

elers. Instead, it might have achieved what Behdad claims it should not, which is to provide "a specialized erudite knowledge of Europe's guilty past" (9).

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Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*. London: James Currey, 1993. Pp. 184. \$17.95.

Moving the Centre brings together essays written between 1987 and 1992, the majority of which Ngugi originally delivered as lectures and subsequently published in journals and magazines in Europe, Australia, and the US. Following the death of Marxism throughout eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, and Ngugi's own prolonged exile in the West, many readers of African literature have wondered what direction Ngugi's political passions, which dominated his writing for over a decade, would take. These essays reveal that nothing much has really changed about Ngugi's views on the politics of language, on the relation of the Empire to the margins, and on cross-culturality. He retains a Third World-centred perspective of culture and freedom and his style of argumentation remains as vivid as ever.

Ngugi's embrace in the early 1970s of Gikuyu as his chosen medium of literary expression marked a turning point in his career. Although critics at that initial stage commonly regarded the choice as a romanticized gesture that would be difficult to realize or sustain, Ngugi articulated a broader commitment to his vision in two books of essays, *Writers in Politics* (1981) and *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986). His Gikuyu language texts *Caithani Mutharaba-ini* and *Ngaahika Ndeenda* commemorated his belief that "writing in [the] Gikuyu language, a Kenyan language, an African language, is part and parcel of the anti-imperialist struggles of Kenyan and African peoples" (*Decolonizing the Mind* 28).

Ngugi admits in the preface to *Moving the Centre* that the obstacles to the use of African languages by African writers are overwhelming. Writing of his experiences with two of the essays in the collection that give him "special satisfaction" ("English, a Language for the World?" and "Many Years Walk to Freedom: Welcome Home Mandela"), he discloses the ease with which he published the English version of the latter. Originally commissioned by "EMERGE, a New York based African-American news magazine," the essay was published as "the lead article in their March 1990 issue featuring the historic release of Nelson Mandela" (xiv). "But whereas the Gikuyu original of the piece on language has been published in the Yale journal," Ngugi laments, "the Gikuyu original of the Mandela piece is still in my drawer among a good number of others" (xiv). He comments: "In their different destinies, the two pieces illustrate the difficulties in the way of those writing

theoretical, philosophical, political, and journalistic prose in an African language, moreover in conditions of exile" (xiv).

The essay "Many Years Walk to Freedom" is a supreme tribute to Nelson Mandela, whom Ngugi describes as the symbol of "the infinite capacity of the human spirit to resist and to conquer" (147). Mandela's courage, endurance, and resistance spirit, Ngugi argues, reflect not only the heroism of the South African masses in their commitment to the elimination of apartheid, but the will of all oppressed peoples of the world because of the historical significance of South Africa. Through the discovery of South Africa, Europe obtained a gateway to India's riches and later "South Africa saw her people hunted down and carried away as slaves. Their labour was used to develop what later became the United States and profits from sale of their bodies as commodities became part of the capital that . . . was the basis of Western Europe's nineteenth-century industrial take off" (148). Ngugi's reconstruction of the history of the use of South African slave labor in mining gold, diamonds, and other minerals to lay the foundation of the West's industrial development is quite radical. He fails, however, to establish a link between the radicalism of his views and the refusal of Western journals to publish the Gikuyu version of the essay, which in any case their audiences cannot read.

Ngugi's disquisitions on life in exile are more compelling. In "From the Corridors of Silence: The Exile Writes Back," he explores the conditions of exile as one in which the victim is "keenly aware of his loss of freedom." Viewing exile and imprisonment in identical terms, Ngugi argues that exile is not simply the condition of physical distance from home but spiritual alienation, a condition of being "haunted by a tremendous longing for a connection," a longing felt even by the African writer trained at home to feel in sympathy with the colonialist (106). In his own case, Ngugi emphasizes that he did not choose exile; it was imposed on him by Kenya, his country of birth, when, after a short visit to Britain, he learned that he was wanted by the authorities at home.

