

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o

Long Question no. 01

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o as a Critic:

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o is an internationally renowned Kenyan novelist, dramatist and critic. He is a distinguished professor of English and comparative literature at the University of California. Born in Kenya, under the British rule, Ngugi witnessed the effects of **colonialism** firsthand. His own family was a victim of British cruelty during the political turmoil which ultimately led to the independence. His first critically acclaimed novel **"Weep Not, Child"** centres around the Mau Mau war and East African culture. He was against the supremacy of English culture in Africa. He even renounced his anglicized name as a protest against colonialism. He believes that even the anglicized names of the native Africans are sign of colonialism. He used to write in his native language Kikuyu and then translate his works into English.

Ngugi has been an important figure in the research about the theory of post-coloniality. He along with his colleagues, **Taban Lo Liyong** and **Henry Owuor-Anyumba** took an **anti-imperialist stance** in the essay **"On the Abolition of the English Department"**. This essay is seen as an important inaugural statement of post-colonial literary criticism. Ngugi's writings have aided in foregrounding the dilemmas faced by post-colonial countries. In this essay, he argues for the necessity of the **realignment of educational institutions** in order to get rid of the **internally enforced subordination of African culture** by the imposition of European frameworks. Ngugi stages a revolt against the British supremacy thereby depicting English not as a neutral subject but as an **instrument of imperialism**. His aim is to promote the **study of indigenous national literature and languages**.

Ngugi argues how literary education and academics have been the key instruments in the implementation of **cultural imperialism** in Africa. He says in **"Literature and Society"**,

"the content of our literature syllabus, its presentation, the machinery for determining the choice of texts and their interpretation were all an integral

part of imperialism and domination in the colonial phase, and they are today an integral part of the imperialism and domination in the neo-colonial phase”.

Ngugi questions the place and role of an English department in an African university. He is against the study of the historic continuity of a single culture throughout in African Universities. He has always promoted **Afrocentricism**. His main aim was to orientate the native Africans towards placing African culture at the centre of their study. Therefore, he suggested the abolition of the English Department and the establishment of a Department of African Literature and Languages in its place. According to him, **firstly**, universities must dismantle the departments that are concerned with English language and literature. **Secondly**, they must create departments concerned with the study of indigenous African language and literature. **Thirdly**, neglected topics such as African oral traditions must be studied. **Fourthly**, they must include modern African literature such as Caribbean and Afro-American literature.

Ngugi used his writings to show the world that the newly independent Kenya was a “democratic” country with freedom of speech guaranteed. He began to walk together with peasants and workers by making his writings in his mother tongue, kikuyu, and thus became a **symbol of threat to the system**. He was of the view,

“... if you write in a foreign language, you are assuming a foreign-language readership...If I write in the Kikuyu language (or in any African language) ; I am assuming an African readership and so, in fact, am assuming a peasant and worker audience.”

He once argued,

“a Kenyan language, an African language is part and parcel of anti imperialist struggles of Kenyan and African people.”

Ngugi chose the working class of his society as his audience and captured as well as reflected the struggles around him with honesty and faithfulness. He appreciated the classes and their values that are struggling for a new world order, a new society, and a more human future.

Ngugi regards European literature as one of the few influences on modern African literature. He considers the African tradition as active and alive.

As a critic, he is of the view that the study of their own tradition will provide more **spontaneity and liberty of communication** to the African students. And they will be able to come up with fresh approaches as well. He gives his vision of an active grammar school for Africans. He suggests that the department of literature should offer courses in the oral tradition, Swahili literature, European literature and Modern African literature. According to him, different forms of art such as tale, dance, song and myth have an aesthetic as well as a social purpose. They also provide a critique on society. Thus, their study will lead to a **“multidisciplinary outlook”**. Also he thinks,

“For any group, it is better to study representative works which mirror their society rather than to study a few isolated ‘classics’, either of their own or of a foreign culture.”

In a nutshell, Ngugi negates the emergence of English traditions in Africa. To place Africa in centre, he demands a curriculum which teaches from African perspective. He argues the replacement of **traditional English Department** with a **department of African literature**. Therefore he offers set of proposals in his essay ***“On Abolition of English Department”*** for African universities in order to abolish imperialism in Africa. He maps out a new direction for African universities which will lead them to a new social order. Thus, Ngugi asserts that

“African languages must be at the frontline in the discovery and invention of knowledge in the sciences and technology”.

Therefore, he demands the centrality of Africa. He believes that education is a means of knowledge about oneself. Therefore, the Africans need to study the literature which mirror their own society and gives them knowledge about their own traditions and history.

