

FROM ALTERITY TO AGENCY: PATHWAYS OF SUBVERSION AND RESISTANCE IN NGUGI WA THIONG'O'S PERSONAL ESSAYS

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Abstract

In this paper, we have evaluated the contribution of aesthetic and rhetorical devices to Ngugi wa Thiong'o's artistic mission of sabotaging the political, social, cultural and economic hegemony of empire. We have focused on his deployment of anecdotes, extended metaphors, essayistic allusions, argumentative structure, persuasive juxtaposition, concession structure and irony as aesthetic categories to undermine the domineering imperial codes. Our guiding theoretical lights have been postcolonialism, stylistics and the theory of the personal essay. The postcolonial approach adopted here is in the mould of Gayatri Spivak and Kwame Anthony Appiah; the stylistics perspective is illuminated by Rodger Webster, Peter Barry, Paul Simpson, Eriko Bollobas, Michael Kirkhood Halliday and Chris Holcomb; while the theory of the personal essay is framed by Michel de Montaigne, Phillip Lopate, Theodor Adorno, Holman Clarence Hugh, John D. Ramage and Bense-Meyers and others. This investigation is pitched in the premise that Ngugi writes subversively from the subordinated margins of 'alterity' against the hierarchical power of colonial and imperial empire. In this study, we selected personal essays from the following collections: *Writers in Politics: Essays*; *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*; *Decolonising the Mind: Politics of Language in African Literature*; *Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture and Politics*; *Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams: The Performance of Literature and Power in Postcolonial Africa*; *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance* (first published as *Remembering Africa*); and *Secure the Base: Making Africa Visible in the Globe*.

Key words: Alterity, Cosmopolitanism, Essayistic Persona, Personal Essay, Postcolonialism, Resistance, Stylistics

Introduction

It is worth starting this analysis by noting that the texts selected for this study are demarcated within the genre of the personal essay. In the words of Alfred Upham, “The charm of the modern personal essay is the exposition of the personality of the essayist. The essayist reveals himself to the readers in his subtlety, delicacy, whimsicality and buoyancy of spirit” (140). We compliment this view of the personal essay with the words of Theodor Adorno, who avers that the personal essayist “composes as he experiments; turns his object around, questions it, feels it, tests it, reflects on it; considers the object from different sides in his mind’s eye” (*Notes to Literature* 17). Having broadly defined the genre, we examine the stylistic principles underlying the personal essay within the amplitude framed by Phillip Lopate, who points out its attributes such as “personal element, freshness of form, an intimate style, autobiographical content and the projection of the subjective voice of the essayist – the writer’s *I* or point of view” (xxiii). Another trait of the personal essay explored by its founding father, Michel de Montaigne, is its “experimental nature and conversational tone” (*The Complete Essay*, 57). The hallmark of the personal essay is its intimacy: “The writer seems to be speaking directly into your ear, confiding everything from gossip to wisdom ... the personal essayist sets up a relationship with the reader, a dialogue, a friendship based on identification, understanding, testiness and companionship” (Lopate xxiv).

The personal essay being a sub-category of the essay, needs to be demarcated from the formal essay. According to Holman Hugh in *A Handbook to Literature*, the formal or impersonal essay is characterized by “seriousness of purpose, dignity, logical organization and length, in which literary technique is secondary to serious purpose” (348). Hugh adds that “the writer of the formal essay is ordinarily a silent presence behind the words” (349). Similarly, the tone of the formal essay “is usually impersonal and serious, and its structure is tightly controlled” (Wingard *Literature* 1485). What is implied here is that the formal essay strives to achieve objectivity and avoids a subjective slant. This distinction is important to us because in the purview of this study, we have selected those essays that fall within the clear margins of the personal essay.

We also predicate this study on the understanding that “language is the basic material of literature” (Webster 30); that stylistics is “a critical approach that aims to show how the technical linguistic features of a literary work...contribute to its overall meaning and effect” (Barry 202); and that the methodology of stylistics “makes discoveries about the structure and function of language by explaining the linguistic patterns in a literary text” (Simpson 4). We interpret the essayistic voice in the manner laid out by Yaani (1551), who affirms it as a stylistic feature, which endeavours to persuade and win the reader’s sympathy. The dialogic situation in the essay is usually built within the interaction between the essayist and the implied reader (Langacre 170;

Bollobas 40; Halliday 333; Holcomb 189). Likewise, essayists often deploy various forms of irony to convey important information with subtlety (Muecke 2). Of similar importance to our analysis is the engagement with the personal essay as a rhythmic project, a cohesive text resulting from the skilful merger of the multiple voices and various focalisations. Based on the preceding information, we have, therefore, examined the essays as stylistically structured systems of speech performances. Style is also seen as the deliberate manipulation of language as a cultural phenomenon by either a ruling class or by an oppressed class, or which may be accepted and rejected by the same class at different phases in its development (Delany 439). This perspective on stylistics by Delany is particularly salutary in our reception of stridency in some of Ngugi's essays, which could possibly fall within his revolutionary Marxist artistic vision.

