

Decolonising the Mind

Joan Riley on the *BBC World Service*

Decolonising the Mind is powerfully written and full of the clarity and honesty we have come to expect from the man who is probably the most important figure in contemporary African literature.

Carl Wood in *The Christian Science Monitor*

Cut the Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and he bleeds politics. He is passionately committed to the egalitarian ideals of the 1950s Kenyan revolution against Great Britain – a dedication well illustrated in this book of essays on cultural politics. Ngugi's revolutionary fervor has not diluted his literary achievement . . . The main target of his political ire, here as always, is corruption in Africa among Western-influenced rulers and business leaders.

Anne Walmsley in *The Guardian*

. . . many of the ideas are familiar from Ngugi's earlier critical books, and earlier lectures, elsewhere. But the material here has a new context, and the ideas a new focus . . .

Ned Thomas in *Planet – The Welsh Internationalist*

. . . one of the most important statements to come from Black Africa . . .

Adewale Maja-Pearce in *The New Statesman*

In retrospect that literature characterised by Ngugi as 'Afro-European' – the literature written by Africans in the European languages – will come to be seen as part and parcel of the uneasy period between colonialism and full independence, a period equally reflected in the continent's political instability as it attempts to find its feet. Ngugi's importance – and that of this book – lies in the courage with which he has confronted this most urgent of issues.

Ngũgĩ
wa Thiong'o

Decolonising the Mind

*The Politics
of Language
in African Literature*

James Currey

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Dedication

This book is gratefully dedicated to all those who write in African languages, and to all those who over the years have maintained the dignity of the literature, culture, philosophy, and other treasures carried by African languages.

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Contents

Acknowledgements	viii
Preface	ix
A Statement	xiv
Introduction: Towards the Universal Language of Struggle	1
1 The Language of African Literature	4
2 The Language of African Theatre	34
3 The Language of African Fiction	63
4 The Quest for Relevance	87
Index	111

the peasantry. In doing this it will play a most crucial role in Africa's general quest for relevance.

Notes

- 1 'No human disaster, with the exception of the Flood (if that biblical legend is true) can equal in dimension of destructiveness the cataclysm that shook Africa. We are all familiar with the slave trade and the traumatic effect of this on the transplanted black but few of us realize what horrors were wrought on Africa itself. Vast populations were uprooted and displaced, whole generations disappeared, European diseases descended like the plague, decimating both cattle and people, cities and towns were abandoned, family networks disintegrated, kingdoms crumbled, the threads of cultural and historical continuity were so savagely torn asunder that henceforward one would have to think of two Africas: the one *before* and the one *after* the Holocaust.' Ivan Van Sertima, New Brunswick and London 1984, p. 8.
- 2 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o *Homecoming*, London 1972, pp. 16-17.
- 3 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary*, London 1981, p. 196.
- 4 Markus Cleven *Nordbayerischer Kurier* 6 July 1984.
- 5 The philosophy of President Moi of Kenya is called 'Nvayoism', i.e. follow my footsteps. Recently he has elaborated on that philosophy in words that beat the most inventive satiric genius when he demanded that all Kenyans must sing like parrots:

'Ladies and Gentlemen, we Kenyans are happy apart from the fact that there is widespread drought. I would like to say, while here with you, that for progress to be realised there should be no debates in newspapers on this and that. What is required is for people to work in a proper manner . . .

. . . I call on all ministers, assistant ministers and every other person to sing like parrots. During Mzee Kenyatta's period I persistently sang the Kenyatta (tune) until people said: This fellow has nothing (to say) except to sing for Kenyatta. I say: I didn't have ideas of my own. Why was I to have my own ideas? I was in Kenyatta's shoes and therefore, I had to sing whatever Kenyatta wanted. If I had sung another song, do you think Kenyatta would have left me alone? Therefore you ought to sing the song I sing. If I put a full stop, you should also put a full stop. This is how this country will move forward. The day you become a big person, you will have the liberty to sing your own song and everybody will sing it . . .' An excerpt from President Moi's speech on his return from Addis Ababa on 13 September 1984

What beats all satiric descriptions is that some University academics, some journalists, and of course most of the MPs and ministers have actually been echoing Moi's every word - like parrots. They have nothing to say for their colleagues under false charges or detention without trial, but are voluble about anybody described by the neo-colonial regime as being a 'dissident'.

4 The Quest for Relevance

I

So far I have talked about language in creative literature generally and in theatre and fiction in particular. I should have gone on to talk about 'The language of African poetry' but the same arguments apply even more poignantly in the area of poetry. The existence and the continuing growth of poetry in African languages, clearly and unequivocally so in orature (oral literature), make it manifestly absurd to talk of African poetry in English, French or Portuguese. Afro-European poetry, yes; but not to be confused with African poetry which is the poetry composed by Africans in African languages. For instance, written poetry in Swahili goes back to many centuries. While the poetic political compositions of the great anti-imperialist Somali fighter, Hassan, will be known by heart by every Somali-speaking herdsman, not a line by even the best of African poets in foreign languages will be known by any peasant anywhere in Africa. As for a discussion of the other language of poetry - where poetry, like theatre and fiction, is considered as a language in itself with its own structures of beats, metres, rhymes, half-rhymes, internal rhymes, lines and images - it calls for different resources including a knowledge of the particular African languages of its expression, which I cannot, at present, even pretend to possess.

