

---

**SWITCHING LITERARY WORKS FROM ENGLISH TO GIKUYU:  
NGŪGĪ WA THIONG'O'S FIGHT AGAINST LINGUISTIC RACISM**

---

**Krishna Priya V**Ph.D Researchscholar,Hindusthan college of Artsand Science,Affiliated to Bharathiar  
University,Coimbatore, Tamilnadu

---

**Article Received:** 11/07/2025**Article Accepted:** 11/08/2025**Published Online:** 12/08/2025**DOI:** 10.47311/IJOES.2025.18.08.243

---

**Abstract**

Ngũgĩ waThiong'o, who was one of the most popular African writers of Post-colonial period belongs to the Gikuyu descent of Kenya. Kenya was under colonial rule for approximately 68 years. Even after the colonizers left the country, the dominance of English language and western culture prevailed in the African countries. In the English speaking postcolonial African countries, there was widespread resentment against the forceful dominance of English language over African native languages. Ngugi, being one of the leading advocates of local languages in African literature, participated in all activities conducted to regain the prestige of African languages. He was imprisoned for staging a play in 1977 promoting local language by making the actors perform in their native language instead of English. This led him to take a firm decision in 1978 to write all his future literary works only in his native tongue, Gikuyu and not in English. Ngugi waThiong'o wrote several works in Gikuyu, which made a profound impact on the people of Kenya. This paper reveals how he developed great affinity towards his mother tongue, Gikuyu and the relevance of his decision to write in his native language as a resistance against linguistic racism.

**Keywords:** Postcolonial, Languages, Mother tongue, Culture, Gikuyu**Introduction**

Africa was under the colonial rule during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Colonialism in Africa primarily ended by the 1960s. Even after the colonizers left the country, the dominance of English language and western culture prevailed in the African

cou

ntries. In the post-colonial period, indigenous leaders had to struggle hard to overcome the colonial legacy of domination and reclaim the cultural and linguistic heritage of Africa. There was a consensus among the leaders throughout Africa on the urgency of using native language as a medium of communication in all fields of administration, education, and literature. Steve Paulson writes, "Sometimes, the simple act of speaking in your mother tongue can be a revolutionary gesture." In the English speaking postcolonial African countries, there was widespread resentment against the forceful dominance of English language and western culture over African native languages and culture. As a result, a number of debates highlighting the importance of indigenous languages were conducted in various parts of these countries during the post-colonial period.

### **Ngũgĩ waThiong'o's literary journey**

Ngũgĩ waThiong'o was a popular professor of literature at the University of Nairobi and one of the most popular African writers of Post-colonial period. Immediately after Kenya got independence, he successfully published novels, *Weep Not, Child* in 1964, *The River Between* in 1965, and *A Grain of Wheat* in 1967. He also wrote the novel, '*Petals of Blood*' in 1977. All these novels were written in English.

Ngugi, being one of the leading advocates for local languages in African literature actively participated in the debates conducted to regain the prestige of African languages. In the post-colonial African scenario, Ngugi highlighted the importance of indigenous languages in African literature. He expresses his opinion in an interview to Steve Paulson that the best way to "decolonize the African mind" is to reclaim African languages. To quote Ngugi in this interview, "I saw how once we have colonized another, the first thing they do is always impose their language as the language of power. So they demonize the language of the colonized, and they glorify the language of the colonizer. It becomes the language of intelligence, of education, of intellectual exploration. And it's the opposite with African languages. They are good for speaking, but not good for ideas, not good for politics. English becomes the language of glory, African languages become the languages of gory." Criticizing the postcolonial ruling elite, he poses the question, "British had long been kicked out of power and Kenyans were running the country. Why did they need English to hold onto power?" (*Steve Paulson's interview with Ngũgĩ waThiong'o 'Never Write In The Language of the Colonizer.'*)

He argued that African writers should write in their native languages, not the colonial languages of English or French. Consequently, the repressive Kenyan government began to look upon Ngugi as one of the country's most dangerous people.