The Subversive Voice of the Essayistic Persona

Our reading of Ngugi's *Decolonising the Mind* reveals a recognizable appropriation of the personal essay tradition with essayistic subtlety on display. From the outset, we are introduced to a distinctive first persona narrative voice: "Inevitably, essays of this nature may carry a holier-than-thou attitude or tone. I would like to make it clear that I am writing as much about myself as about anybody else" (xii). This is the typical authorial voice habitual unto the Western personal essay. In conveying the gist of his message in the introductory section of this collection, Ngugi asserts: "This book *Decolonising the Mind*, is my farewell to English as a vehicle of my writings. From now on it is Gikuyu and Kiswahili all the way" (xiv). Within this statement, the essayist sets the tone that runs through the breadth and length of the oeuvre of his personal essays. He announces his rejection of the imperial language that he argues has perpetrated cultural, political, technological and economic subordination of colonised societies. In the foregoing citation, we notice the possessive determiner *my*, which pre-modifies the noun *farewell*, therefore, underscoring the seriousness of Ngugi's action while locating the essayist himself right at the heart of this decision. Here, style amplifies the message in a very subtle way, further revealing to us not just the aesthetics of the essay but the weight it conveys – a momentous life-changing decision by Ngugi.

In a brief essay appearing under the title "Author's Note" (*Homecoming* xv - xix), Ngugi's first person narrative persona speaks to the reader using the personal pronoun *we*, which carries a collective conversational consciousness: "Do we think that Western capitalism and the classes that run it have suddenly changed their motives and interests in Africa?... We would be deceiving ourselves if we thought that indigenous capitalism... would produce a society where a few do not live on the blood of others" (xvii). Ngugi makes a beeline for capitalism and calls it out for its opprobrious and deleterious effect on African cultures, identities, nationalism, languages and economy. The rhetorical question in this citation recognises the presence of the reader whom the essayist is determined to persuade and subtly influence. We are not given the answer to this question, since it is not necessary: the question achieves a rhetorical effect – it emphasises the sad reality about the real intentions of Western capitalism, forcing the audience

to deeply reflect on the matter. This message is reinforced by a cross-textual reference to the weighty words he writes in *Decolonising the Mind*: “The present predicaments of Africa are often not a matter of personal choice: they arise from an historical situation. Their solutions are not so much a matter of personal decision as that of a fundamental social transformation ... a real break with imperialism and its internal ruling allies” (xii). In both instances cited above, the essayist exposes the malady ailing his society and follows this up by pricking the consciousness of his readers/audience, artistically nudging them into acts of resistance, rebellion and liberation.

The predicament of marginality that Ngugi is exposing can be seen as constituting “alterity, a term that also means “Otherness” (Baldwick 9). The term is used to “describe the inherent strangeness of those we do not understand; the relationship between the colonised and coloniser; and the relationship between the self and that part of ourselves that we disavow” (Buchanan 12). Our adoption of this term is strictly within its application to the unequal, exploitative and dehumanising relationships between the imperial centre and its periphery.

In the essay “J.M. – A Writer’s Tribute” (*Writers in Politics*), the writer is not only mourning the assassination of, but also celebrating the fruitful life and personal contributions to the nation by, Josiah Mwangi (J.M) Kariuki. In this essay, we notice that Ngugi is engaging the reader through the essayistic first person *I* narrator. He recalls his personal friendly encounters with Kariuki, his fascination with Kariuki’s book, *Mau Mau Detainee*, the struggle Kariuki was waging within government against exploitation and oppression of the poor, the macabre assassination, the public reaction against Kariuki’s killing, and the legacy Kariuki left behind. We read a litany of lamentations by Ngugi in the essay: “For it was *we, we* who have kept silent and propped up an unjust oppressive system... So *we* kept quiet when Gama Pinto was killed; when Mboya was murdered; when Kung’u Karumba disappeared... *We* kept quiet saying it was not really our *shauri*” (85). Ngugi’s construction of the collective implicature is designed to prick our conscience, to question our complacency, to spur us into action. The collective pronoun *we* projects an implied collective agreement between Ngugi and the reader/audience on this urgent matter. By means of this essay, Ngugi rises up to the occasion to indict the deviant postcolonial regime of the then President Jomo Kenyatta, which he believes could have been complicit in the assassination of Kariuki. In this way, he conforms to Okot p’Bitek’s mantra that: “the artist’s thoughts, actions and guiding philosophy of life make him both a product and commentator - hence producer of his society” (*Artist the Ruler* 38). Ngugi is speaking on behalf of the silenced Kariuki, on behalf of the silenced citizens and on behalf of the whole country which could not rise up to call for justice. He writes much in the mould of p’Bitek’s artist by mustering the courage to speak amidst the fear and danger from the state. We get a sense that the writer is re-imagining an alternative political order, one which demands that the state must serve the interests of the people and which also uproots the imperial architecture on which the postcolonial state is founded.