Instead, I shall attempt to sum up what we have so far been discussing by looking at what immediately underlies the politics of language in African literature; that is the search for a liberating perspective within which to see ourselves clearly in relationship to ourselves and to other selves in the universe. I shall call this 'a quest for relevance' and I want to look at it as far as it relates, not to just the writing of literature, but to the teaching of that literature in schools and universities and to the critical approaches. In other words, given that there is literature in Africa and in the world, in what order should

it be presented to the child and how? This involves two processes: the choice of material and the attitude to, or interpretation of, that material. These two processes will themselves affect and be affected by the national and the class bases of the choice and the attitude to the material chosen. Finally the national and even the class bases of our choice and perspective will affect and be affected by the philosophic base from which we look at reality, a matter over which there can never be any legislation. Already as you can see we are entangled in a kind of vicious circle with everything affecting and being affected by everything else. But let me explain the question of base.

How we see a thing – even with our eyes – is very much dependent on where we stand in relationship to it. For instance we are all in this lecture theatre. But what we see of the room and how much of it we see is dependent on where we are now sitting as we listen to this talk. For instance you all can see the wall behind me: and I can see the wall behind you. Some of you are seated in such places as physically allow you to see much more of this room than others. What is clear is that were we to leave this room and describe it, we would end up with as many descriptions of this room as there are people here tonight. Do you know the story of the seven blind men who went to see an elephant? They used to have so many conflicting speculations as to the physical make-up of an elephant. Now at last they had a chance to touch and feel it. But each touched a different part of the animal: leg, ear, tusk, tail, side, trunk, belly and so they went home even more divided as to the physical nature, shape and size of an elephant. They obviously stood in different positions or physical bases in their exploration of the elephant. Now, the base need not be physical but could also be philosophical, class or national.

In this book I have pointed out that how we view ourselves, our environment even, is very much dependent on where we stand in relationship to imperialism in its colonial and neo-colonial stages; that if we are to do anything about our individual and collective being today, then we have to coldly and consciously look at what imperialism has been doing to us and to our view of ourselves in the universe. Certainly the quest for relevance and for a correct perspective can only be understood and be meaningfully resolved within the context of the general struggle against imperialism.

It is not always easy to see this in literature. But precisely because of that, I want to use the example of the struggle over what is to be taught, and in what order, with what attitudes or critical approaches, to illustrate the anti-imperialist context of the quest for relevance in

Africa today. I want to start with a brief description of what has been called 'the great Nairobi literature debate' on the teaching of literature in universities and schools.

II

The debate started innocuously when on 20 September 1968 the then head of the English Department, Dr James Stewart, presented proposals to the Arts Faculty Board on the development of the English Department. The proposals were in many ways pertinent. But they were all preceded by two crucial sentences:

The English department has had a long history at this college and has built up a strong syllabus which *by its study of the historic continuity of a single culture throughout the period of emergence of the modern west* makes it an important companion to History and to Philosophy and Religious Studies. However, it is bound to become less *British*, more open to other writing in English (American, Caribbean, African, Commonwealth) and also to continental writing, for comparative purposes.¹

A month later on 24 October 1968 three African lecturers and researchers at the University responded to Dr Stewart's proposals by calling for the abolition of the English Department as then constituted. They questioned the underlying assumption that the English tradition and the emergence of the modern west were the central root of Kenya's and Africa's consciousness and cultural heritage. They rejected the underlying notion that Africa was an extension of the West. Then followed the crucial rejoinder:

Here then, is our main question: if there is a need for a 'study of the historic continuity of a single culture', why can't this be African? Why can't African literature be at the centre so that we can view other cultures in relationship to it?²

Hell was let loose. For the rest of 1968 and spilling over into 1969 the debate raged on, engulfing the entire faculty and the university. Thus within four sentences the stage was set for what has become the most crucial debate on the politics of literature and culture even in Kenya of today. What was interesting was that the details of the debate were the same: all sides were agreed on the need to include African,

European and other literatures. But what would be the centre? And what would be the periphery, so to speak? How would the centre relate to the periphery? Thus the question of the base of the take-off, the whole question of perspective and relevance, altered the weight and relationship of the various parts and details to each other.

In order to see the significance of the debate and why it raised so much temper we have to put it in a historical context of the rise of English studies in Africa, of the kind of literature an African student was likely to encounter and of the role of culture in the imperialist domination of Africa.

III

English studies in schools and higher institutions of learning became systematised after the Second World War with the setting up of the overseas extensions of the University of London in Uganda, Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Kenya and Tanzania; and with very few variations they offered what also obtained in London. The syllabus of the English Department for instance meant a study of the history of English literature from Shakespeare, Spenser and Milton to James Joyce and T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards and the inevitable F. R. Leavis. Matthew Arnold's quest for the sweetness and light of a hellenized English middle class; T. S. Eliot's high culture of an Anglo-Catholic feudal tradition, suspiciously close to the culture of the 'high table' and to the racial doctrines of those born to rule; the Leavisite selected 'Great Tradition of English Literature' and his insistence on the moral significance of literature; these great three dominated our daily essays. How many seminars we spent on detecting this moral significance in every paragraph, in every word, even in Shakespeare's commas and fullstops? For some reason the two most outstanding critical minds that might have made my study of English Literature really meaningful even in a colonial setting – Arnold Kettle and Raymond Williams – were studied, if at all, only remotely and fleetingly even in the time from 1959 to 1964. But here I am not looking at which writer or critic was more suitable to our situation or even the difference in their world outlook. What was more important was that they all fell within English tradition except in the study of drama where names like those of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Aristotle or Ibsen, Chekhov, Strindberg and Synge would appear quaint and strange in their very

unEnglishness. The centrality and the universality of the English tradition was summed up in the title of an inaugural lecture by Professor Warner of Makerere, *Shakespeare in Africa*, in which he grew almost ecstatic about the fact that some of his students had been able to recognise some characters of Jane Austen's novels in their own African villages. So, English literature was applicable to Africa too: the defence of English studies in an African situation was now complete. In schools the English language and English literature syllabuses were tailored to prepare the lucky few for an English degree at university. So the syllabuses had the same pattern. Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats and Kipling were familiar names long before I knew I would even make it to Makerere.

