

*The Power of Literature in African Development Since the 1950s:  
A Focus on Kenyan Author Ngugi wa Thiong'o'*

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Because subjects like literature and art history have no obvious material payoff, they tend to attract those who look askance at capitalist notions of utility. The idea of doing something purely for the delight of it has always rattled the grey-bearded guardians of the state, sheer pointlessness is a deeply subversive affair.

Terry Eagleton 2008

Art encourages you to fantasize and desire. For all these reasons, it is easy to see why it is students of art and English rather than chemical engineering who tend to staff barricades.

Terry Eagleton 2008

We writers and critics of African literature should form an essential part of the anti-imperialist cultural army of African peoples for total economic and political liberation from imperialism and foreign domination.

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o 1981

Do we want to free and be freed by the text? It depends on how we read it and what baggage we bring to it. Hopefully the work of art may contain that which makes us look again, critically, at our baggage.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1981

African history has been described as a hero in African literature. In this paper I argue for the reverse: that African literature is not only a hero in African history but also a powerful proactive force in the continent's development. The contribution made by African literature constitutes the academic arm of the continent's multifaceted struggles from the 1950s to date. African writers /pen soldiers bear many pet names that signify their essence and power in the society such as "artist the ruler", "Oracle of the people", "self-ordained priest", "novelist the teacher", "voice of conscience" and so on. A comprehensive history of African development in the last half a century must of necessity take cognisance of the contribution made by creative artist and texts. In this paper I focus on the contribution made by the prolific Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o.

Since the 1950s many African countries have had many political leaders some of whom doubled as poets, such as Leopold Sedar Senghor and Agostino Neto, essayists and autobiographers such as Kwame Nkrumah, Oginga Odinga and Nelson Mandela. There have been political writers and lovers of literature such as Julius Nyerere, to cite just a few. Senghor the first president of Senegal retained his poet-cum-politician identity throughout his life. He viewed both fields as expressions of the same African protest against political-cum-cultural imperialism.

His ideology of negritude was realised through both fields. Agostinho Neto the first president of independent Angola was also a poet-cum –politician. He started writing poetry in the 1940s and continued writing in the fifties and sixties –the difficulty years when he was in and out of prison. In his foreword to *Sacred Hope* (1974), Basil Davidson summarises Neto’s poetry thus:

Chants of sorrow, these are also songs of joy. Poems of departure, they are also poems of arrival. They are highly political writings but their message has nothing to do with the machinery of politics, and even less if that were possible, with the empty political propaganda. If they are political poems, then they are political in the sense that Shelley wrote political poems, in the sense that Brecht wrote political poems..(Neto,1974: xiii).

Nkrumah the first president of Ghana was an essayist with a keen eye on the function of the arts and literary art in particular in the process of colonisation and consequently in decolonisation. Oginga Odinga’s *Not Yet Uhuru* (1967), and Nelson Mandela’s *No Easy Walk To Freedom* (1965) speak of different levels of oppression but also demonstrate deep hope for complete freedom.

In the first generation of leaders of independent Africa, Julius Nyerere the first president of Tanzania ranks high among those who understood the philosophy and potential power of literary art. He knew when to exploit and contain it. As a believer in Marxism he presumed the function of literary and other arts as part of the superstructure .His deep understanding of the discipline is exemplified in his translation of three of William Shakespeare’s plays into Kiswahili, the local/national language. The very fact that Shakespeare’s European texts from a different era were still relevant in modern Africa signifies the power of the literary text across a myriad of contexts. No wonder Nyerere who understood this fact encouraged the arts in many ways. Unlike Nyerere, other political leaders around him appreciated literature only when it served an overt propagandist function in their favour but rejected it when it became critical of their actions.

