

Ngugi wa Thiong'o and the Re-Owning of the Body

Monday 5 March 2018, by [BHATTACHARJEE Manash Firaq](#) (Date first published: 27 February 2018).

The Kenyan writer is of the view that the colonial system of knowledge creates a space where we are logically trapped into defining ourselves as 'other people'.

The Kenyan writer, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, was less in conversation with Githa Hariharan, and more in conversation with the space he discovered between himself and the audience at the Stein Auditorium in India Habitat Centre on February 23. Thiong'o not only speaks English differently, he also interjects it with his own language with a mannerism and style that English education could not rob him off.

English is nothing else but colonial for Thiong'o, unlike our nationalist thinkers, and our English-speaking writers and scholars. Not only does English exploit people who speak it in the colonies (not really) left behind by colonialism, but it also corrupts the colonised subject's relationship with herself. The lasting effect of the master's tongue is part of the master's logic, leaving behind his sensibility that shall in devious and subtle ways alter the universe of the colonised.

If caste is primarily a "notion", as Ambedkar said, colonialism is fundamentally a sensibility that develops and spreads through an embodiment of its language. The primary task of the colonial language is to disrupt your universe by luring you into what (you shall consider) is better (for you). It immediately severs your ties with your own history, culture and relationship with the world.

English is a language that allows you to master it and invent a paradox for yourself - by mastering the language, you declare yourself slave and master at the same time. English undergoes a remastering in the colonies and cunningly convinces the colonised of regaining self-mastery. What it ensures, politically, is to complete its secret task of recolonising the colonised.

Thiong'o has not only understood the politics of (colonial) language down to its basic logic, he has also found his clarity of resistance from it. No wonder then that he has left writing in English and gone back to writing in his own (not *native*) language. It is necessary to emphasise that Thiong'o has *not* gone back to writing in his 'native' tongue, for the idea of the 'native' is itself colonial, and any tongue is native only for the coloniser.

With evocative simplicity, Thiong'o takes us back to the roots of what we understand as education. Education, he says, is simply, "where we are". This is interesting, for he delineates not just a subject of education but also a *place*, where education *takes place*. Education is where we are because education is *about* where we are.

He says: "Knowledge begins in the body". The body is not just as an entity belonging to a subject. It is also an entity that defines a place (and has its possibilities defined by it). The task of education is to begin at the beginning, where we are, our body and our place. Education is to learn about ourselves. What colonial education does instead, Thiong'o spells out, is to carry this beginning "elsewhere", somewhere else, and displace the beginning. It turns us into receptors of a knowledge

that comes from outside about *other people*. As if knowledge begins elsewhere, from where the coloniser comes from. No wonder, we receive, (re)learn, discuss and justify the knowledge we receive from elsewhere to explain ourselves as much as the world.

This colonial system of knowledge creates a space and system where we are logically trapped into defining ourselves as other people. We become, in a way that was never envisaged by Jean-Paul Sartre, our own other people. This is also a step ahead of Edward Said's understanding the colonial encounter as a historical othering of the colonised world by Europe. The colonised other is not simply born out of the representational violence in European literature, but also produced within the colonial system of education, where the colonised others herself.

Colonialism seeks to reduce the self-confidence in the colonies by offering the colonised, a language and a world of supposedly, superior people. Making the colonised suffer from a sense of inferiority forms the psychological basis of colonialism. It paves the way for the enthusiasm towards English/European education and knowledge. Thiong'o makes the funny but telling remark that in his student days, he felt as if Shakespeare is the only playwright in the world. Colonialism works as long as the colonised is convinced that the coloniser is superior, even if he may be an exploitative figure.

"Knowledge begins in the body", as Thiong'o put it. Colonialism imparts a body of knowledge that deepens and expands by the colonised disowning his own body (of knowledge) for another. This is a forced disowning that happens through systemic ways, through the avowed curriculums of modern education, one put firmly into place by the colonised.

This system of knowledge is also inevitable, for it serves the larger market of ideas and profession waiting to claim the colonised subjects. It is precisely where, as Thiong'o tried to explain with superb simplicity, the logic of capitalism meets the logic of colonialism and completes the vicious circle.

All that capitalism wants (of us), just as colonialism, is for us to disown ourselves as ethical subjects who shall resist the forces that take over their own body. We become passive bodies of colonialism, serving the larger colonial enterprise that came in the name of profit and exploitation. We become marketed and marketable bodies that are secure in their use of English language and European knowledge that offers us lucrative entries into the global market (of ideas and professions). Thiong'o is brave to make us think over the roots of exploitation we have managed to cover ourselves up with, grappling with nuances sitting on comfortable branches.

