

NGUGI'S AMBIVALENT CULTURAL DISCOURSE IN *MOVING THE CENTRE*

Malika Bouhadiba
Oran University

Abstract

This paper aims at exploring the ambivalence of Ngugi's cultural discourse in *Moving the Centre*. The major assumption held in this paper is that Ngugi's Universalist rhetoric is in stark opposition with his nativist discourse, with its Afrocentric undertones. Most of Ngugi's essays betray a cultural essentialism, first evidenced in his Manichean rhetoric. As will be demonstrated, Ngugi's collection of essays falls within the range of post-colonial counter-hegemonic discourse, and bears the stamp of a strong cultural resistance.

Ngugi's ambivalent discourse resides in his advocacy of cultural globalism together with his defence of cultural politics exclusively Pan-African and Third worldist. Another contention held in this paper is that despite the fact that Ngugi preaches cultural dialogue, he does not attempt to promote cross-cultural understanding, since he insists on cultural separatism, between the First and the Third World, and along class lines. Ngugi's multiculturalist agenda, being discriminatory, is henceforth, contradictory with the logic

Resumen

Este artículo pretende explorar la ambivalencia del discurso cultural de *Moving the Centre*, de Ngugi. La principal propuesta que mantengo aquí es que la retórica universalista de Ngugi se opone frontalmente al discurso nativista, con su trasfondo afrocéntrico. La mayoría de los ensayos de Ngugi traicionan el esencialismo cultural, que queda manifiesto en su retórica maniquea. Como se pretende demostrar, esta colección de ensayos entra en el ámbito del discurso postcolonial contrahegemónico y lleva el sello de una fuerte resistencia cultural.

El discurso ambivalente de Ngugi radica en su defensa del globalismo cultural además de su defensa de la política cultural exclusivamente pan-africana y tercermundista. Otra idea que se sostiene en este artículo es que a pesar de que Ngugi predica a favor del diálogo cultural, no intenta fomentar el entendimiento intercultural, puesto que insiste en la separación cultural entre el Primer y el Tercer Mundo, además de las distinciones de clases. La agenda cultural de Ngugi, además de ser discriminatoria, es, por lo tanto, contra-

of a Universalist discourse. Cross-cultural understanding can only be promoted through a global dialogical intercultural approach.

Key Words: Cultural discourse, Cultural resistance, Racialism, Afrocentricity, Humanist Universalism, Cross-cultural understanding.

dictoria con la lógica de un discurso universalista. El entendimiento intercultural tan solo se puede potenciar con un enfoque intercultural dialógico global.

Palabras clave: discurso cultural, resistencia cultural, racismo, afrocentrismo, universalismo humanista entendimiento intercultural.

'Increasingly, the issue of cultural difference emerges at points of social crises [...] identity is claimed either from a position of marginality or in an attempt at gaining the centre: in both senses, ex-centric.'

Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*

Starting from the premise that Ngugi¹ self-proclaims to be an “unrepentant universalist” (Ngugi 1993:xvii),² I will attempt to show where he departs from the politics of Humanist Universalism. The contention held here is that despite Ngugi’s use of such flashy slogans as “Towards a pluralism of cultures” (*MC* 2) or “The wealth of a common global culture” (*MC* 12), the overall stamp of the essays is one of cultural resistance rather than a celebration of a universal cultural perspective.³ Ngugi’s ambivalent, if not oppositional, stance to cross-cultural communication, first shows in the subtitle of the collection: “The struggle for cultural freedoms.” This clearly indicates that the work falls within the range of counter-hegemonic discourse, or to borrow Bhabha’s phrase, “liberationist aesthetics” (Bhabha 2004:29). Ngugi attempts to “write back” to

¹ Ngugi is one of the most prolific East African writers. His collections of essays and fictional works revolve mostly round such themes as colonialism, neo-colonialism, imperialism, Mau Mau and the Kenyan class differences. His works bear the stamp of his Marxist-Fanonist allegiances. In his novels and plays, he denounces the excesses of the Kenyan regime and calls for a revolutionary uprising of the grassroots. He has been jailed for one year because of the subversive dimension of his fictional works. He has, then, resorted to self-exile for fear of political reprisals. He was a professor at New York University and is currently a Professor at the University of California, Irving.

