

NGUGI WA THIONG'O  
 "LITERATURE AND SOCIETY: THE POLITICS OF THE CANON" (1973)

Ngugi wa Thiong'o. "Literature and Society: the Politics of the Canon." Critical Perspectives on Ngugi. Ed. G. D. Killam. Washington, DC: Three Continents Press, 1984. 17-45.

Ngugi's thesis is that the Western literary canon was an integral part of imperialism in the heyday of colonialism and in the present era of neocolonialism. Rejecting all ahistorical approaches to the study of literature, Ngugi argues that literature "as a creative process and also as an end is conditioned by historical social forces and pressures" (20): literature is "partisan" (20) precisely because any writer "comes from a particular class and race and nation" (20). A national literature is, thus, "not only a reflection of that people's collective reality, collective experience, but also embodies that community's way of looking at the world and its place in the making of that world" (21) – it "both reflects reality and also attempts to persuade to take a certain attitude to that reality" (20-1).

After a lengthy and superbly informed discussion of the Base/superstructure model and the location of culture therein, Ngugi turns his attention to the phenomenon of European imperialism which, he argues, is ultimately best understood as an economic affair: Africa, he contends, has for the last four centuries served to "develop Europe--to develop European capitalism" (25). The simple fact is, he argues, that Europe has "thriven . . . on the devastation of a continent and the brutal exploitation of millions" (25). Although the "aim of any colonial mission is to get at a people's land and what that land produces" (25) by instituting an "economic structure and consequently a class system the colonizing nation can control" (25), in order to understand the colonialist enterprise in Africa (and, by extension, any former colony) in particular one must seek to comprehend the always changing nature of the relationship between a capitalist European society and "African societies at different stages in the development of their forces of production" (24). As capitalism developed (from "mercantile and laissez-faire capitalism" [25] through industrial monopoly capitalism" [25] to the "present stage of Finance-Industrial monopoly capitalism" [25]), the nature of the relationship between the two continents altered to suit.

Ngugi is particularly interested in the role played by culture in the colonialist and imperialist process:

to make economic and political control the more complete the colonizing power tries to control cultural environment: education, religion, language, literature, songs, forms of dances, every form of expression, hoping to control a people's values and ultimately their world outlook, their image and definition of self. (26)

Cultural imperialism was "part and parcel of the thorough system of economic and political oppression of the colonized peoples" (28), literature being a "more subtle weapon" (28) because it works through "influencing emotions, the imagination, the consciousness of a people in a certain way; to make the colonized see the world as seen, analysed, and defined by the artists and intellectuals of the Western ruling classes" (28).

Pre-eminent Western thinkers such as David Hume the philosopher, Georg Hegel, Thomas Jefferson were all guilty of what Ngugi terms "racist formulations" (27). At best, the greatest writers of European literature defined social reality in Eurocentric ways, that is, ways "rooted in their European history, race, culture, and class. When they talked of the human conflicts and tensions, when they talked of the human condition and the human anguish, they were talking of those tensions and conflicts and anguish as expressed and emerging in the European experience of history" (29). At worst, much of this literature is deliberately colonialist and even racist – he mentions writers like Rider Haggard, Rudyard Kipling, Karen

Blixen (*Out of Africa*), Joseph Conrad, Joyce Carey and Alan Paton in this regard. In short, this literature "inculcated in our people the values of the European ruling class and made our own rising middle class take on those values for a universal norm" (36). Ngugi's point is that colonialist culture was an integral part of the education of this emerging middle class in the post-colonial world: there was a "calculated policy to nurture a dependent native middle class sharing the values of exploitation to take positions of influence after constitutional independence" (36) and to continue imperialism in its neo-colonial phase. He defines neocolonialism as 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 economic structures . . . overseen by a native ruling class" (36). Most prominent African writers belong to this middle class (they are its "petty intellectual army" [37]) as a result of which they fail to conceive of themselves as potential "literary guerrillas of the masses in their quest and struggle for total liberation" (37). African literature is devoid of "positive [working-class] heroes who would embody the spirit of struggle and resistance against exploitation" (37).

The solution? The struggle for national liberation must be seen as a "dialectical negation of the colonial process" (38) and is preeminently an economic and political struggle, one waged under the banner of "racial nationalism" (39): it is, he writes, "'we' black people against 'them' whites; Africans versus Europeans" (39). The racial form of this struggle is inevitable because "under colonialism, exploitation and privilege take the form of an iron caste structure" (39) whereas under neocolonialism, "political and economic struggle assumes its true class character despite any and every attempts at ethnic mystification" (39). In other words, in Ngugi's scheme of things, skin-colour is an accidental feature of the essentially economic relationship between the two continents as a result of which racism is ultimately reducible to its roots in class-antagonism. This struggle is also waged at the cultural level, the goal of which is to "restore the African personality to its true human creative potentialities in history" (39), what he describes earlier as "man's self-realization as a result of his wrestling with nature" (20). (Later he speaks of 'black power' as the "creative power of black people through a people's control of their forces of production and equitable distribution of the products of their sweat to enhance the quality of all their lives" [43].) The culture of the coloniser must be rejected and replaced with that which embodies a "structure of values dialectically opposed to those of the ruling class of the oppressing race and nation" (39). The "aim is in other words to change a people's world outlook, . . . to seize back the right and the initiative to define oneself" (41) by substituting Africentric cultural products especially in the education system. Such a "committed" (42) literature "defines a people not in terms of always being acted upon but also in terms of actors" (42). This struggle commences at the level of orature and continues in written forms of literature.