. His *Moving the Centre* (1993) best reflects the de-radicalization- we mentioned- in spite of its somewhat more subtle theorizations. Indeed, the main point is this regard, is that a de-radicalization of his ideological discourse has occurred even if his entire corpus on the politics and theory of culture remains important for its anti-imperialist critique and its conceptualization of a project of cultural decolonization. The de-radicalization of discourse that occurs is replaced by a greater appreciation of the notion of ambivalence and the different kinds and degrees of flux, fluidity and interconnectedness in the contemporary world. It also represents a greater understanding of the subjectivities of difference and the various complexities by which they are marked. In this sense, the lesson been advanced is that apparently non-negotiable cultural polarities can always been subverted and transcended. Accordingly, wa Thiongo's work can be read within two structures of socio-political relations and forms of discourse: the structure of classical or conventional colonial relations and the discourses of ambivalence and their multiple ruptures.

ⁱ See the essays by Etienne Balibar, Jacques Derrida, Slavoj Zizek and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in the Special Issue of *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, “And Justice for All? The Claims of Human Rights,” Ian Balfour and Eduardo Cadava eds. 103: 2/3 Spring/Summer 2004.

ⁱⁱ Statement at the beginning of Ngugi wa Thiongo’s *Decolonizing the Mind*, Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers Ltd, 1986.

ⁱⁱⁱ See for instance, Kai Kresse’s article, “The Problem of How to Use African Thought- On a Multilingual Perspective in African Philosophy,” *African Philosophy*, Vol. 12, No. 1, March 1999 which expresses a similar view.

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