### **Ngũgĩ waThiong'o's shifting from English to Gikuyu**

Ngugi waThiong'o, wrote and staged a play in 1977, which landed him in a maximum security prison because of the fact that he promoted local language by making

---

the actors perform in their native language instead of English.

This led him to take a firm decision in 1978 that as an act of resistance against linguistic racism, he would cease writing in English and write all his creative works in his native tongue, Gikuyu. He stated, "I'm going to write it in Gikuyu, the language which was the basis of my incarceration. And there had never been a modern novel in the Gikuyu language."

Then, in an act of defiance against the ruling elite, who supported linguistic racism towards native language, he wrote a novel in his native Gikuyu language on the prison-issued toilet paper, which was the only paper available to him for writing. This was the first modern novel written in Gikuyu and was later translated into English and published as "Devil On the Cross." This turned out to be a landmark in the revival of African literature. In all the forums, he emphasised the need for giving importance to indigenous languages in literature and education. As mentioned above, a number of debates were conducted in Kenya and various other countries throughout Africa, which led to the revival of the lost prestige of local languages in various countries of Africa.

According to Ngugi, Gikuyu symbolized the African culture and he effectively used Gikuyu to overcome the onslaught of the legacy, which colonialism had left behind. The tendency to hold English language and western culture in high esteem in local people, which led to language loss and cultural alienation was a hurdle to be overcome in upholding the cultural legacy of Africa.

By using Gikuyu, Ngugi was able to depict the unity in African culture with its cultural and linguistic diversity. To quote Kristin I. Helland in *'Writing In Gikuyu: Ngugi WaThiong'o's Search For African Authenticity,'* "writing in Gikuyu can be seen as one of several counter-discursive strategies he employs to achieve the goal of "decolonization of the mind." These strategies include oral features associated with traditional storytelling and heteroglossic use of multiple languages and multiple voices to index social roles and broader political realities."

Ngugi states in *Decolonizing the Mind*, "This book. . . is my farewell to English as a vehicle for any of my writings. From now on it is Gikuyu and Kiswahili all the way. However, I hope that through the age-old medium of translation I shall be able to continue dialogue with all" (*Decolonizing the Mind.p. xiv*). He decided to switch to Gikuyu to fulfill his long-cherished dream of developing an authentic African literature. While explaining the duty of writers in his country, he argues "writers from marginalised cultures and languages have the duty and responsibility of making themselves not only visible in their languages" but also "to challenge and shake up that view of languages in theory and practice" (*Resistance to linguistic feudalism and Darwinism: Conditions for creating a reading culture in Africa, Par. 18*). His decision to reject English language and switch to

Gikuyu was applauded by many in Africa. Of course his decision was questioned by some for its viability and effectiveness.

According to Mazrui and Mphande (*Orality and the language of combat: Ngugi and the legacy of Fanon*), his style of writing adopted in his works in Gikuyu is “griot oral narrative style,” which is an authentic African style. They observe that viewing from a post-colonial perspective as evident in his novel in Gikuyu, *Devil on the Cross*, his style incorporates a range of counter-discursive strategies such as hybridization, code-switching, rewriting, and the use of oral features from a multilingual, heteroglossic perspective.

Ngugi’s decision to write in Gikuyu met with mixed responses not only from Kenya and Africa, but also from countries outside Africa.

Ngugi lists out the problems faced by writers in African languages in his book, ‘*Moving the Center*’ (p. 21), he writes “writing in African languages has many difficulties and problems. Problems of literacy, problems of publishing, problems of the lack of a critical tradition, problems of orthography, problems of having very many languages in the same country, problems of hostile governments with a colonised mentality, and abandonment by some of those who could have brought their genius -demonstrated by their excellent performance in foreign languages - to develop their own languages. In short, literature in African languages suffers from a lack of a strong tradition, creative and critical. Writers in African languages have to create several traditions simultaneously; publishing, critical vocabulary, orthography, and even words. But it has the advantage of being able to establish a natural give and take relationship to the rich heritage of orature. African writers in African languages are giving something back, however tiny, to the development of African languages.”