Not all independent African countries had leaders who supported the arts. There were other first generation African leaders who were threatened by the power of the text. In Kenya Ngugi wa Thiong’o was detained by Jomo Kenyatta the first president. It is ironical that Jomo Kenyatta Foundation established an annual prize for Literature from 1974. Even more ironical is the fact that wa Thiong’o met Uhuru Kenyatta son of Jomo when he came to Kenya from exile to celebrate fiftieth anniversary of his first book *Weep Not Child* (1965).From detention wa Thiong’o went into exile. A number of Kenyan writers were to follow particularly during the Moi era 1978-2002.

From the 1950s to date Africa has produced a long list of artistic rulers who have engaged the African experience through prose fiction, poetry, drama and theatre, film, and practical criticism. In most cases the artists have challenged the power of the politicians and paid heavily for their audacity with imprisonment, exile and even death. Their crime is often summarised euphemistically as treason. In retrospect “treason” can now be defined as valid knowledge and truth rooted in critical thinking with the ultimate aim of structural social transformation. As Terry Eagleton concludes, literally philosophy is “deeply subversive” mainly because artists are “trained to imagine alternatives to the actual” (2008:833). The censoring political

rulers understand the potential of literature and exploit or punish it in equal measure. Interestingly, few African scholars in other disciplines particularly the sciences have been subjected to similar victimisation, which raises the question: why would fiction--mere imagination threaten the political ruler with all his resources and instruments of power? That notwithstanding, literary art is generally undervalued and relegated to the margins of verifiable knowledge since it is neither scientific nor technological. At the surface level its entertainment function tends to subsume the didactic. In modern Africa, unlike traditional Africa, literary artists are either victimised or abandoned to pauper existence. Fortunately their creations are timeless and enrich our understanding of many aspects of human experience including the concept of development.

In contemporary discourse in Africa, development is generally perceived in economical terms as the process of material production and creation of commensurate ideas, policies, structures and institutions, with the ultimate aim of solving practical problems of poverty, ignorance and disease in order to change a country from developing (read under developing) to developed status. The developed world that prescribes development strategies emphasises science and technology starting from the education system and subsequently spreading into other areas of daily experience. Educational institutions are established on this basis. Hence, the multiplication of institutes of technology something or other, never institute of literature and literary studies, history, anthropology, philosophy or sociology. Before the 1970s, much of the literature taught in school systems in many African countries excluded African literature. Little research was done in this discipline. In developmental language research denotes investigative activities that yield solutions to practical problems. Research in the humanities is generally not given priority in development agenda. There are many other signifiers of this deification of science versus reification of the arts. Yet everyday experiences are shaped by both discipline categories as sources of knowledge.

In *Theory of Literature* (1949), René Wellek and Austin Warren argue that the humanities had systematic epistemology long before modern science. Indeed philosophers and poets such the Greek Sophocles and Euripidies were theorising meaningfully about the universe centuries before technology ventured into space. Although there is no explicit dismissal of the knowledge in the humanities especially literary art in Africa, there is equally no explicit acclamation of the non-material contribution it makes to socio-economic development by providing the necessary moral guidance, critique, caution, and evaluation.

Reading any developmental documents one would think that the sciences and the arts are mutually exclusive in our lives. Eagleton argues that artists “raise questions of quality of life in a world where experience itself seems brittle and degraded” and that “those who deal with art speak the language of values rather than price. They deal with work whose depth and intensity shows up the meagerness of everyday life in a market-obsessed society” (Lodge and Wood: 2008: 833). Market is the final phase of technology. In this sense literature seems to be antithetical to scientific technological development aimed at poverty eradication. This is subversive indeed! Yet, paradoxically it enhances development by providing the vital antidote to value-free capitalist tendencies that drive humanity to obsessions. Moderation is humane but obsession is savagery. To serve humanity constructively capital, machines and markets need the humanities and literature in particular. Ngugi wa Thiong’o delineates the complementarity between the science and the arts in colonialism succinctly in *Writers and Politics*:

“to make economic and political control the more complete, the colonizing power tries to control the cultural environment: education, religion, language, theatre, songs, forms of dances, every form of expression, hoping in this way to control a people’s values and ultimately world look, their image and definition of self“(1981,12).