In the same essay, Ngugi has categorized the country into two classes: the comprador bourgeois and the proletariat. He takes the side of the latter and constructs structural allusions to

those who have struggled against Western imperialism such as the Palestinians against Zionist Israel and Patrice Lumumba against the Belgians in the Congo, but who was betrayed and eventually murdered. He draws empathy towards the selfless struggles against imperialism by local heroes, Waiyaki and Dedan Kimathi, who were also betrayed. There is an effort by the essayist to inspire the readers by elevating their vision by linking local to worldwide anti-imperial campaigns. He augments his angry tone with rhetorical questions: “Who betrayed J.M Kariuki? Who killed him?” (85). The interesting thing here is that Ngugi seems to be expressing angst towards his readers: in our view, this is a rhetorical effort to stoke resistance by the “Othered” against global imperialism and its local surrogates.

In the essay “Creating Space for A Hundred Flowers to Bloom” (*Moving the Centre* 12-24), Ngugi’s essayistic persona evaluates William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and John Maxwell Coetzee’s *Foe*. The essayist avers that unlike Caliban in *The Tempest*, who displays full linguistic agency and self-assertion, Friday in *Robinson Crusoe* is barely articulate, while the crowd of Africans in *Heart of Darkness* are bereft of speech acts, a sad reality that is taken to new heights in *Foe*, where Friday hardly communicates. Ngugi rides on these contrasts to make the call for writing in African languages and articulation of African cultures as a way of energizing these marginalised forms. This contrastive and juxtapositional reading enacts a subtle resistance against imperial cultural and linguistic domination, as well as against what Homi Bhabha calls *Enstellung*: “a process of displacement, distortion, dislocation, and repetition” (“Signs taken for Wonder” 33). This is the realm of resistance, the inevitable terrain within which postcolonial writers operate. Ngugi’s instant essay can, therefore, be read as a counter-discourse against the canonical Western literature that disavowed African agency, creating the “Other.” As Tiffin argues:

the project of post-colonial literatures is to investigate the European textual capture and containment of colonial and post-colonial space ... One particular counter-discursive post-colonial field is canonical counter-discourse. This strategy is one in which a post-colonial writer takes up a character or characters, or the basic assumptions of a British canonical text, and unveils those assumptions, subverting the text for post-colonial purposes. (97)

The link between Tiffin’s proposal and what Ngugi is doing in the above essay is simple: the essayist is exposing the codes by which the postcolonial subject has been objectified, denied agency and “Othered” in some of the epoch - defining canons of European literature. We see the unmistakable role of the first-person narrative voice in the exposition, contrasts and subversion of the hidden imperial codes.

In the essay “Kenyan Culture: The National Struggle for Survival” (*Writers* 42-48), Ngugi laments the domination of Kenya’s cultural scene by foreign plays, foreign movies, foreign language, media houses owned by foreign interests, foreign music, and foreign-owned book publishers. He creates an imaginary observer and takes him on a tour of the cultural

landscape in Kenya. We read this: “Now our visitor might visit schools;” and “If our visitor should want to see book publishing houses in Kenya...” (43). The possessive determiner *our*, implicates the reader/audience in the essayist’s construction of his argument. Ngugi is both illuminating and resisting what Spivak defines as *epistemic violence* by the West on the postcolony: “The West is engaged in epistemic violence, orchestrated as a project to constitute the colonial subject as “Other,” which results in the asymmetrical obliteration of the trace of that “Other’s” precarious Subjectivity” (66). What constitutes the “Other” in this instant essay are the local Kenyan Plays, which had been unfairly denied ample time and space at the Kenya National Theatre, unlike their European counterparts. Ngugi also decries the lower rank occupied by Kenyan media houses, Kenyan music, and Kenyan book publishers. We can see the clear juxtaposition in contrasting power relations between the foreign and the local, underscoring the graphic reality of neocolonial domination.