As mentioned by Ngugi himself, the problem of orthography was a major challenge faced by those who write in African languages. Bunyi in chapter titled, ‘*Language and educational inequality in primary classrooms in Kenya*’ in book, *Voices of Authority: Education and Linguistic Difference*, raised criticism against Ngugi’s decision to write in Gikuyu that Kenyan and other indigenous languages in Africa are underdeveloped and lack adequate terminology to teach and learn school subjects in local languages” (p. 348). He argues, even when orthographies exist, it is necessary to reconcile the multiple systems that exist, as in the case of Gikuyu to create a standardized form suitable for written literature and for teaching.

Ngugi faced difficulties in orthography while writing his first novel in Gikuyu, *Devil on the Cross*, in 1980, which he reveals in *Decolonizing the Mind*. These difficulties were caused by the lack of proper understanding of the vowel system by the foreign missionaries, as also two rival orthography systems adopted for Gikuyu by Protestant and Catholic missionaries practising in Kenya. (*Decolonising the mind: The politics of language*

in *African literature* p. 67). Gikuyu writer GakaarawaWanjau and linguist Karega Mutahi helped him to overcome this problem of competing orthographies (Pugliese., *The organic vernacular intellectual in Kenya* ;BierstekerAnn., *Gikuyu literature: development from early Christian writings to Ngũgĩ 's later novels* ).

All these obstacles can be considered insignificant considering the success he made in his literary works written in Gikuyu. Ngugi has proven the belief of many that indigenous languages are not capable of complex expression wrong with the success of his literary works written in Gikuyu. By using the Gikuyu language he could effectively communicate political, economic, linguistic, religious, and philosophical ideas.

Ngugi had entertained a vision of 'truly national literature.' Ngugi described the role of literature of different indigenous languages in Africa in realizing this vision. He argued that translation of the works written in any of the African languages to other local languages is a step towards this end. He states, this will help "forming the foundation of a truly national literature and culture" and a "truly African sensibility in the written arts" which would both enhance the art of translation and lead to "more rigorous and committed study of African languages" (*Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature*, p. 84-85). In *Decolonizing the Mind* ( p. 85), he described how he valued the translation of his novel, *Devil on the Cross*, into Kiswahili more than the translations into English, Swedish, Norwegian and German because he believed the translation to Kiswahili worked as a direct communication between Gikuyu and Swahili languages. To quote Ngugi, "Indeed I see this kind of communication between African languages as forming the real foundation of a genuinely African novel. A novel originally written in Ibo could find itself translated into Yoruba and vice versa. A novel written Dholuo or Maasai could find itself translated into two or three or more Kenyan languages or into African languages outside Kenya. There would thus be a real dialogue between the literatures, languages and cultures of the different nationalities within any one country. (p. 84-85).

The works of Frantz Fanon and Paulo Freire influenced to bring about a considerable change in Ngugi's perspective, which got reflected in his works. As already explained, the assault on his freedom just because he expressed his strong sentiments against corruption and exploitation of the masses by the post-colonial rulers of Kenya led him to write in Gikuyu so that he could create an awareness in the local people against the injustice meted out to them by the authoritarian rulers. Ngugi believed that side by side with the role of a creative artist, the writer has the duty to take up the role of a political activist also. He adopted a style of writing in the novels he wrote in Gikuyu, which the masses could connect and hence it was accepted by the masses. (Mazrui and Mphande. *'Orality and the language of combat: Ngugi and the legacy of Fanon'*). His works highlighted the national pride and it carried a fighting spirit against imperialistic

forces. Mazrui and Mphande point out that his later novels written in Gikuyu constitute “a literature of combat that is both national and anti-imperialist in character” and which has come to represent his vision for a national literature and a national culture. In *Devil on the Cross* and *Matigari*, he tried to chart out a new course directed towards this end.

