



CULTURAL NATIONALIST FALLACIES IN SELECT NON-FICTION WRITINGS OF NGUGI WA THIANG'O'

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ABSTRACT

The paper seeks to critically examine the problematic premise of the Nairobi Revolution which led to the abolition of English Department at University of Nairobi. The paper explores the question that how far is exchanging Anglo-centrism for Afro-centrism in literary curriculum advantageous and to whom. The Nairobi Revolution paradoxically maintained the conventional ideology of English literature by attempting to substitute a romantic discourse of true Africanness for the discourse of foreign Englishness as a requisite for literary education in the University. The paper argues that the movement incorporated effectively paradoxical tendencies by discarding and manifesting at the same time the cultural nationalist fallacies.

Keywords: *Afro-Centrism, Culture, Literary Curriculum, Nairobi Revolution, Nationalism.*

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Ngugi wa Thiang'o is considered the pioneer in determining the African literary tradition and establishing its position in literary academies. He is regarded as the foremost postcolonial literary nationalist by both admirers and critics. The paper examines the non-fiction writings of Ngugi wa Thiang'o, particularly, *Decolonising the Minds* and *On the Abolition of English Department* and proposes that despite its overtly anti-colonial approach and

nationalist objective, Ngugi's work belongs to an exclusionary school culture.

To illustrate the hypothesis, the paper takes into focus the successful Nairobi Revolution led by Ngugi that resulted in the abolition of the English Department at the University of Nairobi in the late 1960s and the establishment of an Afro-centric Department of Literature in English. On October 24, 1968, Henry Owuor- Anyumba, Taban lo Liyong, and



James Ngugi, three young black Professors of the University of Nairobi's English Department (dominated by white professoriate), sent an internal memo to the Dean of the Faculty of Arts asking for the department to be abolished.

Regardless of their powerful rhetorical claims, Ngugi and his colleagues have failed to comprehend the institutional focus that both sanctioned as well as inhibited their critique of the Englishness of English literature. The institutional context under consideration is the Postcolonial University, an institutional formation whose enduring relationship with the metropolitan University is more fundamental than may have been perceptible to them. If Matthew Arnold's and F. R. Leavis's attempts to construct an English national culture from the advantageous site of the metropolitan University could be argued to have been motivated by an intentional fallacy, then Ngugi's venture of consecrating an African national culture from the privileged locus of the Postcolonial University can equally be argued to have been determined by an imitative fallacy. The paper does not propose an empirical correspondence between Ngugi and Arnold; rather it argues that what is remarkable about all three critics is the scale to which they mistakenly confound a prevalent school culture with an illusory national culture.

"On the Abolition of the English Department" was a reaction against the Head of Department, James Stewart's endeavour to devise an English program apt for a lately postcolonial student body. The central problem confronting Stewart was how could he generalize British ethnocentrism so as to make it pertinent for Postcolonial African students? Stewart presumed that the objective of a University literary education was the fabrication of national subjects or citizens on the foundation of integrated interdisciplinary syllabi. This reasoning is an uncanny replica of the F. R. Leavis's ideology. "The real university," Leavis famously wrote, "is a centre of consciousness and human responsibility for the civilized world—for the living heritage on which meaning and human intelligence can't, in our time, be maintained without a concentrated creativity somewhere." [1] According to Leavis, the English schools are the creative centres of civilization and in

them is concentrated the direct links to a living culture.

Leavis's argument supplies possibly the perfect depiction of what John Guillory refers as the pedagogical imaginary that is the students are congregated in literary studies for their potential as idealized citizens. Leavis's logic is perceptible even today in theories of literature in both the metropole and the postcolony. Stewart uncritically accepted Leavis's notion in his 1968 proposal. His challenge was to subsume the African polity into the universal civilization, thus the requirement for the English Department at Nairobi to become less British and incorporate other literatures in English. According to him, all cultures be it American, Caribbean or African needed to be incorporated into the Western tradition when at its heart, the Western tradition was English.