Anecdotal and metaphorical fracture

While Ngugi’s seeks to endear his revolutionary message to the reader through the first-person narrative voice, his anecdotes and metaphors expand and solidify the thrust of his argument. In the essay, “The South Korean People’s Struggle,” (*Writers* 117-122), Ngugi writes:

Yesterday, I was moved to tears by the testimony of the Korean composer Yun I Sang when he described his experiences in the cages of Park Chung Hee. I was impressed with his statement that he gained strength to compose opera in prison from the knowledge that he was speaking for many gagged voices, for many whose bodies were being tortured. (118)

The image of Park Chung Hee’s cages conjures up an extended metaphor for the exploitative and oppressive relationship between the colonizer and the colonised around the world. Korean composer Yun I Sang metaphorically represents the freedom fighters who continue to struggle against the colonial and neocolonial forces. The anecdote metaphorically prefigures a deeper message, the message of a Marxist revolution enveloping the whole world. We should mention here that the essayist interprets the society about which he is writing in Marxist terms with a binary struggle for societal control, pitting two forces against each other: “the international bourgeoisie aligned to local compradors and the working people aided by patriotic students, intellectuals, soldiers and progressive elements in the petty middle class” (*Decolonising* 2).

A postcolonial reading of the preceding essay attributes the oppression of Korean people to the western imperial control over the economic and cultural affairs of their country through their local surrogate, dictator Park Chung Hee. As Linda Hutcheon argues, “the true priority of postcolonial discourse should be to assert and affirm a denied or alienated subjectivity” (151). This is where we situate this essay – that it is part of the effort aimed at reclaiming the freedom of the people of Korea, closely followed by the erosion of the colonialist ideology by which their freedom and identity have been devalued. Ngugi appears to link the struggle by the oppressed

people of Korean to other similar struggles around the world: considering that he was writing as an exile also points a finger of indictment at the oppressive government in Kenya.

We read another anecdote in the essay “Moving the Centre: Towards a Pluralism of Cultures,” (*Moving* 2-11), where the essayist writes: “Sometime in 1965, I handed a piece of prose to Professor Arthur Ravenscroft of a carpenter-artist at work on wood... In the copy of my novel, *A Grain of Wheat*, which I signed for Arthur Ravenscroft I was happy to draw his attention to the chapter containing the exercise” (2). In the essay from which this citation is drawn, Ngugi celebrates the struggle to liberate the literature syllabus at the University of Nairobi. He recounts the campaign he inaugurated in 1968 together with Taban lo Liyong and Owuor Anyumba, to put African literature at the centre of the syllabus. He writes that this revolution was designed to open up the cultural landscape so that “there could never be only one centre from which to view the world but that different people in the world would have their culture and environment at the centre” (*Moving* 9). Seen in the context of the above developments, the anecdote with Professor Arthur Ravenscroft reads like a metaphorical juxtaposition of two cultural polarities while also underscoring the passing of the button from the colonial master to the African student – a veritable moving of the centre.

Ngugi takes up a similar message, but slightly nuanced, in his essay “Creating Space for a Hundred Flowers to Bloom” (*Moving* 12-24), in which he calls for a universal garden of many-coloured cultural and linguistic flowers, while looking forward to cross fertilisation across these frontiers as the new horizon. This is a metaphorical construction just like this one in which he conceives “local knowledge not as an island unto itself, but as part of the main, part of the sea” (29). This latter metaphor is adopted from John Donne’s poem, “For Whom the Bell Tolls.” These two metaphors emphasise Ngugi’s concern for a new world of cross-cultural harmony, a world build on cross-cultural respect, and one in which cultural hierarchies are erased. The preceding postcolonial discussion opens us to two ideas: first, we encounter Ngugi’s resistance to Western imperial domination of both Africa’s cultural landscape as well as of its economy. The second idea is a gesture towards a global cultural melting pot in which all cultures are mutually respecting and respected. Kwame Anthony Appiah has alluded to this in his argument that:

POSTCOLONIALITY is the condition of ... a comprador intelligentsia: of a relatively small, Western-style, Western-trained, group of writers and thinkers, who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery. In the West they are known through the Africa they offer; their compatriots know them both through the West they present to Africa and through an Africa they have invented for the world, for each other and for Africa. (120)