LQ:02: Why according to the three writers English Department be abolished from African Universities?

The essay ***“On the Abolition of the English Department”*** is a revolt against the vestige of British colonial rule. The main thrust of the essay is the eminent effects of colonization on the African culture and education department. It deals with how literary education and academic institutions have helped implement cultural imperialism in Africa. It is a collaborative essay of ***Ngugi Wa Thiong’o***,

Taban Lo Liyong, and Henry Owuor-Anyumba. The paper raised important questions. It questions the role and status of the **English department** in an African situation and environment. As the most potent instrument of cultural control, the language of the colonial power, therefore, played an essential role in the process of colonization.

According to Ngugi Wa Thiong'o;

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

Its leading author, Ngugi wa Thiong'o is an internationally renowned novelist, dramatist, and critic. He witnessed the effects of colonialism due to being born in Kenya, which was under British rule from 1895 until 1963. For Ngugi, **English** in Africa is a **“cultural bomb”** that continues to wound the individual by erasing his memories of pre-colonial cultures and installing the dominance of new, more insidious, forms of colonialism. He wants to preserve the specificity of his own community. He presents a compelling argument for African writers to write in the traditional languages of Africa rather than in European languages. Writing in the languages of the **colonizer**, he claims, means that many of one's own people are not able to read one's original work. He believed that text written in a European language cannot claim to be African literature.

Ngugi reminds the people of Africa that the teaching of the English language and literature was a prominent part of the administration of the British Empire in Africa. However, after the uprisings, the British imposed a curriculum on students that emphasized *English history, literature, and a Eurocentric vision of the world*. He emphasized that the ***African language should be the center of the education system***. This essay focuses on the proposal to completely remove the English Department at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, East Africa. Therefore, they decided to **abolish** the English department at the University of **Nairobi**.

The paper proposed changes that are necessary to place into the core roots of Kenya as an African nation. The paper **challenges** the idea of ***“English” as the***

central focus of the study of literature and language when Africa is influenced by distinct and varied roots from other countries such as the European Countries. The British, on the other hand, had Kenya in a protectorate state in 1895. However, in 1920, Kenya transformed into a British Crown Colony. With this, it is essential to note that the English Department is a **mark of colonization** to which it sneers like a **chain** to a free country.

The *Abolition of the English Department to a Department of African Literature and Languages* is not merely a change of name. The essay highlights that they want to establish **the centrality of African language in the Department.** This is just logical in a sense that being free from the colonizer means that a country is free to rebuild what was lost during the colonization process and placing the real African language into the center would make the younger generation after the colonization **to think like Africans** and for them **to experience and know more about their roots.** The assumed centrality of the English Department suggests that *“the English tradition and the emergence of the modern west is the central root of our consciousness and cultural heritage.”*

Also, they intensify that English literature as the central focus of the study is not that necessarily compared to the European studies which take part in the **honing of the culture of Africa** even before the colonization of English. With these stated, they qualify that **English writings will be taught in their European context and only for their relevance to the East African perspective.** This is also the aim of this essay. African language should be at the **center** and all other things are to be considered in their relevance to our situation.

Another reason to abolish the English Language is that they want the **freedom of choice.** They want that other optional subjects that should also be included in the syllabus other than English like *Arabic, Kikuyu, Luo, and Akamba*, etc. They suggest that other than **Swahili, French and English** students should have freedom of choice to study any other language not that they have to study only the English language. They argued that,

“We see no reason why English literature should have priority over and above other European literatures.”

They also raise questions on the standard of **'excellence'** and **'literary'**. That on what grounds something is considered as excellent, ***"the question of literary excellence implies a value judgment as to what is literary and what is excellence and from whose point of view"***.

Lastly, the abolition of English Department and establishment of the Department of African Literature and Languages offers an **interlinking** between Department of African Literature and Languages among other departments for them to concentrate on the aspects of African thought not only in literature and languages but to the honing of the Africa and Africans as a whole.

"For any group, it is better to study representative works which mirror their society rather than to study a few isolated 'classics', either of their own or of a foreign culture."

The abolition of the English Department is necessary to **reestablish the Africanism** of the people which is partially or totally eroded by the process of colonization. **Centering Africa** as the heart of study for literature and languages students would promote to the younger generations of Africa to think like Africans. The marks of colonization will not be eradicated completely, but the roots of Africans could be reinstated if they are going to prioritize African literature and culture in the students' curriculum. The worst thing that could happen to a country is to have citizens who are knowledgeable about the whole world but ignorant about themselves. This abolition is not just about retribution and disdain over the colonizers but it is more on recognizing the importance of knowing and imbibing what makes them Africans.