According to Ngugi, the decision to adopt Gikuyu as his language of literary expression represents an effort to overcome his state of alienation, to seek his "genuine roots in the languages and rhythms of the dispossessed majority" (108). He maintains that only an African-language literature can effectively play the role expected of a genuinely African literary work: to counter Eurocentric images of Africans depicted by some Western writers. This viewpoint, however, oversimplifies the issue of committed writing. Ngugi seems to forget that the issue is not simply that of the language in which Africans write, but also the sensibility they bring to their work. He does not tackle the basic question of the nature of the education that Africans receive or how it can be restructured. Rather, he assumes that writing in an African language will automatically endow the voice of the writer with authenticity. Ngugi speaks with more authority when he admonishes

African writers to employ African languages as their literary medium of communication and to challenge African authorities to adopt indigenous languages as official languages of communication across the continent. A strong advocate of African-language literatures, Ngugi wisely hypothesizes in "Imperialism of Language: English, a Language for the World?" that it is only when all languages are developed that we can have a relation of equality among the peoples of the world, since, as he puts it, "The death of many languages should never be a condition for the life of a few. On the contrary, the lives of many languages should add life to whichever language emerges as the transnational or universal language of communication between people" (39).

Ngugi's reasoning in "Imperialism of Language" suggests an openness toward multiculturalism. But his tacit refusal to abandon the old dichotomies between "the West and the rest of us" (in essays written both in the pre- and post-perestroika periods) and his orthodox Marxist positioning, negate such a global perspective. In many of his essays, we confront a major limitation of Ngugi's sensibility: a one-dimensionality of perception. Few would dispute the fact that some of the political instability, economic mismanagement, and official corruption in post-independence Africa has been instigated by selfish foreign interests, but it is naive for Ngugi to think of Africans as merely reactive victims of imperialist forces. He decries, for example, US leadership in fostering the new imperialism, and talks of the dominance of finance corporations of America, Japan, and Western Europe ("The Cultural Factor in the Neo-Colonial Era"; "Resistance to Damnation: The Role of Intellectual Workers"). At the same time, he views the collapse of the socialist bloc as a result of the corrosive impact of Western imperialism, "a three-headed monster with one head spitting fire at the socialist world" (55). The governing elites of Africa, meanwhile, are excused their coups, squandermania, and corruption, which are explained away through such external motivations.

On the other hand, in "Post-Colonial Politics and Culture" and "The Writer in a Neo-Colonial State," Ngugi does take up how indigenous Kenyan culture, particularly oral literature, is suppressed by post-independence African leaders. He provides an account of the imprisonment of the Kenyan writers Al Amin Mazrui, Maina wa Kinyatti, and others for propagating subversive literature ("Cultural Dialogue for a New World"; "Universality of Local Knowledge"). The attitudes of modern leaders thus become for him a reproduction of the situation under colonial rule.

Moreover, Ngugi offers insights into the cancer of racism ("The Ideology of Racism"), which he describes as "a psychological, cultural, political, and economic reality," particularly for its black victims, who live its effects "hourly, daily, weekly, monthly, all the year round on their bodies, in their bellies, in their minds, in their houses and in the streets" (122). Ngugi's criticism of the role played by colonialist litera-

ture in the propagation of racism provides an enlightened comment on the topic.

Writers who repeatedly employ the media to espouse political causes particularly open themselves to the charges of repetitiousness, conservatism, and even anachronism of the type that I earlier levelled against Ngugi. However, everything considered, Ngugi remained admirably committed to the vision he brought to the debate over imperialism. This is a debate that he has been pursuing since the very beginning of his writing career. Despite numerous constraints, he has tried, as a writer, to fulfil the tenets he outlined for African writers and scholars in his 1984 essay, "The Role of the Scholar in the Development of African Literature," also included in the volume under review. In so doing, he has revealed both the determination and political awareness necessary to restore universal popular equality.

Moving the Centre may not be a fair survey of the range, depth, and themes of the entire corpus of Ngugi's writing. But the book provides interesting insights into the mind of a gifted writer at a significant period in his career. The essays might betray a sense of Ngugi's growing frustration with the slow pace of change, but they also indicate his abiding faith in the capability of human beings to take creative control of their own lives. With these essays, Ngugi serves notice that he will never stop the struggle until he sees positive change. The collection deserves a wide readership for the message of hope it bears, and for Ngugi's persuasive style of argumentation as well.

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