His irreverent tone notwithstanding, Appiah is having to grapple with the question of the African writer as a navigator of the postcolonial terrain, balancing the African pull and the Western push. Perhaps, this is the way in which we could see the cultural melting pot that Ngugi is offering. The instant essay displays a double axis in Ngugi’s thought: there is the revolutionary thrust that

aspires to replace the imperial with the indigenous; and there is the rather cautious recognition of the hybrid condition, of the in-between world, wearily occupied by the postcolonial African writer. As argued by Anthony Appiah: “even when these writers seek to escape the West, their theories are irreducibly informed by their Euro-American formation. Ngugi’s conception of the writer’s potential in politics is essentially that of the avant-garde; of left modernism” (“The Postcolonial and the Postmodern” 120). Appiah also acknowledges the challenges facing the cultural hybrid, whom he calls the cosmopolitan, an individual who respects differences “because there are so many human possibilities worth exploring, we neither expect nor desire that every person or every society should converge on a single mode of life” (*Cosmopolitanism* xv). From Appiah’s perspective, Ngugi can be read as a cosmopolitan writer: he is not entirely disavowing the tools of imperial domination such as the English language, his publisher (Heinemann), his American employer and his current residence in the USA – while at the same time ramping up his unremitting pen at the past and continuing deleterious influences of the centre on the colonial subject.

Ngugi’s essay, “Imperialism of Language: English, a Language for the World?” (*Moving* 30-41), contains an anecdote that illustrates the imperial power of English language: “Recently on my way to Berlin, I chanced to open the London *Evening Standard* of 7 October 1988, and came across an article concerning the British Education Secretary Kenneth Baker’s visit to the Soviet Union... Baker had been amazed to find English being spoken in a part of the Soviet Union” (34). In specific terms, this anecdote is a metaphor signifying the dominance of English language across many cultural divides. As a literal illustration of the yearning by Russians to escape to the seemingly glittering West, it is also a metaphor of the attractiveness of the English language to Africans. Ngugi, therefore, pillories the resultant denigration, distortion and subordination of African languages by this imperial onslaught. The resistance and liberation thrust of this essay seems to accord with a view held by Chinweizu and others, who, in *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*, assert that: “At this point in time, Africa’s mission is to intensify its decolonisation and liberation... The cultural task at hand is to end all foreign domination of African culture, to systematically destroy all encrustations of colonial and slave mentality” (1). We need to state here that although Chinweizu and others were not addressing the linguistic liberation of Africa, we find their remarks applicable to Ngugi’s stated mission. Ngugi’s artistic action here involves exposing the suffocating weight of English not only on colonised societies but also its insidious encroachment on a then superpower, the Soviet Union. The dangers of such linguistic hegemony on the identity of the colonised is also acknowledged by Robert Phillipson in his contention that “Hegemonic ideas tend to be internalised by the dominated, even though they are not objectively in their interest” (8).

Our study of the essay “New Frontiers of Knowledge: The Challenge of the Pan-Africanist Social Scientist,” (*Secure* 65-76) reveals another anecdote in which the essayist gives an account of his own struggle to write in Gikuyu language while in unlawful custody in 1978. He holds that in so doing, he was enriching an African culture and history and throws a challenge

to African social scientists to do likewise. He advocates for self-evaluation by African producers of knowledge and calls for casting away of colonial languages and attendant heritage. He takes himself, his personal experience, as a metaphor that ought to extend to all African researchers.

Rhetorical allusions, juxtaposition and subversion

Like the metaphors and anecdotes we have analysed above, Ngugi has deployed allusion in several of his personal essays to sabotage the enduring legacy of imperialism. In the essay, “Imperialism of Language: English, a Language for the World?” (*Moving* 30 - 41), Ngugi refers the reader to his other collection of essays, *Decolonising the Mind*, in which he laments the unequal power relations between English and the languages of colonised people – he, therefore, calls for the empowerment of these African languages to articulate an alternative world view. He writes: “In *Decolonising the Mind* I have described the process of alienation from our own languages... I have told of instances of children being punished if they were caught speaking their African languages” (32). This rhetorical allusion presupposes that the reader is already acquainted with the referenced text. The thrust of the ensuing essay is that Ngugi is rooting for mutual respectability, equality and cross-fertilisation between world languages. He argues that English, Portuguese and French are tainted by “racism, sexism, national chauvinism, and negative images of other nationalities” (40). He proposes Kiswahili as a world language since it does not come with any nefarious baggage. Ngugi’s worries about the English language have also been raised by Phillipson in his observation that “whereas once Britannia ruled the waves, now it is English which rules them. The British empire has given way to the empire of English” (1).