In my book, *Writers in Politics* – particularly in the essay 'Literature and Society' – I have tried to sum up the kind of literature available to African children in the classrooms and libraries for their school and university education, by placing it into three broad categories.

First was the great humanist and democratic tradition of European literature: Aeschylus, Sophocles, Shakespeare, Balzac, Dickens, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Gorky and Brecht to mention just a few names. But their literature, even at its most humane and universal, necessarily reflected the European experience of history. The world of its setting and the world it evoked would be more familiar to a child brought up in the same landscape than to one brought up outside, no matter how the latter might try to see Jane Austen's characters in the gossiping women of his rural African setting. This was not helped by a critical tradition that often presented these writers, Shakespeare included, as if they were mindless geniuses whose only consistent quality was a sense of compassion. These writers, who had the sharpest and most penetrating observations on the European bourgeois culture, were often taught as if their only concern was with the universal themes of love, fear, birth and death. Sometimes their greatness was presented as one more English gift to the world alongside the bible and the needle. William Shakespeare and Jesus Christ had brought light to darkest Africa. There was a teacher in our school who used to say that Shakespeare and Jesus used very simple English, until someone pointed out that Jesus spoke Hebrew. The 'Great Tradition' of English literature was the great tradition of 'literature'!

Then there was the literature of liberal Europeans who often had Africa as the subject of their imaginative explorations. The best example is Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country*. Here an African eschewing violence, despite the racist violence around him, is the

perfect hero. The Reverend Stephen Kumalo is presented in such a way that all our sympathies are with him. He is the embodiment of the biblical man who offers the enemy the left cheek to strike, after the right cheek has already been bashed in by the same enemy. Kumalo is the earlier literary version in an African setting of those Americans in the sixties who thought they could stop the Vietnam war by blowing bubbles and offering flowers to club and gun wielding policemen. Joyce Cary in *Mister Johnson* had gone a stage further in his liberalism. In this novel he offered an idiotic African as the hero. Mister Johnson is the dancing, fun-loving African full of emotional vitality and the endearing human warmth of a child. In the novel he is condemned to death. What was his dearest wish? To be shot dead by the European District Officer. The District Officer grants him that wish. Don't we do the same for our horses and cats? The point is that in the novel the reader is supposed to admire both the District Officer and Mister Johnson: they have established a human contact – that of the rider and the horse, the master and his servant. Karen Blixen's book *Out of Africa* falls within the same liberal mould: to her Africans are a special species of human beings endowed with a great spirituality and a mystical apprehension of reality or else with the instinct and vitality of animals, qualities which 'we in Europe' have lost.

The third category was the downright racist literature of writers like Rider Haggard, Elspeth Huxley, Robert Ruark, and Nicholas Monsarrat. In such a literature there were only two types of Africans: the good and the bad. The good African was the one who co-operated with the European coloniser; particularly the African who helped the European coloniser in the occupation and subjugation of his own people and country. Such a character was portrayed as possessing qualities of strength, intelligence and beauty. But it was the strength and the intelligence and the beauty of a sell-out. The bad African character was the one who offered resistance to the foreign conquest and occupation of his country. Such a character was portrayed as being ugly, weak, cowardly and scheming. The reader's sympathies are guided in such a way as to make him identify with Africans collaborating with colonialism and to make him distance himself from those offering political and military resistance to colonialism. One can see the same schema at work today in the portrayal of the various African regimes in the Western media. Those regimes, as in Kenya and Ivory Coast, which have virtually mortgaged the future of their countries to Euro-American imperialism, are portrayed as being pragmatic, realistic, stable, democratic and they are often shown as

having achieved unparalleled economic growth for their countries. But other regimes like those of Nkrumah's Ghana or Nasser's Egypt which strove for a measure of national self-reliance are portrayed as being simplistic, unrealistic, doctrinaire, authoritarian and are often shown as having brought only economic chaos to their countries. Thus imaginative literature had created the necessary racist vocabulary and symbols long before the T.V. and the popular media had come to dominate the scene.

African children who encountered literature in colonial schools and universities were thus experiencing the world as defined and reflected in the European experience of history. Their entire way of looking at the world, even the world of the immediate environment, was Eurocentric. Europe was the centre of the universe. The earth moved around the European intellectual scholarly axis. The images children encountered in literature were reinforced by their study of geography and history, and science and technology where Europe was, once again, the centre. This in turn fitted well with the cultural imperatives of British imperialism. In this book I have in fact tried to show how the economic control of the African people was effected through politics and culture. Economic and political control of a people can never be complete without cultural control, and here literary scholarly practice, irrespective of any individual interpretation and handling of the practice, fitted well the aim and the logic of the system as a whole. After all, the universities and colleges set up in the colonies after the war were meant to produce a native elite which would later help prop up the Empire. The cool, level-headed servant of the Empire celebrated in Kipling's poem 'If'; the gentleman who could keep his head against the rising storms of resistance; the gentleman who would meet with triumph and disaster and treat those two imposters just the same; the gentleman who had not the slightest doubt about the rightness of colonialism despite the chorus of doubt around; this gentleman was now being given African robes in the post-war schools and universities of an ageing imperialism.