² Henceforward, the short reference (*MC*) will be given to cite this text.

³ The two essays on cultural pluralism, the second and the fifth, which appear as the odd ones out, would better have been included in a separate collection devoted to cultural globalism.

the Empire “not only through nationalist assertion, proclaiming itself central and self-determining, but even more radically by questioning the bases of European and British metaphysics, challenging the world-view that can polarize the centre and periphery in the first place” (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 1989:33). The collection of essays betrays a conflictual rather than a dialogical cultural discursive strategy. As it will be demonstrated, Ngugi adopts two oppositional discursive systems within the same work. His Manichean rhetoric, his nativist linguistic politics and his expressed Afrocentric allegiances are in opposition to his call for cross-cultural understanding, which requires an endeavour to understand people of different cultures.

The theoretical framework of this paper is a combination of post-colonialism and post-structuralism. The post-colonial perspective is dictated by Ngugi’s “abrogation,” which is defined by Bill Ashcroft et al as “a refusal of the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetics, its illusory standard of normative ‘correct’ usage, and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning ‘inscribed’ in the words” (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 1989:38). Again, as Bhabha defines it, the post-colonial perspective as “a mode of analysis [...] attempts to revise those nationalist or ‘nativist’ pedagogies that set up the relation of the Third World and First World in a binary structure of opposition” (Bhabha 2004:248). The post-structuralist perspective is motivated by an attempt to deconstruct⁴ Ngugi’s cultural discourse.

In this collection of essays, Ngugi’s cultural discourse is not consistent with his expressed views on culture in his earlier works, since he views it from a globalist perspective. In *Homecoming* (1972), he defines culture as follows: “Culture, in its broadest sense, is a way of life fashioned by people in their collective endeavour to live and come to terms with their total environment” (Ngugi 1972:4). In his fictional works, as in his earlier essays, he confines himself to Gikuyu culture. In *Petals of Blood* (1977), *Devil on the Cross* (1982), *Matigari* (1987) and *Wizard of the Crow*⁵ (2006), he preaches cultural monocentrism, and he uses components of Gikuyu oral culture in an attempt to indigenize his novels. Again, this is part of his strategy of cultural resistance, i.e., an affirmation of cultural identity to counteract the Eurocentric norms. It is

⁴This is based on Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction, an approach that demonstrates the writer’s contradiction within the same work.

⁵ In this novel of almost 800 pages, set in a fictional East African country named Aburia, Ngugi denounces the dictatorship of the Kenyan ruling class, criticizes global economics and the hegemony of Western corporations, punning the term ‘corporonialism’. As in *Matigari*, he uses Magical realism and the traditional story-telling narrative style.

by the same token an attempt at subverting the Western literary canons. Ngugi's cultural politics in these works are a form of nativism, i.e., "the desire to return to indigenous practices and cultural forms as they existed in pre-colonial society" (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2001:159). Mainly, Ngugi views culture from a Marxist perspective. Like Williams, he considers a "common culture" as associated with socialist change.

Bhabha, on the other hand, deems that "culture has become as much an uncomfortable, disturbing practice of survival and supplementarity –between art and politics, past and present" (Bhabha 2004:251). Similarly, Chris Baker observes that "postmodern culture is marked by the blurring and the collapse of the traditional boundaries between culture and art, high and low culture, commerce and art, culture and commerce" (Baker 2003:208). In his fictional works, Ngugi often focuses on "low" culture, i.e., that of the grassroots, and considers the ruling class and the élite as culturally alienated. In *Wizard of the Crow*, for instance, one of the characters suffers from "white ache," i.e., the desire to be white.

Moving the Centre is a collection of essays based on speeches given by Ngugi on different occasions and span a period of nine years (1981-1990). In his preface, Ngugi contends that there is a unity of concern in them (MC XIV). His thematic concerns are, as in his earlier collections of essays, decolonising the Mind (1986), Imperialism, Neo-colonialism, Mau Mau, and historiography. In this collection of essays Ngugi is, as in most of his literary output, subversive. He denounces the Kenyan regime and its neo-colonial bondage. In addition, he expresses his Black Nationalism and Pan-African commitment. He defines his major concern as being the need "[to] mov[e] the centre in the two senses –between nations and within nations" (MC XVII).