The same complementarity underpins contemporary non-residential imperialism because it is basically cultural. It is characterised by entertainment excesses in music, film, pornography, and non-scientific sporting activities circulated on internet which is hitherto the highest stage of technology second only to technological traverse of the outer space. Some of the rich and famous of the developed world thrive on the arts that are first created imaginatively then scientifically commoditised and technologically disseminated. It is this process that is currently achieving involuntary re-colonisation of African youths to alien ideologies and lifestyles in the name of globalisation which is consciously designed by global North and dumped onto the unsuspecting and increasingly culturally impoverished global South.

The developed world rewards its artist alongside scientific inventors. The many awards and prizes of which the Nobel Prize for literature ranks highest, exemplify the great significance attached to the discipline. Thankfully the award committees abroad have awarded some African artists-some of whom are victimised at home. In Kenya for example Ngugi wa Thiong’o the leading artist is yet to be awarded for his larger than life literary contribution.

Considering the broad function of literature, it is understandable that it is literary artists--most of them products of imperialist education system--who have effectively scrutinised and deconstructed imperialist ideologies and survival strategies. While many Africans were still mesmerised by what the late Walter Rodney called “assorted rubbish” and convinced of confessed noble motives of European civilising missions purportedly aimed at developing the dark continent, African writers saw: “things falling apart” culminating in retrogressive development as their compatriot historians examined “how Europe underdeveloped Africa “and essayist Frantz Fanon bemoaned the cumulative fate of the “wretched of the Earth”. Subsequent struggles and mobilisation for independence were punctuated with various genres of literary art: work songs, war songs, fly whisks and other artefacts of black power, negritude poetry, fighting poetry like when *Bullets Begin to Flower, Sacred Hope, the Trial of*

*Dedan Kimathi* and similar travails and all over the continent. There were also predictions of impending demise of resident colonialism in *The conservationist*, end of racism, *In Fog of the Season's End*--to name just a few. And as Africans began to celebrate decolonisation, it did not take long before artistic rulers saw through the façade that clouded their political counterparts and christened the process neo-colonialism as they urged "decolonisation of the mind" that was no longer at ease" to quote wa Thiong'o and Achebe.

The first generation of writers who have outlived victimisation and survived into the 21<sup>st</sup> century have been joined by younger generations and are still at it --scrutinising issues, interrogating concepts, subverting wrong policies, analysing structures of development versus the quality of life of the ordinary citizen. In effect, they are employing literary stylistics to expose political gimmicks and peep at the Africanisation of capitalist oppression which retards African's genuine development that should entail raising the quality of life for "the wretched of the earth." If such discourses are not integral to development or even developmental in their own right, what is? In any case orature was an integral part of pre-colonial development. According to Macmillan Dictionary "understanding the past is a developmental process". Therefore, artist the ruler of whom Okot P'Bitek speaks was and still remains a function of development. The griot /court poet for example was a custodian of culture, historian and counselor in ancient African kingdoms. He schooled heirs to the throne in the holistic informal educational system of the land.

The nature of literature facilitates its broad function which combines acquisition of knowledge, attitudes, and values. It can achieve a form of change that is not scientifically verifiable, but change nonetheless because literary art is forged in a language that prompts the audience to critical thought, emotion and feeling. Wellek and Warren describe literature thus: "Poetic language organizes, tightens, the resources of everyday language and sometimes does even violence to it, in an effort to force us into awareness and attention" (1949, 24). They go on to specify the characteristics and intended effect of this use of language as contrasted with literal use of language:

Compared to scientific language, literary language will appear in some ways deficient. It abounds in ambiguities ... it is permeated with historical accidents, memories, and associations. In a word it is highly 'connotative'. Moreover, literary language is far from merely referential. It has its expressive side; it conveys the tone and attitude of the speaker or writer. And it does not merely state and express what it says; it also wants to influence the attitude of the reader, persuade him, and ultimately change him (1949: 23).