The structures of the literary studies evolved in the colonial schools and universities had continued well into independence era completely unaffected by any winds of cultural change. The irony of all this was that these departments were being run in countries where the oral tradition, the basis of all genres of written literature be it a poem, a play, or a story, was beating with life and energy, and yet they were unaffected by the surging creative storm all around them. The study of the historic continuity of a single culture throughout the period of

emergence of the modern west was still the organising principle of literature teaching in schools and colleges.

Seen against this background, the rejection of that principle in 1968 was therefore more than a rejection of a principle in a literary academic debate. It was questioning the underlying assumptions behind the entire system that we had inherited and had continued to run without basic questions about national perspective and relevance. The question is this: from what base do we look at the world?

IV

Three lecturers, Owuor Anyumba, Taban Lo Liyong and myself, were emphatic in our rejection and affirmation: our statement said,

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. All other things are to be considered in their relevance to our situation and their contribution towards understanding ourselves . . . In suggesting this we are not rejecting other streams, especially the western stream. We are only clearly mapping out the directions and perspectives the study of culture and literature will inevitably take in an African university.³

We proposed a new organising principle which would mean a study of Kenyan and East African literature, African literature, third world literature and literature from the rest of the world. We concluded:

We want to establish the centrality of Africa in the department. This, we have argued, is justifiable on various grounds, the most important one being that education is a means of knowledge about ourselves. Therefore, after we have examined ourselves, we radiate outwards and discover peoples and worlds around us. With Africa at the centre of things, not existing as an appendix or a satellite of other countries and literatures, things must be seen from the African perspective.⁴

But our boldest call was for the placing, within the national perspective, of oral literature (orature) at the centre of the syllabus:

The oral tradition is rich and many-sided . . . the art did not end yesterday; it is a living tradition . . . familiarity with oral literature could suggest new structures and techniques; and could foster

attitudes of mind characterized by the willingness to experiment with new forms . . . The study of the Oral Tradition would therefore supplement (not replace) courses in Modern African Literature. By discovering and proclaiming loyalty to indigenous values, the new literature would on the one hand be set in the stream of history to which it belongs and so be better appreciated; and on the other be better able to embrace and assimilate other thoughts without losing its roots.⁵

Orature has its roots in the lives of the peasantry. It is primarily their compositions, their songs, their art, which forms the basis of the national and resistance culture during the colonial and neo-colonial times. We three lecturers were therefore calling for the centrality of peasant and worker heritage in the study of literature and culture.

The new organising principle was accepted after a long debate which engulfed the entire University and which, at one time, also included all the participants at the 1969 Nairobi Conference of English and Literature Departments of the Universities of East and Central Africa. African Orature; literature by Africans from the Continent, the Caribbean, and Afro-America; literature of 'third' world peoples from Asia and Latin America; literature from the rest of the world including Europe and North America; roughly in that order of relevance, relationship and perspective, would form the basis of a new literature syllabus with English as the mediating language. The actual syllabus resulting from the 1968-9 debate was necessarily a compromise. For instance East African poetry was to be taught in *its European context*. It was not until 1973, when the majority of the staff in the department were Africans, that the syllabus was streamlined to reflect the new perspectives without a qualifying apologia.

The growth of the Literature Department at the University of Nairobi, a department which has produced students who can, by starting from their environment, freely link the rural and urban experiences of Kenyan and African literature to that of Garcia Marquez, Richard Wright, George Lamming, Balzac, Dickens, Shakespeare and Brecht is a far cry from those days in the fifties and sixties when they used to try and detect Jane Austen's characters in their villages.

V

But that was not the end of the Nairobi Literature Debate.⁶ In September 1974 a crucial conference on 'The Teaching of African Literature in Kenyan Schools' was held at Nairobi School. The conference was jointly organised by the Department of Literature, University of Nairobi and the Inspectorate of English in the Ministry of Education. It was attended by two hundred secondary school teachers of literature and English; the staff of the departments of literature and of the faculties of education, University of Nairobi and Kenyatta University College; delegates from departments of literatures of Dar es Salaam, Makerere and Malawi Universities; representatives of the Inspectorate of English, Ministry of Education and of the Kenya Institute of Education; observers from the Ministry of Education in Tanzania and Uganda; representatives from the then East African Community; East Africa Examination Council; East Africa Literature Bureau; trade union delegates from the Kenya National Union of Teachers (KNUT); and four publishers: Jomo Kenyatta Foundation, East African Literature Bureau, East Africa Publishing House and Oxford University Press. As if to give it an even more truly international character, there were visiting delegates from the University of West Indies at Mona, Jamaica, the University of Ife, Nigeria and from Auckland University, New Zealand. This impressive gathering was the result of hard organisational efforts of the steering committee chaired by Eddah Gachukia and S. A. Akivaga.