In this collection of essays, Ngugi expresses a concern for Universalist Humanism stating: "true humanism with its universal reaching out, can flower among the peoples of the earth" (MC XVII). He stresses the importance of intercultural communication through such statements: "culture contact can [...] play a great part in bringing about mutual understanding between peoples of different nations" (MC 42), and "cultures [...] which maintain a balanced give and take with external relations are the ones that are healthy" (MC XVI). In addition, he compares a "common global culture" to a "universal garden of many-coloured flowers" (MC 24), and he preaches cultural dialogue proclaiming: "let the people of the world dialogue together through culture" (MC 42). Ngugi contends that he is contributing to such a "fruitful dialogue" saying: "We must continue to aid, encourage and support [this dialogue] by

every means at our disposal" (MC 46). But, paradoxically, he holds combative rather than reconciliatory rhetoric.

Ngugi's subversive rhetoric is first evident in the titles of the different sections, and those of the essays. e.g., "Freeing culture from Eurocentrism," "Freeing culture from colonial legacies," "Freeing culture from racism," "Imperialism and Revolution." In these essays, Ngugi is subversive through his lexical choice. For instance, the term "imperialism" which brings to mind all the injustice and sufferings of its victims, incites to a patriotic response. Another instance of this subversive register is Ngugi's statement: "Our languages were suppressed so that we, the captives, would not have our own mirrors in which to observe ourselves and our enemies" (MC 32). Such emotion-laden terms like "enemies" recur in the essays, e.g., "even our enemies know this" (MC 76).

Not only is Ngugi being subversive, but he preaches subversion. For instance, he writes: "But what of the forces ensuring our survival? They go by the name of resistance" (MC 79).⁶ In addition, he calls for the teaching of cultural resistance to children: "So we have to strengthen our capacity, and that of our children to resist the evil" (MC 80), the evil being imperialism and neo-colonialism. The danger of such an education has been pointed out by Said who remarks in *Culture and Imperialism*: "the defensive reactive, and even paranoid nationalism is, alas, frequently woven into the fabric of education, where children as well as older students are taught to venerate and celebrate the uniqueness of their traditions (usually and invidiously at the expense of others)" (Said 1993:xxix). Ngugi maintains that any study of culture which does not take into consideration the power relations and the resistance of the last four hundred years is "in danger of giving a distorted picture" (MC 28). What Ngugi seems to overlook is that as long as culture relations continue to be viewed through the prism of historical power relations, there cannot be any genuine attempt at cross-cultural communication. Again, as long as culture will be viewed from a centred nativist perspective, there will not be any constructive cultural dialogue. As Said observes "culture is not monolithic [...] and is not the exclusive property of East or West, or of small groups of men or women" (Said 1993:xxviii).

Ngugi's Manichean rhetoric, e.g., the West and its allies are bad, and those who oppose them are good, also forms part of the resistance ethics that informs the essays. For instance, he maintains that "the main antagonism today is between imperialist enemy classes and the internal resistance classes" (MC 80).

⁶ Ngugi's emphasis.

As this example shows, Ngugi's resistance ethics are not merely based on cultural grounds, but on economic and political ones. Ngugi's preoccupation with class warfare has Marxist undertones. This clearly indicates that despite all his forceful calls to "free culture from Eurocentrism," he is still unable to free himself from the Marxist ideology, which also appears in all his novels, even the most indigenized, e.g., *Devil on the Cross* and *Matigari*. Ngugi's endorsement of the Marxist ideology is in contradiction with his adoption of an Afrocentric world view.⁷ Molefi. K. Asante, the major proponent of Afrocentricity, has defined it as "a quality of thought, practice and perspective that perceives Africans as subjects and agents of phenomena acting in their own cultural image and human interest" (Asante 2005:1).