"With Africa at the center of things --- things must be seen from the African perspective".

Thus, they question the role and status of an English department in an African situation and environment. They demand that **English only be taught as a language, not as a tool to imply other's cultures**. They want the abolishment of the English Department because it is not treated just as a neutral or natural subject like others rather it is being used as an instrument of imperialism and promotes the study of indigenous national literature and languages.

Short Questions

Q no. 01 Why oral tradition and oral literature is necessary to be studied in African universities?

Ngugi Wa Thiongo is a Kenyan writer who has remained instrumental in proving the importance of local tradition and culture with regards to literature. He instilled the importance of integrating African literature in the syllabus of universities and colleges rather than studying only English, French and other languages of the dominant nations. Ngugi Wa Thiongo noticed the rich oral literature present in African society in the form of all kinds of songs. These were sung all over the nation in churches, night clubs, political rallies, and by both professional performers and regular people. These oral traditions were both rich and diverse.

“The oral tradition is rich and many sided. In fact ‘Africa is littered with Oral Literature.’”

These traditions were intertwined with the lives of people. The only problem seemed to be was that the literature was not available or efforts made to preserve it in written form. Ngugi Wa Thiongo prevented the oral literature from being lost by proposing a new syllabus for the universities, that is by replacing the English Department with an African one. He provided many reasons to preserve oral tradition and literature by necessitating the need to inculcate it into the syllabi.

First of all, the oral tradition is the primary root of African literature. It cannot be separated from African people, so rather than disregarding it, it should be developed further through professional education by university students and scholars. Secondly, **oral tradition is a representation of the society itself.** Due to its intimate connection with the social norms and values and its ability to influence the trends it should not be ignored. Furthermore, oral tradition has roots in African history, if properly utilized, **it can further the development of several disciplines such as Sociology, Anthropology, History, Psychology, Religion, Philosophy, art, and music etc.** Oral tradition would be able to

introduce fresh outlooks in different disciplines, and experiments and research would lead to new aspects of literature.

Literature would change significantly due to the **introduction of new structures and techniques along with new literary patterns** that would lead to evolution of language. Hence, a new literature would come forth that people could relate to because of **its historical and cultural significance. It would be better appreciated by the people because of its origins** and connection to the people rather than other foreign languages. It is a waste to ignore African literature when people can view it through the unique African perspective. No one has access to the unique African perspective than the African locals themselves.

“With Africa at the center of things, not existing as an appendix or a satellite of other countries and literatures, things must be seen from the African perspective.”

So, to not study their oral traditions and values would be a waste of centuries of art and history of the African continent.

Q 2. Discuss briefly Swahili Literature. Roll no. 9

The Swahili language, also called Kiswahili, dates its origin to the **Bantu people** of the coast of East Africa. Swahili is still one of the working languages of the African Union and officially recognized as a lingua franca of the East African Community. In 2018, South Africa legalized the teaching of Swahili in South African schools as an optional subject to begin in 2020. Various colonial powers that ruled on the coast of East Africa played a role in the growth and spread of Swahili. With the arrival of the Arabs in East Africa, they used Swahili as a language of trade as well as for teaching Islam to the local Bantu peoples. Swahili has become **a second language** spoken by tens of millions in three African Great Lakes countries; Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, where it is an official or national language, also being **lingua franca** throughout East Africa.

Swahili literature is literature written in the Swahili language by Swahili speaking people. The first literary works date back to the beginning of the 18th century, when all Swahili literature was written in the Arabic script. Swahili literature is classified into three genres: riwaya (the novel), tamthilia (drama/play)

and ushairi (poetry) that is usually sung but can also be read. The poetic tradition is still practiced today and it is usually published in local newspapers and used in songs and musical theater. Ngugi commented on Swahili literature as,

“There is a large amount of oral and written classical Swahili literature of high caliber. There is also a growing body of modern Swahili literature; both written and oral”

Swahili folklore is a common tradition of transmitting stories from one generation to another. Due to the extensive interaction between Arabic-speaking and Swahili-speaking peoples, there are many Arabic folktales that were told by Swahili speakers. Swahili people are also Bantu people and therefore some of their stories have similar themes to other Bantu stories.