The conference was clearly motivated by the same quest for relevance which earlier had led to the reconstitution of the Department of Literature. In the recommendations of a working committee elected by the conference, it is argued that:

Prior to independence, education in Kenya was an instrument of colonial policy designed to educate the people of Kenya into acceptance of their role as the colonized. The education system at independence was therefore an inheritance of colonialism so that literature syllabuses were centred on the study of an English literary tradition taught by English teachers. Such a situation meant that Kenyan children were alienated from their own experience [and] identity in an independent African country.⁷

Addressing itself to questions of language and literature, a resolution passed at the end of the conference stated:

The present language and literature syllabuses are inadequate and irrelevant to the needs of the country. They are so organised that a Kenyan child knows himself through London and New York. Both should therefore be completely overhauled at all levels of our education system and particularly in schools.⁸

The conference, which was charged with examining the role of literature in society and the nature of literature taught in secondary schools and its relevance to Kenya's present day needs, called for the centrality of oral literature as a take-off base to contemporary literature. They argued that a sound educational policy was one which enabled students to study the culture and the environment of their society first, then set it in relation to the culture and environment of other societies: 'African literature, literature of the African diaspora, and all other literatures of related experiences must be at the core of the syllabuses.'⁹ A working committee set up by the conference with Dougal Blackburn as Chairman and R. Gacheche as the Secretary came up with detailed recommendations on policy and on syllabuses along the principles outlined in the conference resolution. The seventy-three page document was titled: *Teaching of Literature in Kenya Secondary Schools – Recommendations of the Working Committee* and was clearly the result of months of hard work and commitment.

Looking at the document ten years later, one is struck, not so much by their critique of the existing syllabuses or by their detailed proposals for change – though both are impressive and still relevant to the similar debates and issues today – but by the consciousness that guided the critique and the proposals.

The pan-African consciousness is strong. The authors see Africa as one and they reject the division of Africa into sub-saharan (Black Africa; Real Africa) and Northern (Arabic; Foreign; Mediterranean Africa). They want a Kenyan child to be exposed to the literature from north, south, west and east Africa:

The centuries old Arab civilization has exerted tremendous influence on the literature of modern North Africa and also many parts of the continent. To date their influence has been denied by our educators and the literature of North Africa and the Arab world has largely been ignored.¹⁰

The authors want to pursue the African connection to the four corners of the earth, so to speak, and they want Kenyan children to be exposed to those historical links of biology, culture and struggle, particularly in Afro-American and Caribbean literature:

It is often asked, why study Caribbean and Afro-American literature? What is the connection between African and the West Indian and Afro-American?

- (a) We have the same bio-geographic roots: the people of the West Indies and Afro-America are Africans who, a few hundred years ago, were brutally uprooted from the African continent.
- (b) We have shared the same past of humiliation and exploitation under slavery, and colonialism: we have also shared the glorious past of struggle, and fight against the same force.
- (c) Equally important we have the same aspirations for the total liberation of all the black people, in the world.

Their literature, like our literature embodies all the above aspects of *our struggle for a cultural identity*.

Apart from that, African peoples of the Diaspora have contributed much to Africa's cultural and political growth. Blyden, C. L. R. James, George Padmore, W. E. Dubois, Marcus Garvey and many others were part and parcel of Africa's struggle for independence. The literary movements from the West Indies and from Afro-America have creatively interacted with those in Africa. Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Léon Damas, René Dépestre, Paul Robeson – all these giants of culture and the arts have positively contributed to the growth of African Literature.

Most of these comments would apply equally well to the literature of the third world especially that of Asia and Latin America.¹¹

Africa; African connections; third world; indeed, the authors of the report are very conscious of the internationalist setting and context of the national experience. Like the university Literature Department, which was conscious of the immense value of world literature, they too refused to substitute national chauvinism for the British colonial chauvinism of the existing syllabuses. A Kenyan child would be exposed to world literature and the democratic tradition in world literature.

In accordance with the principle of teaching beginning with the students' immediate environment and moving out towards the world, the teaching of non-African literature in schools should aim to introduce the Kenyan student to *the world context of the black experience*. Such study should therefore include European and American literature, with their historical and present influences on

the societies and literatures of black peoples, and a study of literature from other parts of the third world such as Latin America and Asia. Criteria for selection should attempt to balance: literary excellence, social relevance, and narrative interest. *The aim is to instil in the student a critical love of literature, which will both encourage its pursuit in later years and ensure that such a pursuit is engaged in fruitfully . . .* Given the nature of Kenyan society, we recommend that attention be paid to literature expressing the experience of a changing society, and that it be ensured that the variety of experience of different classes in society be covered.¹²

Their recommendations for the teaching of world literature come face to face with the issue of language; and they have authors which include Tolstoy, Gogol, Gorky, Dostoevsky (Russian); Zola, Balzac, Flaubert (French); Ibsen (Norwegian); Faulkner, Arthur Miller, Upton Sinclair, Hemingway (American); Dickens, Shakespeare, Conrad, Yeats, Synge (British and Irish); Mann and Brecht (German). They see the necessity or inevitability of continued use of English, but they strongly call for Swahili to be made compulsory in all schools but particularly for those students of English and literature and drama:

A clear programme of Swahili literature be introduced and be made compulsory in schools.

Every language has its own social and cultural basis, and these are instrumental in the formation of mental processes and value judgements. Whereas it is accepted that we use English and will continue to do so for a long time to come, the strength and depth of our cultural grounding will ultimately depend on our ability to invoke the idiom of African Culture in a language that is closer to it. Swahili has a major and an increasing role to play in Kenya, and needs to be given greater emphasis than it has hitherto been accorded.