In "On the Abolition of the English Department", Ngugi and his colleagues offer a persuasive, yet, problematic critique of Stewart's proposition for curriculum reform. They highlight that beneath Stewart's logic "is a basic assumption that the English tradition and the emergence of the modern west is the central root of our consciousness and cultural heritage. Africa becomes an extension of the west." [2] They reject Stewart's Eurocentrism and as Postcolonial intellectuals they celebrate their African identities. Though, they discarded the conclusion, but not the founding principle of Stewart's recommendations. As Simon Gikandi argues, "The great irony, of course, is that the Leavisite tradition Thiong'o and his colleagues were fighting had already set the terms of this debate by connecting literature to tradition, community, and nation." [3] Ngugi and his colleagues did not rebuff the equation of the culture of university classroom with national cultures. They argued, "The primary duty of any literature department is to illuminate the spirit animating a people, to show how it meets new challenges, and to investigate possible areas of development and involvement." [4] This position is an African replication of Leavis's language. Leavis's discourse is appealing for Ngugi and his colleagues, paradoxically, on grounds of its ethnocentrism. In the context of independent Kenya, the re-appropriation of Kenyan culture and consciousness in place of



English culture and consciousness was an easy substitution.

Rather than being a frank postcolonial refutation, their contention is a mirror image of Stewart's assumptions with the exception of a cynical discourse on Afro-centrism. Apparently, Ngugi and his colleagues shared with Stewart, their ideological opponent the same philosophical assumptions. They argued for the English Department to be abolished not because they rebuffed the value-system of the British Academy and their proposition of objective of literary education for the production of national citizens. Rather, what bothered them was the purposely European form those principles took within what they defined as an African context. They argue that they reject the primacy of English literature yet at the same time that they uncritically acknowledge the perspective that the goal of a University literary education, even in a generally non-literate and non-literary post-colony, is the creation of consummate national subjects. While there is an attempt to restructure the literary curriculum, there is no effort to recognize the specificity of the institutional locus of the Postcolonial University. Who is sanctioned to become a part of the literary academy and at whose cost? These are some essential issues nowhere approached in their arguments.

Ngugi and his colleagues advocated that a Department of African language and literature be launched in place of the alien and alienating English department. The Department's nationalist agenda was unambiguous, "The aim, in short, should be to orientate ourselves towards placing Kenya, East Africa, and then Africa in the centre. All other things are to be considered in their relevance to our situation, and their contribution towards understanding ourselves." [5] Their literary nationalism was determined by a racist black aesthetic. As Angus Calder, a prominent member of the reconstituted Department favourably concluded in, "What we have now is a syllabus in Literature that takes the world for its scope, and where, while student A may if he wishes select options which will give his programme an overwhelmingly Black emphasis, it is impossible for any perverse student to avoid a heavy Black emphasis." [6] In the new

Department, students were expected to adhere to a literary curriculum that emphasized their black identity. Calder considered any student who would oppose the Afro-centric prominence as perverse, the prey of a disease to be treated by means of a coercive pedagogy.

Oral literature became the centre of the recent literary nationalism perceived by Ngugi and his colleagues. Through coercive pedagogy, oral literature functioned as a tool for the construction of collective Africanness, predicated on their ethnicity. Students were expected to study oral literature as part of their ethnic identification; they affirmed their ethnic identity as part of their nationalist recognition, which consequently led to an assertion of their global black identity. The paper does not question the intellectual validity of the study of oral literature as such, it rather explores the ways in which that study was channelled in the construction of an invented African tradition. University's aspiration to legitimize itself through ethnic identities needs to be challenged.

Ngugi and his colleagues expressed an impossible idea of literary citizenship on the ground of an invented African tradition. Critics like Hountondji insist that there is no traditional African philosophy. Hountondji asserts that the primary charge in philosophically understanding Africa is a methodical demystification. He argues for the destruction of "the dominant mythological conception of Africanness and restores the simple obvious truth that Africa is, above all, a continent, and the concept of Africa is an empirical, geographical concept and not a metaphysical one." [7]

Therefore, it can be argued that Ngugi and his colleagues by advocating for the establishment of an Afro-centric Department of Literature in English challenge the inherent Eurocentric perspective prevalent in most of English Departments in Postcolonial Universities across the world. But, at the same time they unwittingly acknowledge that the goal of a University literary education is the creation of consummate national subjects which unambiguously exhibit their nationalist agenda. English literature both in the West and in Africa has been twisted by nationalist mystification.



The primary mission of any educational institution or literary academy should be the work of demystifying the nationalist halos and returning literature to its true historical context.

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