The mention of roots and branches coincides with Thiong'o's analogy of how colonial education turns us into monkeys, as we leap from our here to elsewhere, in our mad bid to see ourselves as outsiders see us, and reclaim ourselves in the image of the coloniser. Thiong'o wants us to introspect upon the damaging possibility where we are trapped into a place where we (re)colonise ourselves. The roots of this problem are naturally deep, so naturally, that Thiong'o says, we are made to ridiculously imagine that our rivers are lesser rivers, our mountains lesser mountains, than the rivers and mountains of England. How many English educated Indians end up reading of Ghalib on Banaras or Calcutta? But they all grow up reading about the beauty of Thames.

For Thiong'o, culture is the basis to judge colonialism. The body (as the source of culture) is the capital that colonial power seeks to own, control and dominate. Culture is not mere superstructure, unlike in Marxist theory. And this is Thiong'o's understanding even though he is quite a Marxist. From my recapitulation and extension of Thiong'o arguments so far, there is a problem I face at this juncture. And it relates directly to the way we understand the complex relationship between culture, language, self/body and colonialism. Here 'self' and 'body', as two (conceptually) different entities, nevertheless form a connected narrative and mode of inferiorisation. In India, as we know, the idea

of the 'self', hierarchised under the caste system, is linked to the corresponding segregation of (touchable and untouchable) bodies.

Thiong'o mentions how in India, colonialism kept us away from (re)learning our ancient texts. He mentioned the *Vedas* and the *Puranas*. They are texts worth studying. But the values these texts espouse aren't supposed to be re-inculcated. In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi wrote, some tenets of the *Manusmriti* would create "moral anarchy" and must be discarded. Ambedkar burnt copies of Manu's text in 1927. Tagore preferred the *Upanishads* over the *Puranas* or the *Gita*, two texts that hardly find mention in his writings. These choices are modern in nature, based on present sensibilities, not past.

Inventing fixed notions of the past and glorifying certain texts is precisely the trap laid by colonialism. It opens up the problem of making certain texts that the coloniser translated, spoke about and held in esteem, as the sources of our own cultural greatness. It is provocative to ask: Would the *Gita* have become such an important nationalist text if Wilhelm von Humboldt hadn't translated it, and produced a commentary by Hegel? Isn't the problem of 'Orientalism', the way Edward Said understood it, also about how we re-orientalised ourselves through the politics of translation?

This was certainly not the production of "translated selves" that Salman Rushdie spoke about. It was more of an extension of the colonial project in the cultural sphere, where we accepted (and neglected) older texts belonging to our culture, by following the footsteps of the master. This politics of re-appropriation through texts like the *Gita* gained prominence, for nationalist thinkers thought it is necessary to flaunt the wisdom of those texts the coloniser took interest in.

As a result, a certain kind of cultural regeneration in mainstream Indian nationalism left out Kabir and Charvaka. This is not to treat the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads* or any other 'Hindu' religious/philosophical text as unimportant, but to simply question their centrality, without also taking as seriously the literature that critiques these texts.

Colonialism is hierarchical, Thiong'o says, and it implants hierarchy in our society. But here we may depart a bit, but crucially, from Thiong'o formulation, for it isn't colonialism that is responsible for the *original* hierarchy that taints our social relations. Caste hierarchy precedes (and complicates) class hierarchy in India, and its "date of birth" was placed by Ambedkar around 400 AD.

India's history prior to colonialism creates a paradox vis-a-vis the colonial encounter, where the (Sanskritic) tools of the Brahminical master is disrupted by English education. Even though the upper castes readjusted their hegemony by responding to the new cultural challenge by mastering it, the intellectual discourse of resistance against Brahminical hegemony appeared from that very "elsewhere" that colonised us. Of course, it appeared for Thiong'o as well, the way he dismantles the logic of the capitalist structure with Marxist acumen. But since all (pre-colonial) cultures are also stained by a colonial logic of hegemony, the resistance for us has been twofold.

Modern, religious politics or the politics of religious nationalism, in this sense, is a discourse of re-appropriation by following the colonial logic. It serves the internal coloniser, the Brahminical class/caste, to further its cultural interest and social power by offering us a great past. Any text, religious, social or nationalist, can be used to foment the idea of a great past, where we apparently need to return to for lost glory.

One coloniser will imitate another, for their interests are perpetual dominance over other people. It is necessary to treat the idea of cultural glory with skepticism and wariness. To know, as Thiong'o hinted, of such schools of religious and cultural regeneration as (capitalist) corporations. The point

of return is not to replace one coloniser with another, but to find out how can those who seek liberation from power, find it. Even today the Dalit body is bullied and shamed, exactly the way Thiong'o mentioned what the white coloniser did to the African body. The bully in India, shaming the Dalit body, was never the white coloniser. The re-ownership of that body then is intrinsic to a longer history of oppression that needs to be rejected.

Manash Firaq Chattacharjee

P.S.

The Wire

<https://thewire.in/228129/ngugi-wa-thiongo-and-the-re-owning-of-the-body/>