It is in this creative use of language that artistic insight resides. The artist is not always obliged to create new knowledge but prompt his audience to rethink what they know but fail to examine critically. As the two critics above argue:

The imaginative writer --and especially the poet--misunderstands himself if he thinks of his prime office as that of discovering and communication knowledge. His real function is to make us perceive what we see; imagine what we already, conceptually or practically know ... Does the artist remind us of what we have ceased to perceive or make us see what, though it was there all the time, we had not seen (ibid: 33-34)?

This is what makes literature pervasive, this constant reminder; awakening and prompting of minds that have become acquainted and acquiescent with perceived fate. In his unique way of pointing out the familiar, anew, the artist defamiliarises and disrupts. It would appear that the author is indeed creating new ideas because he expresses them in new words that recapture attention. According to Charles Davis, "An author if he is big enough can do much for his fellow men. He can put words in their mouths and reason in their heads, he can fill their sleep with dreams so potent that when that awake they will continue living them"(qtd in P.Bitek,1980:39).In post independence African context this didactic function of literature has often been perceived as treasonable because it constructs antidotes to official propaganda. Literature must do this or risk degenerating into cheap court poetry. Didacticism is propagandist in a finer sense of the word. Wellek and Warren explain this paradoxical power of literary art thus:

From views that art is discovery or insight in to truth we should distinguish the view that art-especially literature- is propaganda, the view, which is that the writer is not the discoverer but the persuasive purveyor of the truth. The term 'propaganda' is loose and needs scrutiny. In popular speech, it is applied only to doctrines viewed as pernicious and spread by men whom we distrust. The word implies calculation, intention, and is usually applied to specific, rather restricted to doctrines or programs. So limiting the sense of the term, one might say that some art (the lowest kind) is propaganda, but no great art, or good art or art can possibly be. If however, we stretch the term to mean effort, whether conscious or not to influence readers to share one's attitude towards life, then there is a plausibility in the contention that all artists are propagandists or should be, or (in complete reversal of the position outlined in the preceding sentence) that all sincere responsible artists are morally obligated to be propagandists (1949, 35).

This inescapable inevitability of propaganda in art is further emphasised by Arnold Hauser in his article 'Propaganda, Ideology and Art':

All art aims to evoke; to awaken in the observer, listener or reader emotions and impulses to action or opposition. But evocation of man's active will requires more than either mere expression of feelings, striking mimesis of reality, or pleasing construction of word, tone or line: it presupposes forces beyond those of feeling and form...The artist unfolds these forces in the service either of a ruler – whether a despot or a monarch—or a particular community, rank in society or class; of a state or church, of an association or party; or as a representative or spokesman of a form of government, a system of conventions and norms: in short, of a more or less rigidly controlled and organization (qtd. in wa Thiong'o 1981:6-7).

In society official views emanating from political rulers are often misrepresented not only as the wish of the majority but also erroneously as the 'truth'. And literature – mere imagination-should by inference be the "mother of all lies" as Plato said. In which case, literature should not have bothered Plato or any other ruler. But it did, and still does, precisely because it is the expression of the 'real truth' as distinct from an alternative view of truth manipulated through political stylistics. The artist scrutinises the first truth cum-lies, and presents it together with other perspectives in verse and imagery so that the readers can see and judge for themselves. In a sense, all

the 'truths' are given an evidential base in reality which leads to verification of both the lies and truth and the later eventually emerges because

'Truth in literature is the same as truth outside literature, i.e. systematic and publicly verifiable knowledge. The novelist has no magic short cut to present state of knowledge in the social sciences which constitutes the 'truth against which his' world', his fictional reality is checked (Wellek and Warren 1949:33).