Ngugi's endorsement of the Afrocentric ideology appears in his call for "a return to the source" (MC 18-19). It is also evident in his preaching linguistic nativism. He calls for the use of African languages, which he maintains "have contributed immensely to the development of European languages" (MC 23). This bears witness to Ngugi's endorsement of the Diopian thesis of the influence of African civilization on the Western one. Diop's influence is also apparent in his suggestion of the influence of Egyptian culture on Greek culture (MC 23). Ngugi's sympathy for Afrocentric thought appears in his enhancing the importance of the Black Nationalist movements of the 1960s (MC 112). These movements triggered Afrocentric concerns in the U.S. and Africa. Ngugi's adoption of the paradigm of Afrocentric historiography is reflected in his historical reconstruction of the Mau Mau struggle both in his essays and novels. The Afrocentric influence on Ngugi also shows in his quoting Chinweizu, a staunch Afrocentric adept. Like the latter, Ngugi condemns "europhone" literature, and considers it as "an appendage of European literature" (MC 23). Yet, Ngugi and Chinweizu are at odds as regards Ngugi's Marxist allegiances. Chinweizu considers the African Marxists as "Marxist Ariels," who should have "their minds decolonised" (Chinweizu 1987:253). On the whole, the Afrocentric perspective is in contradiction with the multiculturalist agenda that Ngugi proposes in *Moving the Centre*. Mazrui aptly demonstrates the dichotomy of the two perspectives in the following passage: "Afrocentricity is predicated on the uniqueness of the African peoples. Multiculturalism is predicated on the universal cultural interdependence of all people. Afrocentricity emphasizes the impact of the African people on world

⁷ The proponents of Afrocentricity, notably Chinweizu, condemn Marxism on Eurocentric grounds (1987:253).

civilization. Multiculturalism sees world civilization as a pooling of the cultural resources of many people" (Mazrui 1993:3).

Ngugi's dualistic discourse in *Moving the Centre* is also related to his linguistic politics. Whereas he proclaims: "we should let all our languages sing of the unity of the people of the earth, of our common humanity" (MC 39), he deems that English, which he considers as "imperialistic" and "racist," should be renounced by African writers. He condemns those who write in European languages and considers them as "black skins in white linguistic masks" (MC 19). Still, Ngugi who maintains that the English language has a "racist tradition" and that it can "but be marked by the very disease it carrie[s]" (MC 38), continues to use it particularly in his essays. Consequently, he has been taken to task by critics, both Western and African alike, for his ambivalent attitude toward the issue of linguistic nationalism. Again, whereas Ngugi advocates the liberation of African literature and culture from the mainstream, he contends that African writers can use, besides "orature, world literature and culture" (MC 22). This ambivalence towards Western cultural artefacts, which is common to the nativists has been pointed out by Said who remarked that they "soon enough found [...] that the idea of a total independence [from the West] was a nationalist fiction." Appiah similarly points out the nativists' ambivalence towards the West: "Railing against the cultural hegemony of the West, the nativists are of its party without knowing it" (Appiah 1988:162).

Ngugi's dualistic discourse, further, appears in his self-contradictions. For instance, he asserts that "Moving the centre [...] between nations and within nations will contribute to the freeing of world cultures from the restrictive walls of nationalism, class and gender" (MC XVII). As his essays testify, he is himself trapped within the confines of class and race. He racializes class differences: "white workers may even come to identify with the whiteness of capital against the blackness of labour" (MC 117).⁸ He posits his analysis of racism along Marxian lines observing: "Racism obscures the real relationship between the wealth of the few and the poverty of the many within a capitalist nation and internationally" (MC 117).

