

LANGUAGE AND THE SELF: COLONIAL EXILE AND POSTCOLONIAL RECOVERY

Jen Khai Yew

There was a time when my mind would render a chair linguistically as “kau-ié,” a word that my family has used for generations and generations to refer to sitting implements. But now a chair is “chair.” In my adolescence, English supplanted Penang Hokkien as the language of my thoughts, and now my mind instinctively settles on the English “chair,” occupying the boxy curtness of the English word rather than the rounded, sing-song syllables of “kau-ié.” Now, I love, grieve, and dream in English. In the grand historical perspective, my linguistic migration can perhaps be seen as an instance of a much larger movement—the inevitable vestiges of British colonialism, or the consequences of a pragmatic educational policy that is eager to keep up with the lingua franca of the world. That is to say, my adoption of English as the language of my consciousness was perhaps inevitable. Yet, I often feel as though I am not at home in English, as though I am trespassing in some hallowed cathedral, a visitor overstaying his welcome. English feels like something borrowed, a language that is incidental rather than essential to my being. There are no more “kau-ié”s except in the hazy memory of my childhood. Meanwhile I sit uneasily on the edge of the “chair,” never really reclining into its affricated embrace.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, in his collection of essays *Decolonizing the Mind*, identifies this feeling of linguistic estrangement as part of a broader phenomenon which he calls “colonial alienation” (347). Ngũgĩ’s context is, unlike my upbringing in post-colonial Malaysia and Singapore, a decidedly colonial one. His school, ruled by colonists, expressly forbade the use of Ngũgĩ’s native Gĩkũyũ, meting out harsh and humiliating punishments to whomever was caught speaking it (342). Meanwhile, English was exalted and enshrined—any achievement in English was rewarded with “prizes, prestige, applause” (342). This system of strong incentives, as one might

expect, reinforces the primacy of English in the schoolchildren's minds. For Ngũgĩ, this is an act of linguistic violence—it causes in the child a “dissociation, divorce, or alienation from the immediate environment,” a dissonance between the language that they speak and the reality that they inhabit (347). Certainly, and thankfully, most post-colonial children do not experience this explicit and inhumane system of carrots-and-sticks. However, there is still a subtler scheme of incentives at work today. In postcolonial countries the distinction is still drawn between languages with currency (most commonly, English) and languages without, and the valuation is reflected in the pressures placed on schoolchildren to master the language that leads to economic success. For most people in Malaysia and Singapore, the fine-tuning of the language of business still takes precedence over the appreciation of native literature. The asymmetry of languages still exists and so do the attendant consequences.

Colonial alienation, Ngũgĩ contends, is rooted in linguistic oppression—“the domination of a people's language by the languages of the colonizing nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonized” (346). Language for Ngũgĩ has two crucial aspects—it is both “a means of communication and a carrier of culture” (343). The former, language as communication, encompasses both the basic, spoken, mediatory function of language and its written manifestations. For the colonial subject, the “broad harmony” between these two facets of language is broken (344). There is no correspondence between the English of education and the Gĩkũyũ or Hokkien of daily life. “Harmony” is a telling word—this internal correspondence of language has a *je ne sais quoi* about it, a musicality that allows our stream of consciousness to proceed with unburdened vim. Ngũgĩ cites the example of the word “missile,” which “used to hold an alien far-away sound” for him until he learnt the Gĩkũyũ equivalent of “ngurukuhi” (346). Linguistic imposition impinges on one's capacity to emotionally engage with concepts. The condition of the colonized is that of persistent estrangement from this musicality of the mind.

The second aspect of language, language as culture, provides further troubling consequences. Ngũgĩ argues that the language of the colonizers reflects and elevates the culture of the colonizers, while

undermining the culture of the colonized (346). This imposition of culture is exacerbated by representations of the colonized person's culture. Ngũgĩ cites Hegel's writing, which characterizes African culture as a place where there is "nothing harmonious with humanity" (348). Indeed, the sense of permanence and authority that emanates from written texts, especially ones considered canonical, seems to further reinforce notions of inferiority in the mind of the colonized. Binyavanga Wainaina satirizes these oppressive representations in his essay "How to Write about Africa," a tongue-in-cheek litany of instructions for Western writers. His sardonic manual calls for gross oversimplifications and exoticization. Wainaina's essay illustrates a subtler dimension of the cultural destruction that Ngũgĩ describes—the insidious form of cultural denigration exacerbated by the nuances of language. Wainaina provides many examples which operate on a more subconscious level in their oppression. Even simple words like 'darkness' and 'bygone' and 'timeless,' when employed under the careless, patronizing gaze of those in power, can reduce the complexities of entire cultures (543). The earthly and primordial representations of the colonized are on the surface innocuous and perhaps even empowering, but in reality they lock the colonized culture in stasis. The romanticization of the other is as alluring as it is flattening. Wainaina illustrates that the absence of nuance in these "[b]road brushstrokes" is harder to detect than other incongruities (545). These one-dimensional images accumulate and ossify and, as Ngũgĩ writes, one begins "seeing oneself from outside oneself as if one was another self" (347). The dominance of the colonizer's culture exerts both overt and implied forms of oppression, resulting in disharmony between the colonized people and their culture.