An immediate step that should be taken to fulfill this aim is that adequate numbers of Swahili teachers should be trained.¹³

All in all, the report is shot through and through with a consciousness that literature is a powerful instrument in evolving the cultural ethos of a people. They see literature as part of the whole ideological mechanism for integrating a people into the values of a dominant class, race, or nation. Imperialism, particularly during colonialism, provides the best example of how literature as an element of culture was used in the domination of Africa. The report notes:

That Africa as a continent has been a victim of forces of colonial exploitation, oppression and human degradation. In the field of culture she was taught to look on Europe as her teacher and the centre of man's civilization, and herself as the pupil. In this event Western culture became the centre of Africa's process of learning, and Africa was relegated to the background. Africa uncritically imbibed values that were alien and had no immediate relevance to her people. Thus was the richness of Africa's cultural heritage degraded, and her people labelled as primitive and savage. The colonizer's values were placed in the limelight, and in the process, evolved a new African who denied his original image, and exhibited a considerable lack of confidence in his creative potential.¹⁴

The writers are therefore shocked that syllabuses designed to meet the needs of colonialism should continue well into the independence era.

It was noted with shock and concern that even ten years after Independence, in practically every school in the republic our students were still being *subjected to alien cultural values which are meaningless especially to our present needs*. Almost all books used in our schools are written by foreign authors; out of 57 texts of drama studied at EAACE level in our schools between 1968 and 1972 only one was African. It became obvious that very little is being done in schools to expose our students to their cultural and physical environment.¹⁵

They are therefore conscious of the fact that an actual literature syllabus, no matter how far reaching in its scope and composition of texts and authors, is limited unless literature is seen and taught as an ideological component of the continuing national liberation process. In one of their conclusions they write:

Three major principles that emerged from the conference have guided the discussions of the working committee and the preparation of this final report.

- (i) *A people's culture is an essential component in defining and revealing their world outlook. Through it, mental processes can be conditioned, as was the case with the formal education provided by the colonial governments in Africa.*
- (ii) *A sound educational policy is one which enables students to study the culture and environment of their own society first, then in relation to the culture and environment of other societies.*

- (iii) *For the education offered today to be positive and to have creative potential for Kenya's future it must be seen as an essential part of the continuing national liberation process.*¹⁶

The hell let loose by the conference and by its subsequent recommendations was almost a repeat of the 1968-9 University-based debate. But now the debate became national. Some newspapers opened their pages to the literature debate revealing in the process a wide range of views on the issue from extreme hostility to passionate commitment. Believe it or not, in the early seventies academics and teachers could hold such a debate and assert the primacy of the Kenyan people and their experience of the history of struggle without fear of being labelled Marxist, Communist or radical and being hauled into prisons and detention camps. Even so the proposals and the model syllabus worked out to reflect the new perspective of Kenya, East Africa, Africa, Third World and the rest of the world, were not readily accepted by the Ministry of Education. They became the subject of a continuing debate and struggle in the educational corridors of power. The proposals were strengthened and argued about in yet other follow-up conferences and in 1981 were still a matter of controversy. In 1982 a syllabus like that of the Literature Department was labelled by some political elements as Marxist. Kenya-centrism or Afrocentrism was now equated with Marxism.

I am not sure if today the proposals have been accepted or not. I think some elements, like the oral literature components, have been introduced in the school literature curriculum. But I expect the controversy continues. For the quest for relevance and the entire literature debate was not really about the admissibility of this or that text, this or that author, though it often expressed itself as such. It was really about the direction, the teaching of literature, as well as of history, politics, and all the other arts and social sciences, ought to take in Africa today. The debate, in other words, was about the inherited colonial education system and the consciousness it necessarily inculcated in the African mind. What directions should an education system take in an Africa wishing to break with neo-colonialism? What should be the philosophy guiding it? How does it want the 'New Africans' to view themselves and their universe? From what base: Afrocentric or Eurocentric? What then are the materials they should be exposed to: and in what order and perspective? Who should be interpreting that material to them: an African or non-African? If African, what kind of African? One who has internalized the colonial

world outlook or one attempting to break free from the inherited slave consciousness? And what were the implications of such an education system for the political and economic set up or status quo? In a neo-colonialist context, would such an education system be possible? Would it not in fact come into conflict with political and economic neo-colonialism?

Whether recommendations in the quest for relevance are successful or not ultimately depends on the entire government policy towards culture, education and language, and on where and how it stands in the anti-imperialist process in Africa today.

Whatever the destiny of the 1974 proposals on literature in schools, the values, assumptions and the attitudes underlying the entire 'Nairobi Literature Debate' are today at the heart of the contending social forces in Kenya, in Africa and in the third world and they all boil down to the question of relevance, in philosophical class and national terms.

VI

At the level of the national base for relevance, two conflicting lines have emerged in Kenyan intellectual circles and particularly in the interpretation of history, politics and economic development.

One line identifies with the imperialist heritage, colonial and neo-colonial, and it sees in imperialism the motive force of Kenya's development. The more rapidly Kenya loses her identity in the West and leaves her fate in imperialist interests, the faster will be her development and her movement to the modernity of the twentieth century. This line is particularly clear in the interpretation of history where a corpus of state intellectuals has emerged who now openly write manuals in praise of colonialism. These state intellectuals scoff at the heroic and patriotic struggles of Kenyan people of all the nationalities to free Kenya from the stranglehold of imperialistic capitalism. For them the tradition of collaboration with British imperialism is what brought about independence and not the resistance tradition of Waiyaki, Koitalel, Me Katilili, Markan Singh and Gama Pinto, a tradition carried to new heights by Dedan Kimathi and the Kenya Land and Freedom Army (Mau Mau). For these state intellectuals imperialism is the beginning of Kenya's history and progress. Imperialism created Kenya. Therefore, for these intellectuals,

the neo-colonial state is the model instrument for Africa's rapid development.