Ngugi has applied another device, juxtaposition, to deconstruct the power of empire. In the essay “Voices and Icons: The Neocolonial in Emergent African Cinema” (*In the Name* 67-80), Ngugi has juxtaposed several film traditions that have dominated Africa: the colonial film, the resistance film by Africans, the tradition of accommodation and compromise, the middle ground film and the indigenous film. He catalogues the broad film traditions, their creators and exemplars: under the colonial film tradition, he places *King Solomon’s Mines* based on Rider Haggard’s novel; *Mister Johnson* based on the novel by Joyce Cary; *The Flame Trees of Thika* based on Elspeth Huxley’s novel; and *Out of Africa* based on Karen Blixen’s memoir. Ngugi argues that these colonial films misrepresented Africa’s history by portraying the continent and its people as barbaric, savage, infantile, docile, dirty, dark and the uncivilised “Other.” In such films, Ngugi declares: “the white adventurer is always at the centre: light spreads from him to the outer darkness. The African crowds are usually merged with the shadows” (68). This compels him to write this essay to expose these hidden codes and to reconstruct the disfigured image of Africa, the “Other.”

The preceding image is juxtaposed with that of the resistance tradition, which takes into its ambit those films directed, written and acted by Africans. Here, Ngugi’s catalogue includes Sembene Ousmanae’s *The Black Girl to Gelwaar* and Haile Gerima’s *Sankofa*. These resistance

films are further contrasted with films falling under the accommodation and compromise tradition where we find *Heritage* by Kwaw Ansah and *Saikati* by Anne Mungai. Apart from the preceding contrast, Ngugi identifies the postcolonial African films *Neria* by Godwin Mawuru and *Gito, the Ungrateful* by Leonce Ngabo. Then he savours the numerous Nollywood productions, especially those rendered in indigenous languages, marking what he considers a significant plank in the resistance tradition:

In the area of African languages, the vibrant Nollywood film and video industry have taken the lead over African literature... Hollywood screens had degraded Africa languages. By making African characters speak in African languages with English or French subtitles, African cinema is subverting the tradition of Europhone African literature and theatre, which create characters who speak perfect English and French. It also undermines the negative representation of African languages on the Hollywood screen. (79)

The above extract plays two juxtapositional functions: on the one hand, we have the explicit contrast that negates the negative image of African languages in western film; on the other hand, we are presented the embedded contrast between the postcolonial African literature in foreign languages and the postcolonial African film in African languages. This double juxtaposition adds weight to Ngugi's lament against the paucity of Africa's presence in film as well as for its liberation from the insidious neocolonialism of foreign languages.

We discern juxtaposition in *Secure the Base*, whose "Preface" sets the tone for the other essays in the collection. Here, Ngugi turns his guns inwards on the postcolony's comprador bourgeoisie whom he pits against the poor proletariat. He singles out the collaborators for working against the deepest interest of their own people by serving exploitative foreign capital. He asks a series of questions about this middle class in Africa: "Does it see itself as accountable to the people or to the external centres of imperial power? Does it see itself as rentiers of their resources or a maker of things from their resources?" (x). These questions are, in his typical rhetoric, directed not at the indicted middle class but at the reader/audience, whom Ngugi assumes are on his side. We notice the repetition of the irregular verb 'Does,' in its present simple third person singular form, at the beginning of the two successive sentences. It is artfully deployed for rhetorical emphasis. It also adds weight to Ngugi's view that the indicted middle class is sold out to foreign masters and it has no allegiance to fellow Africans.

Even in clearly nefarious acts deliberately or indirectly committed by the power elite in the postcolony, Ngugi does not fail to see a hidden hand of the imperial masters. In the essay "Splendour in Squalor" (*Secure* 77-86), his tone is arguably strident. This essay is Ngugi's response to the post-election violence in Kenya (2007-2008). Rather than express his grave feelings about the failures by successive leaders in the country to create unity and prosperity among its various communities, Ngugi carefully weaves his argument around and within the United Nations Declaration of 2005 on the Responsibility to Protect, which calls for the timely

response in times of crises to prevent loss of human lives. He reviews the two-key fault-lines in the world that create tensions and violence: the exploitative gulf between the wealthy and the poor nation states; and that between wealthy and poor individuals. In the clincher of the above essay, Ngugi writes: “Pull down the grand global palace erected on global poverty and build the foundations of a new earth, a new world. End the global philosophy of splendour in squalor” (85). The verb *pull* is a command that Ngugi directs at the United Nations and other duty bearers. It packs a harsh tone and a sense of urgency.

In the same essay, Ngugi exposes the power hierarchy within the Slave Castle he visited in Ghana, in which both the governor’s palace and the church sat atop the prison cells holding slaves awaiting their sale and shipment. There is a sharp contrast between the callous wealthy power wielders and their helpless victims. In Ngugi’s view, these ancient schisms have now metamorphosed into the unequal power and material relations in our times. The writer, therefore, stridently commands those with responsibility to act swiftly to dismantle these hierarchies, which he blames for manipulating divisions and violence between innocent poor people.