Fanon critically analyses Ngugi’s works written in Gikuyu and states, “Ngugi’s language choices, narrative style, use of counter-discursive strategies, and multilingual model together represent a viable model for a truly authentic African literature which is also a literature of combat.” (Fanon, *The wretched of the earth.*)

In his interview with Steve Paulson, he expresses his opinion about the pathetic condition of the languages of the colonized in the following words, “I looked at the centrality of language in all colonial enterprises. In Africa, Australia, America, New Zealand and Ireland, the languages of the colonized were demonized. Children were punished. I’m not against English, but I’m against the hierarchy of languages.” (*Steve Paulson’s interview with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o ‘Never Write In The Language of the Colonizer’*)

In an interview Ngugi did in 1980, he expresses his opinion of the impact of stigmatization of indigenous languages in schools in the following words, “What happens to the mentality of a child when you humiliate him or her in relationship to a particular language? Obviously he comes to associate that language with inferiority or with humiliation and punishment, so he must somehow develop antagonistic attitudes to that language which is the basis of his humiliation. By extension he becomes uncomfortable about the people who created that language and the culture that was carried by it, and by implication he comes to develop positive attitudes to the foreign language for which he is praised and told that he is intelligent once he speaks it well. He also comes to respect and have a positive attitude to the culture carried by that foreign language. . . What does this mean in practical terms? It means that he comes to feel uncomfortable about the peasant masses or working masses who are using that language. (*Kristin I. Helland. Writing In Gikuyu: Ngugi WaThiong’o’s Search For African Authenticity*)

Ngugi waThiong'o wrote several works in Gikuyu, his native language. These include the novels *Caitani Mutharaba-ini* (*Devil on the Cross*), *Matigari* *Ma Njirungi* (*Matigari*), and *Murogi WaKagogo* (*Wizard of the Crow*), "The Perfect Nine: The Epic of Gikuyu and Mumbi" as well as plays like the play "Ngaahika Ndeenda: Ithaako ria ngerekano" (*I Will Marry When I Want*). He also published children's books and essays in Gikuyu.

### **Conclusion**

Speaking a language is great, but using that language in establishing the age-old culture is more important. Ngũgĩ highlights why language is powerful when he writes,

“Language...has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture,”

In the postcolonial scenario, the African literature revolved around the fulcrum of the European languages. A strong sentiment aroused in Ngugito uphold the rich heritage of African literary culture by reviving the native languages. This prompted Ngugito take the decision of writing his literary works only in his mother tongue, Gikuyu. His literary works written in Gikuyu made a profound impact on the people of Kenya and there was a strong uprising among the local population against the continuance of colonial dominance, exploitation of the masses, and corruption of the ruling elite. There is no doubt that the name of Ngugi waThiong'o will be engraved in the history of African literature.

### Works Cited

Biersteker, Ann. “Gikuyu Literature: Development from Early Christian Writings to Ngũgĩ’s Later Novels.” *The Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature*, vol. 1, edited by Abiola Irele and Simon Gikandi, Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 306–28.

Bunyi, Grace. “Language and Educational Inequality in Primary Classrooms in Kenya.” *Voices of Authority: Education and Linguistic Difference*, edited by Monica Heller and Marilyn Martin-Jones, Ablex Publishing, 2001, pp. 77–100.

Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Grove Press, 1968.

Helland, Kristin I. “Writing in Gikuyu: Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s Search for African Authenticity.” 2013. *Academia.edu*,

[https://dlwqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/41576131/Helland\\_Ngugi\\_wa\\_Thiongo\\_chapter-libre.pdf](https://dlwqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/41576131/Helland_Ngugi_wa_Thiongo_chapter-libre.pdf). Accessed 26 July 2025.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. James Currey, 1986.

---. *Moving the Center: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*. James Currey, 1993.

---. “Resistance to Linguistic Feudalism and Darwinism: Conditions for Creating a Reading Culture in Africa.” *Pambazuka News*, no. 450, 2009, <https://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/59136>. Accessed 26 July 2025.

Paulson, Steve. “Never Write in the Language of the Colonizer.” *To the Best of Our Knowledge*, Wisconsin Public Radio, <https://www.ttbook.org/interview/never-write-language-colonizer>. Accessed 26 July 2025.

Pugliese, Cristiana. “The Organic Vernacular Intellectual in Kenya: Gakaara wa Wanjau.” *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 25, no. 4, 1994, pp. 177–87.