The other line identifies with the tradition of resistance in all the nationalities. It sees in the activities and actions of ordinary men and women of Kenya, the basis of Kenya's history and progress. The line, best exemplified by the Kenyan intellectuals now in jails, detention camps or in exile – these are clearly *not* state functionaries – insists that Kenya and the needs of Kenya come first. For them, the national perspective in economy (even capitalism if the national capital and enterprise were dominant), politics and culture is of paramount importance. To get the correct national perspective, democracy – where a whole range of opinions, views and voices can freely be raised – is an absolute minimum. For them the starting point is a democratic Kenya – the Kenya of peasants and workers of all the nationalities with their heritage of languages, cultures, glorious histories of struggle, vast natural and human resources. From this starting point they can radiate outwards to link with the heritage and struggles of other peoples in Africa, the third world peoples, Europe and the Americas; with the struggles of the people the world over, the vast democratic and socialistic forces daily inflicting mortal blows to imperialist capitalism. A study of African literature, culture and history, starting from a national base, would therefore be linked with progressive and democratic trends in world literature, culture and history. For them the quest for relevance is not a call for isolationism but a recognition that national liberation is the basis of an internationalism of all the democratic and social struggles for human equality, justice, peace and progress. For them, the neo-colonial state is the negation of Africa's progress and development. The defeat of imperialism and neo-colonialism and hence the liberation of natural and human resources and the entire productive forces of the nation, would be the beginning of Africa's real progress and development. The national, viewed from the needs and activities of the majority – peasant and workers – is the necessary base for a take-off into the world of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the international democratic and socialist community of tomorrow.

The Nairobi Literature Debate and the enormous reactions it generated *for* and *against* reflected the fierce struggle of the two lines in Kenya today. In answering the question – are the sources of our inspiration foreign or national? – the proposed changes implied an unequivocal rejection of the imperialist and foreign and an affirmation of the democratic and national. For the first time since Independence

in 1963, the defenders of imperialist and neo-colonial culture were put on the defensive.

VII

While the Nairobi Literature Debate has clearly been able to isolate the national democratic basis of relevance, it has not always been as successful in isolating the philosophic and class bases of relevance – although they are implied.

The philosophic and the class bases of relevance are even more crucial when it comes to the area of critical approaches and interpretations. For the critic, whether teacher, lecturer, interpreter or analyst, is a product of a class society. Each child by birth, family or parents' occupation is brought up in a given class. By education children are brought up in the culture, values and world outlook of the dominant class which may or may not be the same as the class of their birth and family. By choice they may opt for one or the other side in the class struggles of their day. Therefore their interpretation of literature and culture and history will be influenced by their philosophical standpoint, or intellectual base, and their conscious or unconscious class sympathies.

First the philosophical base. Is a person's standpoint that of idealist or materialist? Is their mode of thinking and reasoning dialectical or metaphysical? Does the critic see values, ideas and the spiritual as superior to material reality? Does the critic see reality as static for all time or reality as changing all the time? Does the critic see things, processes, phenomena as linked or as separate mutually exclusive entities? Since literature, like religion and other areas of culture, is a reflection of the world of nature and human community, the outlook of a critic in real life will profoundly affect their interpretation of the reflected reality.

This is even more true of class sympathies and identification.

A critic who in real life is suspicious of people fighting for liberation will suspect characters who, though only in a novel, are fighting for liberation. A critic who in real life is impatient with all the talk about classes, class struggle, resistance to imperialism, racism and struggles against racism, of reactionary versus revolutionary violence, will be equally impatient when he or she finds the same themes dominant in a work of art. In criticism, as in creative writing, there is an ideological

struggle. A critic's world outlook, his or her class sympathies and values will affect evaluations of Chinua Achebe, Sembene Ousmane, Brecht, Balzac, Shakespeare, Lu Hsun, Garcia Marquez or Alex La Guma.

The quest for relevance calls for more than choice of material. The attitude to the material is also important. Of course, over this, there can never be any legislation. But it is crucial to be alert to the class ideological assumptions behind choices, utterances and evaluations. The choice of what is relevant and the evaluation of a quality is conditioned by the national, class and philosophical base. These factors underlay the controversy attending the whole quest for relevance in the teaching of literature in Kenyan schools and universities.

VIII

For the Nairobi Literature Debate and the quest for relevance were basically challenges as to where people stand in the big social issues of the world today. In the era of imperialism where do we really stand? In a society built on a structure of inequality, where do we stand? Can we remain neutral, cocooned in our libraries and scholarly disciplines, muttering to ourselves: I am only a surgeon; I am a scientist; I am an economist; or I am simply a critic, a teacher, a lecturer? As Brecht says in a poem addressed to the students of the 'Workers' and Peasants' Faculty:

Your science will be valueless, you'll find
And learning will be sterile, if inviting
Unless you pledge your intellect to fighting
Against all enemies of mankind.¹⁷

Or his poem addressed to Danish working-class actors:

And that is where you
The workers' actors, as you learn and teach
Can play your part creatively in all the struggles
Of men of your time, thereby
Helping, with your seriousness of study and the cheerfulness of
knowledge
To turn the struggles into common experience and
Justice into a passion.¹⁸

When one day the simple men and women of all our countries will, as foreseen in the poem addressed to apolitical intellectuals by the late Guatemalan poet Otto René Castillo, rise and ask us what we did when our nations dried out slowly, 'like a sweet fire, small and alone,' yes when they will ask us –

What did you do when the poor
Suffered, when tenderness
and life
burned out in them?¹⁹

– we, who teach literature, history, the arts, culture, religions, should be able to answer proudly, like the Brechtian intellectual, we helped turn the struggles into the spheres of common knowledge and, above all, justice into a passion.