While still on the above essay, we have observed that Ngugi excoriates the concept ‘tribe’ as it is applied by the imperial powers on Africa. He writes: “It still baffles me why 40 million Yorubas are a tribe and 5 million Danes a nation! Or why non-European peoples should have the name tribesmen attached to their communities and leaders. Every community has a name. Call them by that name” (xii). In Ngugi’s artistic intervention, we see that ‘*why*’ is repeated twice in two contiguous sentences and it carries conjunctive and adverbial significance, which emphasises the European disavowal of the “Other” and the unequal power of naming communities, where tribe signifies inferiority and lack of civilization, while nation carries the weight of civilization and advancement. He reinforces his criticism against this denigration through a series of apostrophes, directly addressing hypothetical Europeans or their institutions, whom he commands: “*Call* them by their name”; “*Accord* the same to all communities.” The imperative tone in the two consecutive verbs ‘*Call*’ and ‘*Accord*’ allow us to detect justifiable impatience and anger in the essayistic persona. His angry tone is in keeping with his standpoint on western imperialism: he is operating in the resistance tradition, which is determined to liberate the oppressed people – the “Othered.”

The power of the empire to name, dislocate and dismantle traditional cultures and languages comes under sharp criticism in the essay “New Frontiers of Knowledge: The Challenge of the Pan-Africanist Social Scientist” (*Secure* 65-76). The essay makes allusion to Ngugi’s *Something Torn and New (Re-Membering Africa)*. The essayist blames all colonialist cultures, practices, systems and languages for replacing, displacing, destroying and altering Africa in a fundamental way. He sums up the effect of colonialism using the metaphor of planting of European memory on Africa:

In my book *Something Torn and New*, I have written extensively and intensively about how Europe planted its memory on Africa’s landscape ... naming the land as a claim of discovery and ownership, the planting was extended to the African body: Western

Christianity became a vast renaming ritual reminiscent of that horror scene in Sembene Ousmane's film *Ceddo* (1977) where this ownership is branded on the body of the enslaved with a hot iron. (69)

The thrust of Ngugi's argument, therefore, is that African social scientists must cast away the chains of this European memory and reconnect with their own indigenous African memory. Like the preceding analysis, the essayist creates linkages between the instant essay and his other books that pack a similar message. The inescapable idea here is that Ngugi's writing is aimed at disturbing the fossilised but distorting layer of foreign identity that colonialism, capitalism and the continued imperial linkages have imposed on all facets of life in Africa.

Cohesion and artistic vision

Ngugi's other structuring artifice is the syncretism between different strands within each of his essays that both realises cohesion and points to his artistic vision. In the essay "From the Corridors of Silence: The Exile Writes Back" (*Moving* 102-108), we see that the title echoes content and is itself echoed in the content. For example, the first paragraph of the essay refers back to the title by way of allusion: "But the book that first caught my eye on entering a London bookshop was a slim volume titled *Writers in Exile*, by Andrew Gurr" (102). While the title of Gurr's book suggests a sense of helplessness on the part of the exiled writers, the title of Ngugi's instant essay, however, is proactive and dynamic. More reference to the title is found in this sentence: "The twentieth century has seen many an African writer confined by the colonial and neocolonial state to corridors of silence" (104). Ngugi gives us a catalogue of these writers: Dennis Brutus, Alex La Guma, Abdulatif Abdallah, Al Amin Mazrui, Sherif Hetata, Kofi Awoonor, Jack Mapanje, Wole Soyinka and Gekaria wa Wanjau (104). He makes another reference to the essay's title with these words: "Kimani Gecau and Ngugi wa Mirii had become part of the community of African writers in exile.... A universal sense of exile, of not fully belonging, still haunts humankind" (108). We can see that the title of the ensuing essay is intertwined with the content; it points forward to the content, which in turn points back to the title. This creates unity of the disparate parts of the essay, while also broadening its thematic thrust.

In addition to its focus on the anguish of forced dislocation from home, the above essay raises new realities in postcolonial African writing. We are referring to what Tina Steiner defines as translation, by which concept she denotes "the multiple interactions of living and writing in an intercultural and interlinguistic space. It encompasses the adaptations and adjustments... The source cultures and languages are consciously incorporated with those of the host country to produce ... the cross-cultural character of the text" (3). The postcolonial writer figured by Steiner is not singularly working to illuminate tensions between Western and colonised cultures and languages, but is rather interested in exploring points of contact in which the two sides borrow and gain from each other. Therefore, we are inclined to read Ngugi as a postcolonial

writer who is aware of the potential danger of interpreting reality from the perspective of a single perspective. The essay is visibly imbued with a unique realisation by the writer that he has to negotiate the two warring polarities that shape his identity: in his nostalgic longing for home, Ngugi is equally acknowledging the favours of the empire with which he is at loggerheads.