Ngũgĩ suggests that the colonial subject's mental life is full of both linguistic and cultural dissonance. What recourse does the colonized subject have? The pragmatist in me, like Chinua Achebe (whom Ngũgĩ cites), wants to reconcile with the given circumstances, carve out a niche in the colonial language for myself. But Ngũgĩ seems to think that such a solution is neither possible nor desirable. Indeed, he stopped writing in English after *Decolonizing the Mind*, returning to his native language, Gĩkũyũ. This seemingly radical departure resonates with the rage and indignance that Jamaica Kincaid expresses in

her essay "On Seeing England for the First Time." She vividly describes her mental colonization, sketching out her colonial education, which had "an iron vise at the back of [her] neck" that forced her to imbibe images of veneration as an outsider looking into England and Englishness (423). As an adult, she finally visits England, but instead of exultation she feels disgust and the violent desire to "take [England] into [her] hands and tear it into little pieces and then crumble it up as if it were clay, child's clay" (425). This disillusionment stems from the disparity between the romantic visions of England that suffused her upbringing and the reality of "the real England, not a picture, not a painting, not through a story in a book, but England" (425). Kincaid's journey to the country that ruled over her native Antigua and her youthful self's imagination provide a physical, literalized displacement analogous to Ngũgĩ's mental one. It is hard for the colonized to realize that the exaltation of the colonizer's culture is as disproportionate as the undermining of their own; it is as integral to the fabric of colonial existence as water is to fish. Colonial alienation is thus twofold: the colonized are simultaneously separated from their own culture and barred from their colonizer's culture, stranded in the middle of nowhere.

Can home be found in that middle ground? Perhaps. Salman Rushdie, in his lecture "Is Nothing Sacred?," suggests that language in the form of literature is the arena for transcendence. The novel is for him "the stage upon which the great debates of society can be conducted" (364). He recognizes that the reader is not a vessel that blindly imbibes whatever ideas are presented on the page. Instead, literature, being a place where "we can hear voices talking about everything in every possible way," allows for the reader to be an active participant in discourse (371). Language may thus be both the captor and the emancipator for the colonized. Indeed, the very activity of postcolonialism is concentrated in discourse. The conversations we have regarding Ngũgĩ's essays and Rushdie's and Kincaid's novels aid us in recovering from the exile of the self from the self. Thus, Ngũgĩ's decision to write exclusively in Gikũyũ is perhaps, in an increasingly globalized world, overly reclusive. It closes an avenue for discourse, and as Rushdie writes, "wherever in the world the little room of literature has

been closed, sooner or later the walls have come tumbling down” (371).

Ngũgĩ’s absolutist, us-versus-them outlook is no doubt a product of his context. It is a testament to the harrowing and divisive psychological trials of colonization. In the postcolonial world, however, it may no longer be beneficial, or indeed possible, to conceive of our identities in such a static manner. To do so would be to submit entirely to the arbitrary conditions of the birth lottery and fail to acknowledge our increasingly fluid cultural identities. I, for example, am a fourth-generation Chinese immigrant to Malaysia who myself immigrated to Singapore, grew up assimilating to Anglo-American culture and ideals, and has now come to the United States. Globalized identities defy easy categorization.

Moreover, the static delineation of cultural identity removes choice from the individual. Jhumpa Lahiri, in a memoir entitled “Teach Yourself Italian,” recounts the process of attempting to internalize Italian, a language “that has nothing to do with [her] life,” at least initially (Lahiri). Her reflections on Bengali, her “mother tongue,” echo Ngũgĩ’s alienation: “When you live in a country where your own language is considered foreign, you can feel a continuous sense of estrangement. You speak a secret, unknown language, lacking any correspondence to the environment. An absence that creates a distance within you” (Lahiri). But unlike Ngũgĩ, Lahiri does not consider any language as home, instead suggesting that she may be “a writer who doesn’t belong completely to any language.” The reasons for her insistence on her “odd linguistic journey” at first elude Lahiri, until a friend writes to her: “a new language is almost a new life, grammar and syntax recast you, you slip into another logic and another sensibility.” Lahiri came to realize that her desire to learn another language was a desire to subject herself to “metamorphosis.” She recounts the moment in the *Metamorphoses of Ovid* “when the nymph Daphne is transformed into a laurel tree,” and reflects that the “beauty of this scene is that it portrays the fusion of two elements, of both beings” (Lahiri). Yet she recognizes that a total linguistic metamorphosis is not possible—“the part of [her] conditioned to write in English endures” (Lahiri).

What this vision suggests to postcolonial societies is the possibility to occupy an identity that straddles both our pre-colonial origins and postcolonial predicaments. Lahiri writes: "It's not possible to become another writer, but it might be possible to become two." Chair is "kau-ié" is "chair," not either/or, but both. In chairs, as in all things, I now locate a superimposition of two linguistic worlds, the world of my childhood and the world of my present. Ngũgĩ's pre-colonial idyll cannot be restored, for like any nostalgia it is a yearning for a past that no longer exists. Rather, it is a past that can no longer exist solely, but instead one that must coexist with now, with other temporalities. What we need then is not a harmony within the self, but a harmony between our multiple selves. Fragmentation is a prerequisite for iridescence, and alienation is but eternal sojourning. It is time to move on.

WORKS CITED

- Kincaid, Jamaica. "On Seeing England for the First Time." *The Broadview Anthology of Expository Prose*, edited by Laura Buzzard et al., 3rd ed., Broadview Press, 2016, pp. 419-428.
- Lahiri, Jhumpa. "Teach Yourself Italian." *The New Yorker*, 7 Dec. 2015. www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/12/07/teach-yourself-italian.
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. "From *Decolonizing the Mind*." *The Broadview Anthology of Expository Prose*, edited by Laura Buzzard et al., 3rd ed., Broadview Press, 2016, pp. 340-348.
- Rushdie, Salman. "Is Nothing Sacred?" *The Broadview Anthology of Expository Prose*, edited by Laura Buzzard et al., 3rd ed., Broadview Press, 2016, pp. 360-371.
- Wainaina, Binyavanga. "How to Write about Africa." *The Broadview Anthology of Expository Prose*, edited by Laura Buzzard et al., 3rd ed., Broadview Press, 2016, pp. 543-546.