IX

The Nairobi Literature Debate is a continuing debate. It is there in East, West, South and North Africa. It is there in the Caribbean. It is there in Asia and Latin America. The relevance of literature. The relevance of art. The relevance of culture. What literature, what art, what culture, what values? For whom, for what? The debate, even for Kenyans, has not for instance settled the issue of multi-national languages in the same country. English is still the linguistic medium of the debate; and of the temporary solutions of the 1968–9 and 1974 conferences. The language question cannot be solved outside the larger arena of economics and politics, or outside the answer to the question of what society we want.

But the search for new directions in language, literature, theatre, poetry, fiction and scholarly studies in Africa is part and parcel of the overall struggles of African people against imperialism in its neo-colonial stage. It is part of that struggle for that world in which my health is not dependent on another's leprosy; my cleanliness not on another's maggot-ridden body; and my humanity not on the buried humanity of others.

A hundred and fifty years ago, that is forty years before the Berlin Conference, a German visionary saw how money taken from the worker and the poor had come to dominate human relations:

It transforms fidelity into infidelity, love into hate, hate into love, virtue into vice, vice into virtue, servant into master, idiocy into intelligence, and intelligence into idiocy . . . He who can buy bravery is brave though he be a coward.²⁰

He foresaw a new world based on a relationship, not of stolen property, but of human qualities calling forth even more human qualities in all of us:

Assume man to be man and his relationship to be a human one: then you can exchange love for only love, trust for trust, etc. If you want to enjoy art, you must be an artistically cultivated person; if you want to exercise influence over other people, you must be a person with a stimulating and encouraging effect on other people. Every one of your relations to man and to nature must be a *specific expression*, corresponding to the object of your will, of your *real individual* life. If you love without evoking love in return – that is, if your loving as loving does not produce reciprocal love; if through a *living expression* of yourself as a loving person you do not make yourself a *beloved one*, then your love is impotent – a misfortune.²¹

That was not a German Pope in the Vatican but Karl Marx in the British Museum library. And it was he who threw another challenge to all scholars, all philosophers, all the men and women of letters, all those who in their different disciplines are trying to explain the world. Hitherto, he wrote:

The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however is to *change* it.²²

Change it? This sentiment is in keeping with the vision of all 'The Wretched of the Earth' in Africa, Asia and Latin America who are struggling for a new economic, political and cultural order free from imperialism in its colonial or in its more subtle but more vicious neo-colonial form. It is the sentiment of all the democratic and socialistic forces for change in the world today, forces once addressed by Brecht in the poem, 'Speech to Danish Working Class Actors on the Art of Observation':

Today everywhere, from the hundred-storeyed cities
Over the seas, cross-ploughed by teeming liners
To the loneliest villages, the word has spread
That mankind's fate is man alone. Therefore

We now ask you, the actors
Of our time – a time of overthrow and of boundless mastery
Of all nature, even men's own – at last
To change yourselves and show us mankind's world
As it really is: made by men and open to alteration.²³

This is what this book on the politics of language in African literature has really been about: national, democratic and human liberation. The call for the rediscovery and the resumption of our language is a call for a regenerative reconnection with the millions of revolutionary tongues in Africa and the world over demanding liberation. It is a call for the rediscovery of the real language of humankind: the language of struggle. It is the universal language underlying all speech and words of our history. Struggle. Struggle makes history. Struggle makes us. In struggle is our history, our language and our being. That struggle begins wherever we are; in whatever we do: then we become part of those millions whom Martin Carter once saw sleeping not to dream but dreaming to change the world.

Notes

- 1 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o *Homecoming*, London 1969, p. 145.
- 2 *ibid.*, p. 146.
- 3 *ibid.*, p. 146.
- 4 *ibid.*, p. 150.
- 5 *ibid.*, p. 148.
- 6 The debate and the conferences that followed have also been the subject of scholarly dissertations – see for instance, Anne Walmsley *Literature in Kenyan Education – Problems and Choices in Author as Producer Strategy*, M.A. dissertation, Sussex University.
- 7 Recommendations of the Working Committee, p. 7.
- 8 *ibid.*, p. 8.
- 9 *ibid.*, p. 8.
- 10 *ibid.*, p. 59.
- 11 *ibid.*, pp. 61–2.
- 12 *ibid.*, pp. 70–1.
- 13 *ibid.*, p. 21.
- 14 *ibid.*, p. 7.
- 15 *ibid.*, pp. 7–8.
- 16 *ibid.*, pp. 19–20.
- 17 Brecht *Collected Poems*, Methuen Edition, p. 450. 'To the Students of Workers' and Peasants Faculty' ll. 5–8.
- 18 *ibid.*, p. 238. 'Speech to Danish Working-Class Actors on the Art of Observation', ll. 160–6.
- 19 The whole poem is in, Robert Márquez, ed. *Latin American Revolutionary Poetry*, New York and London 1974.
- 20 Karl Marx, 1844 *Economic and Philosophic Manuscript*.

- 21 *ibid.*
- 22 Karl Marx *Theses on Feuerbach* No. XI.
- 23 Brecht *Collected Poems*, Methuen Edition, p. 234, ll. 35–43.