A similar ambivalence towards the symbols of imperialism is manifest in the essay “Heinemann, African Writers Series & I” (*In the Name* 1-10), which presents Ngugi’s dilemma in sticking with Heinemann as his publishers, yet at the same time going on a warpath against imperialism, the very dominion represented by Heinemann. It is clear to us, long before we read the long sentence that contains the clincher, that Ngugi has a soft spot for his publishers, Heinemann: “I am grateful that the books, the writers and the series are there to provoke debate and I am glad to be part of the celebration of the forty years of its existence, which also coincides with forty years of my writing career” (10). The tone is that of happiness and the rhythm is rather excited. Two things emerge from this clincher: first, Ngugi’s adoration of the role of Heinemann in Africa; and second, the coincidence of the fortieth anniversary for both the writer and the publisher. The fact that this information is captured in a long complex sentence, adds to its weight, reinforcing the message and making it memorable.

One observation we have made, which may not be so adverse, is that Ngugi has over-repeated and overdramatized his message. For instance, the writer has overly regurgitated the question of writing in African (indigenous languages). We encounter it in “New Frontiers of Knowledge” (*Moving* 71-76); in “Imperialism of Language: English, a Language for the World?” (*Moving* 30-41); in “The Role of the Scholar in Development of African Literatures” (*Moving* 82-87); in “From the Corridors of Silence: The Exile Writes Back” (*Moving* 102-108); in “Life, Literature & a Longing for Home” (*Moving* 154-58); in “Matigari & the Dreams of One East Africa” (*Moving* 159-176); in “The Neo-Colonial Emergent in African Cinema” (*In the Name* 67-80); and in “Contempt and Self-Contempt: How the Word ‘Tribe’ Obscures the Reality of African Politics” (*Secure* 1-16).

Ngugi drives this message further in some of his formal and critical essays contained in *Writers in Politics*, *Penpoints*, *Gunpoints & Dreams*, *Barrel of a Pen*, *Homecoming*, *Decolonising the Mind*, *Re-Membering Africa* and *Globalectics*. We get the impression that the author has overdone his message; and that he has lingered too much on the same topics, using the same illustrations. On this issue of African languages, Chinweizu and others have endorsed a different view from Ngugi’s:

Ideally, African literatures should be written in African languages. But the same historical circumstances that presently compel African nations to use Western languages as their official languages also compel African writers to write in them. Until those historical circumstances are changed, it is pointless debating whether or not to use these Western languages in our literature. A more immediate issue is how to write well in those languages. (242)

Conclusion

In this paper, we have analysed Ngugi's personal essays from the perspectives of stylistics, the theory of the personal essay and postcolonial theory. Our focus was on how the essayist appropriates the genre to re-write the "Othered" identities, cultures, languages and economies into the centre of global conversation. Ngugi's mode of writing personal essays can be seen as one that takes into account the traditional defining features of the Western personal essay but also modifies the genre to speak to his unique message – resistance, revolution and reconstruction by the "Othered" cultural, linguistic, social, and economic communities. We have analysed his rhetorical projection of the first-person narrative voice, anecdotes, extended metaphors, allusions, juxtaposition and cohesion and observed that they play an important role of reinforcing the writer's message – that of subversion and recreation.

Our evaluation has identified two broad strands in Ngugi's personal essays: on the one hand, there is the manifestly strident and urgent essay, which amplifies resistance and revolution against imperialism; and on the other, we see the leisurely, digressive, easy-going and rambling essay, constructed around a communication pact with the reader. We have realised that the possible downside of Ngugi's personal essay could be his over-regurgitation of the struggle for the empowerment of indigenous languages. Our analysis confirms that his artistic war against the empire is holistically anchored in multiple spaces: cultural, identity, political and economic. His economic anchor bears a Marxist stamp, under which perspective he bifurcates society into two antagonistic camps, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Ngugi's essays, therefore, seek to conscientise the proletariat to overthrow the bourgeoisie with a view to realising a classless society.

We have noted that it is somewhat problematic to create a definitive category that best suits Ngugi as an essayist: He works in a capitalist metropole whose imperial tentacles are all over the world, yet he still entertains a Marxist vision; he is enacting resistance and encouraging a revolution against foreign languages by writing in Gikuyu, but he still writes these very essays in English, perhaps, a tacit acknowledgement that his vernacular enterprise has some limitations. In the end, we reveal an essayist oscillating between his traditional Gikuyu (African/Kenyan) and Western identities. Ultimately, we critique him within the frames of translation and hybrid identities, which also give us a peek into the potential markers of his mode of writing personal essays.

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