Swahili literary genres and conventions, as well as specific Swahili literary works, have intrigued and inspired a wide range of writers on African history. While early writers on East African history considered only the chronicles of Swahili city-states, more recently scholars have begun to write about other narrative genres as well as about Swahili narrative poetry. Historians have also turned to ethnographies, local histories, the more recent genre of autobiographical writing in Swahili, and the Swahili novel.

Literary works may, of course, be problematic when they are read as documents, and therefore an understanding of both literature and history is necessary for an **insight into significant issues in African history** as well as issues that are central to Swahili literary history. Swahili literature has provided invaluable and diverse sources to historians and other scholars, and an international intellectual community is emerging for whom Swahili is the primary language. Shaaban Robert, James Mbotela, Muhammed Said Abdulla and Muhammed Saleh Farsy are few of major writers who wrote first in standard Swahili.

In 1968 essay, ***“On Abolition of English Language”***, Ngugi stages a revolt against the prestige given to English language due to colonial reign of Britain and really pushed forward the idea of promoting national languages of Africa along with **‘oral tradition’** more specifically Swahili language and Literature. This approach inspired postcolonial students of English to rethink the practices of the discipline. The recent 20th century development of English department became a

tool to propagate nationalism and became the very symbol of national pride. Ngugi offered a perspective, according to which English was no longer a natural or neutral subject but an instrument of imperialism.

Ngugi argued for the primary use of native traditions and languages. To eradicate this cultural imperialism, Ngugi suggests some very straightforward sets of proposals for African universities in which he clearly states, ***“Create departments centered on the study of indigenous African languages and literatures...”***. He clearly demanded a department that teaches,

“Swahili literature (with Arabic and Asian literatures): this is another root, especially in East Africa”.

Q no. 03 On what grounds the three authors reject the primacy of English literature and culture.

Colonial language practices brought about the **demise** of many languages and the expansion of many languages. Language imperialism involves the **transfer** of dominant language to other people. The imperialism of English language because of **Britain** had influenced the world remarkably. **“On the Abolition of English Department”**, aims to shed the British colonial rule even amidst its language and literature departments. This essay **“depicts English not as neutral or natural subject but as an instrument to imperialism, and promotes the study of indigenous nation language”**. Due to this, critics such as **Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, Taban Lo Liyong and Henry Owuor Anyumba** decided that English department should be **abolished** from **African Universities**. They wanted the English department to be **replaced** by the department of African literature and languages.

These critics produced the **manifesto** which provided an answer to the role of **literary resources** to accompany the **anti- colonial** struggles. In which they suggested that, **“we reject the primacy of English literature and cultures**. The aim, in short, should be to orientate ourselves towards placing **Kenya, East Africa** and then **Africa** in the centre. We are not rejecting other streams especially **Western** stream. We are only clearly **mapping** out the **directions** and **perspectives** the

study of culture and literature will inevitably be taken in an African university. We want to establish the **centrality** of Africa in the department. Education is a mean of **knowledge** about **ourselves**, so we have to **examine ourselves**, we radiate outwards and **discover peoples and worlds around us**.”

All three were **English graduates, dramatist, poet and having firsthand experience of colonialism**. As this essay is concerned with how literary education and institutions have helped implement cultural Imperialism in Africa by centralizing British literature. The suggested proposals are, **first**, the abolishing of English Department. **Second**, the construction of African literature and language be set in its place. **Third**, neglecting African oral tradition and **forth** offering courses studying modern African literature including Caribbean and African literature.

The authors **oppose** the **3.1.1** because they believe undergraduates **“should be exposed to as many general ideas as possible”**. The aim of the authors is to diversify undergraduate curriculum to be more generalized. Critics considered oral tradition as **primary root** which is rich and sided. The importance of oral tradition is in its ability to cause **pleasure and meaning**. And this pleasure side is derived from the capacity of **tale, dance, song, myth** etc, to provide **aesthetic enjoyment**. This identifies another way English literature lacks in comparison to African literature.

The three writers gave the **vision** that African culture had roots going back to **European literature and Asian literature**. Li Liyong said that, **“We have eyes, but we do not see, We have ears, but we do not hear. We can read, but we do not understand what we read”**. African literature gives wide reading for instance, an introduction to African art, sculpture and painting is offered with cooperation of Department of Design and Architecture. **Terry Eagleton** points out in **“Literary Theory”** that, **“English arose as a discipline to foster an appreciation for culture in the less educated classes, who were not trained in Greek and Latin”**. In 1968, a revolt was staged against the vestige of British colonial rule and depicts English as an instrument of imperialism. So, due to these reasons three writers **reject the**

primacy of English literature and culture and wanted to abolish English department from African University.