For example, if there is development on River Road in the city of Nairobi, it may be evaluated by enumerating the tall buildings there but since "development" is humanistic it should also be seen in the lifestyle of the people who live there. In Meja Mwangi's *Going Down River Road*, it transpires that the people who labour to construct the buildings have no access to the benefits they generate. The first meaning/truth of development is immediately disrupted by the second truth. Each is a truth in context but one must supersede the other because humanity is the ultimate development index. When the later resonates with the majority of humanity, "the grey-bearded guardians of state" have a lot to fear, particularly because the method of purveyance of the latter is sweetly alluring as P'Bitek observes:

The artist proclaims the laws but expresses them in the most indirect language: through metaphor and symbol, in image and fable. He sings and dances his laws. It is taught not in the school of law, not in the Inns of Courts, but around the evening fire, where elephants and hares act as men. The boat movement, the painting, the sculptures are his law books. The drums, the flutes, the horns, the strumming and plucking on the strings of the musical instruments, are the proclamations of decrees. He lures his subjects by the sweetness of his song, and the beauty of his works. He punishes the culprits with laughter, and awards, the good mannered with praises (1986:36).

In this paper I examine the contribution of Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o among the many African writers who have contributed a lot to African development in terms of their deconstruction and reconstruction of various African experiences. From 1950s to date African writers on many topics themes including: Missionary factor, the impact and aftermath of colonialism, the question of African identity, the debate on orature and literature, political and economic conflicts, social changes, the link between history and literature, nationalism and contemporary issues, and Afrocentric literary theory. Ngugi wa Thiong'o's selected literary texts cover all these topics and five of his critical texts: *Homecoming* 1972, *Writers in politics* 1981, *Decolonising the mind: the politics of language in African Literature* 1981, *Moving the Centre : The struggle for Cultural Freedoms* 1993, and *Globalectics: Theory and Politics of Knowing* 2012, provide what is sufficiently representative of the power of literature in African experiences. In these five critical texts wa Thiong'o delineates the role of the African writer and his literary creation from the vantage point of the larger than life author, critic, academic and social activist, political detainee, and post-colonial theorist that he is.

Wa Thiong'o's critical texts provide the conceptual and theoretical frameworks that underpin his enormous creative writing including novels, plays, short stories, children's literature, memoir, some of which are written in his vernacular Gikuyu. His literary works capture everything that seems to summarise Kenya's walk through the last sixty years. In all his texts, this author writes for a wider continental and even

international rather than a local national space. In Afrocentric terms his context includes the African diaspora and the entire Third World. For this reason wa Thiong'o, his literary art, critical texts, and his travails at the behest of the powers that be in Kenya, all constitute the quintessential power of literature in African context. A study on wa Thiong'o can be self sufficient in terms of research problems and questions (he raises very many), objectives and significance, theoretical/conceptual framework and the methodology he offers.

The titles of Wa Thiong'o's critical texts listed above are self explanatory—they all emphasise the function and power of literary artist and text in various contexts from pre-colonial, to colonial and postcolonial. There are many other writers in Africa who double up as literary critics but Wa Thiong'o surpasses them in many ways. He has written more than forty books of both fiction and non-fiction some of them have been translated into thirty languages.

His first critical text *Homecoming* (1972) is recognition of Africa's loss of identity and the need to return, not to the ideally traditional culture, but to a space from where the African writer and reader can re-examine and critique their status quo. In *Writers In Politics* (1981), this writer discusses the power of literature vis-à-vis as well as versus politics. He explains how colonialism exploited the power of literature to destroy the image of the colonised and therefore the inevitability of reversing the same in the attempt to regain lost image. In the same book the author explains the effort that he and his colleagues at the University of Nairobi effected a major change in literature syllabi in Kenyan education system to include non-western texts. In other words they insisted on a syllabus that "emphasised the literaturness of literature rather than the Englishness of that literature (1993:7). On the whole the author uses many examples from various parts of the world to advance his argument that literary art is a powerful tool in development and in politics consequently, no writer can afford the luxury to be politically neutral. In agreement with Arnold Hauser cited above, art for art's sake becomes a convenient tool for those who seek to neutralize its power.