Though, Ngugi reckons that racism "has always been and will always be a threat to world peace" (MC 123-124), he seems to forget that encouraging racial hatred, even if it is with the intention of denouncing racism, is similarly "a threat to world peace." As Fanon rightly remarks: "Is there in truth any difference between one racism and another? Do not all of them show the same

⁸ He echoes Césaire. See Fanon (1967a:133).

collapse, the same bankruptcy of man?" (Fanon 1967a:86). To counteract racism by an "anti-racist racism," to borrow Sartre's phrase, is as Fanon puts it, to engage in a "blind alley" (Fanon 1967b:72). In his Part Three, Ngugi indirectly encourages racial hatred, by insisting on the blacks' victimization. He, for instance, maintains that black workers are "robbed" more than their white counterparts (*MC* 120), and that in Western countries racism is witnessed in the whites' indifference to "police brutality against the blacks" (*MC* 121). Here Ngugi seems to be unfair towards the white liberals, not the pseudo liberals, who often denounce racism and take the plea of its victims. He refers to "the black holocaust" (*MC* 123), i.e., slavery, which might legitimately arouse spiteful responses against the whites. He emphasizes, in an Afrocentric fashion, the need for historical awareness, saying: "We must never forget this" (*MC* 123). This seems an indirect call to a revengeful reaction against those who were responsible for the black race predicament, namely the whites. Fanon, on the other hand, disagrees with those who use slavery to justify their anti-white feelings stating: "Have I no other purpose on earth, then but to avenge the Negro of the Seventeenth century?" (Fanon 1967a:228).

Ngugi's racialism appears, for example, in such phrases as: "the racist European tradition" (*MC* 3), and "an oppressor language carries racist and negative images of the conquered nation, particularly in literature, and English is no exception" (*MC* 35). Ngugi's racialist stance, which evidently is antithetical with Universal humanist principles, is best evidenced in his essay on Karen Blixen, who is often targeted by his sarcasm. In this essay, Ngugi insists on Blixen's "orientalist stereotypical discourse" in *Out Of Africa*, which he considers as "racist" and as the most dangerous book ever written about Africa" (*MC* 133). To demonstrate the book's racist touch, Ngugi himself borrows orientalist stereotypes to make his point. He interprets Blixen's statement about the games of the country as meaning that "her knowledge of wild animals gave her a clue to the African mind" (*MC* 134). The other example he gives to prove Blixen's "racism" is the analogy she draws between her cook's friendly behaviour and that of a "civilized dog" (*MC* 134). Ngugi sees the comparison with the dog in terms of the racist stereotypical discourse which likens blacks to animals. Here, Ngugi's response seems to be predetermined by his prejudices. In fact, Ngugi, who observes that there should be a distancing from the "imperial[ist] claim that the cleanliness of one person must depend on pouring dirt onto others" (*MC* 39), adheres himself to such a logic and puts it into practice in his essays.

Mainly, *Moving the Centre* betrays Ngugi's Manichean thinking, which is in opposition with Universalist Humanist principles. Ngugi who is a dedicated

Fanonist seems to have not learned about Universalism and Humanism from his godfather's seminal work: *Black Skin White Masks*. In this book, Fanon provides a detailed study of the prejudices of both blacks and whites. He does not provide a saintly image of the former nor a demonic one of the latter. He opposes racial hatred on both sides of the color line, and preaches Humanism. Fanon maintains: "I as a man of colour do not have the right to seek ways of stamping the pride of my former master" (Fanon 1976a:228), and "I do not have the right to go and cry out my hatred at the white man" (229). He particularly insists on cross-cultural understanding as the solution to the feuds between blacks and whites: "Both must turn their backs on the inhuman voices which were those of their respective ancestors in order that authentic communication be possible" (231).

To sum up, Ngugi seems to have a short-sighted view of cultural globalism, since his conception of cross-cultural understanding is exclusively Pan-Africanist and Third worldist. In *Moving the Centre*, his binary thinking leaves little room for cultural relativism which is based on mutual respect and tolerance. Fanon, unlike Ngugi, preaches Universalist Humanism. He remarks: "I have only one solution: to rise above the absurd drama that others have staged around me, to reject the two terms that are equally unacceptable, and through one human being, to reach out for the universal" (Fanon 1976a:197). Mainly, Ngugi's nativism is contradiction with cross-cultural interaction, which is inevitable in the current globalized world. As Said observes: "although there are many divisions within it, there is only one secular historical world and that neither nativism [...] nor regionalism, nor ideological smokescreens can hide societies, cultures, and people from one another" (Said 2000:209).

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Author's contact: mfbouhadiba@yahoo.fr