In *Decolonising The Mind* (1981), wa Thiong'o engages the politics of language in African literature. In order to play the role that African literature is expected to do, the author argues that the question of language cannot be ignored. For him much of the power of the text resides in the language in which it is written:

The choice of language and the use to which it is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe. Hence language has always been at the heart of two contending social forces in the Africa of the twentieth century (1981:4).

In this text wa Thiong'o discusses the many strategies that used by colonialists to kill African languages but they refused to die. But refusal to write in the languages is what may eventually kill them. On his choice to write in vernacular he envisages the problem of a limited audience but the value of the text far outweighs the limitation. In fact his first book in Gikuyu was well received judging from the sales. He was also the first African writer to be detained by his tribesman president for producing a play in vernacular which attracted crowds. For wa Thiong'o therefore:

The call for the rediscovery and the resumption of our language is a call for a regenerative reconnection with the millions of revolutionary tongues in Africa and the world over demanding liberation. It is call for the rediscovery of the real language of humankind: the language of struggle...Struggle makes history...In our struggle is our history, our language and our being (1981:108).

This debate on the language of African literature continues with many writers taking either side. In my view, African literature has developed and had strong impact on development despite the language. The power of wa Thiong'o's works is exemplified by the translations into many languages. Other African writers' books have been translated into many languages globally. Whereas wa Thiong'o's view that part of the power of the text lies in its original language in relation to the reader, it is also true that its appeal emanates from its content. This is what is meant by a text having power across numerous contexts.

This author's fourth book length critical text *Moving the Centre: the Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* (1993), deconstructs Eurocentrism, racism, classism, and sexism as forms of constrictions from which literature and literary criticism needs to be liberated. This argument is based on his view that the world is inhabited by different peoples with different worldviews located in different centres. The centres relate or should relate to one another on equal terms. The various forms of marginalisations from isms above are manifested in language, literature and cultural studies. Therefore, to reconstruct the situation process of moving the centre must take place and in "nationalism, class, race and gender" (2012:50). Literature has the capacity to move centres in this way and achieve cultural freedoms. But this is not possible unless there is a change in the method of interpreting a given text. The latter is the subject of wa Thiong'o's latest critical text: *Globalectics Theory and the Politics of Knowing* (2012).

The meaning we tease out of a text "depends on how we read it and what baggage we bring to it" (2012:50). This premise underpins the subject of the critical text above. In this text the author defines globalectic reading thus:

a way of approaching any text from whatever times and places to allow its content and themes form a free conversation with other texts of one's time and place, to better yield its maximum to the human. It is to allow it to speak to our cultural present even as we speak to it from our own cultural present. It is to read a text with the eyes of the world; it is to see the world with the eyes of the text (2012:51).

While African literatures achieve decentring of knowledge from Eurocentrism, globalectis decentres theory of reading and knowing the same monocentrism because "Globalectics embraces wholeness, interconnectness...It is way of reading and relating to the world particularly in this era of globalism and globalization" (ibid.7).

On the whole there is no specific criteria by which the power and impact African writers and their works African development can be quantified and qualified but the reverse argument would be impossible to construct considering the large number of literary titles that have come out of Heinemann and other publishers. Some writers like the Ghanain Ayi Kwei Armah wish they would have contributed to solving problems. Other writers such Christopher Okigbo the direct method and died in Biafran civil war. Armah's frustration is shared by many African writers who know that their wisdom accepted by the target audience in power. But Armah's compatriot the late Senegalese author Sembene Ousmane argued that he was making an impact because serving his people who had given him the task that politicians did not want to hear. He insisted that it was the responsibility of writer to be "the voice of the less-privileged" (Per Wastberg: 1988, 22). This mission of the write is a signifier of his power. In this case the censorship that has been experienced at different times all over the continent is yet another signifier of the same.

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