

**NEOCOLONIALISM AND LINGUISTIC RESISTANCE IN
NGUGI WA THIONG'O'S DEVIL ON THE CROSS**

Vijay Kumar K.V.

Research Scholar, Rayalaseema University, Department of English,
Byatarayanapura, Bangalore.

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ABSTRACT:

Language plays a decisive role in the colonial process, functioning as a primary tool for colonizing the minds of the colonized. Even after the departure of colonial rulers, control is often maintained through linguistic and cultural domination. Language is not an isolated medium; it is inseparably connected with literature, culture, religion, and social life. This paper examines Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's critique of neocolonialism with particular reference to *Devil on the Cross*, highlighting language as a powerful instrument of resistance. Ngũgĩ's deliberate shift to indigenous language and oral narrative traditions represents a sustained effort to dismantle neocolonial power structures and to re-centre marginalised communities within postcolonial discourse.

KEYWORDS:

Neocolonialism, language, Resistance, Decolonising the Mind.

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Neocolonialism refers to the post-independence condition of formerly colonised nations. Although these nations have achieved political independence, such “flag independence” does not necessarily guarantee economic, cultural, or ideological sovereignty. Actual power often remains concentrated in the hands of capitalist elites who operate through state institutions such as financial systems, governance structures, educational establishments, and religious organisations. These elites, shaped by colonial education, frequently govern through native leaders who have internalised European values and ideologies. Consequently, resistance to this

indirect and concealed form of domination becomes more complex and difficult to organise.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o offers one of the most sustained critiques of this neocolonial condition in African literature. In the preface to *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ laments the continued extraction of African intellectual and cultural resources by Europe, expressing concern over the appropriation of African talent and creativity by former colonial powers (Ngũgĩ, *Decolonising* xii). For Ngũgĩ, political independence without cultural and linguistic autonomy remains incomplete and ultimately illusory.

Ngũgĩ characterises neocolonialism as a parasitic system in which native labour, talent, and resources are exploited while agency and material benefits are systematically denied to the masses. He employs the metaphor of the "sword of fire" to explain the functioning of neocolonial power in postcolonial societies. In the hands of producers, power can serve constructive purposes, but when controlled by parasites, it becomes a tool of exploitation (Devil 54).

Post-independence leadership, often operating under the influence of former colonial masters, has failed to fulfil the aspirations of people who sacrificed their lives for national liberation. The common masses are marginalised within their own countries and treated as outsiders in the very lands they fought to free. The absence of a visible colonial enemy further obscures the mechanisms of domination, making resistance difficult to identify and mobilise. *Devil on the Cross* becomes a crucial text through which Ngũgĩ exposes these hidden structures of power and communicates his ideological concerns to a wider audience.

Ngũgĩ identifies language as a crucial instrument of neocolonial control. While colonialism relied heavily on military force for physical subjugation, neocolonialism operates primarily through cultural and linguistic domination. As Ngũgĩ famously asserts, "The bullet was the means of the physical subjugation.

Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation” (Decolonising 9). Language thus occupies a central position in both oppression and resistance.

Ngũgĩ began his literary career writing in English, the language of the coloniser, and authored his early novels in this medium. Over time, however, he recognised the limitations of English in reaching the majority of Kenyan readers, most of whom were excluded from literary discourse due to linguistic barriers. Reflecting on this realisation, Ngũgĩ writes, “I knew whom I was writing about, but whom was I writing for?” (Decolonising 72). His shift to Gikuyu represents a conscious effort to communicate directly with peasants and workers, whom he identifies as the true agents of resistance.

This transition resonates with Frantz Fanon’s assertion that the native intellectual must ultimately address their own people rather than the coloniser. Fanon observes that resistance literature matures when writers abandon the desire to appeal to the oppressor and instead articulate the lived realities of the oppressed (Fanon 193).

Ngũgĩ’s commitment to indigenous language found practical expression in his theatrical experiments at the Kamiriithu Open Theatre. When permission to stage plays in the national theatre was denied, Ngũgĩ and his collaborators took theatre directly to the people, involving peasants and workers as actors and audiences. The play *I Will Marry When I Want*, co-authored with Ngũgĩ wa Mĩriĩ, reflected contemporary social conditions and histories of resistance, achieving widespread popularity (Ngũgĩ, *Moving* 93).

This cultural mobilisation was met with state repression. Ngũgĩ was detained without trial, the play was banned, and the Kamiriithu theatre was permanently closed. During his imprisonment, Ngũgĩ began writing *Devil on the Cross* in Gikuyu on toilet paper—an act that symbolises both artistic resistance and defiance against neocolonial authority (Ngũgĩ, *Detained* 8).

In *Devil on the Cross*, Ngũgĩ adopts an innovative narrative style that integrates oral traditions such as songs, proverbs, and communal storytelling into a critique of neocolonial capitalism. The novel exposes how post-independence elites collaborate with global capital to exploit peasants and workers while criminalising dissent in the name of “order.” Characters such as Wangari and Mũturi are arrested for resisting exploitation, prompting Ngũgĩ to interrogate how order is defined and whose interests it ultimately serves.

By adopting oral narrative techniques, Ngũgĩ engages readers excluded from formal education. He draws upon familiar cultural forms—fables, parables, proverbs, and music—to embed radical political critique within accessible storytelling structures (Decolonising 68). By privileging indigenous aesthetics over European narrative conventions, Ngũgĩ challenges the cultural hierarchy imposed by colonial education systems. His use of Gikuyu revitalises cultural memory and affirms the dignity of native languages, demonstrating that linguistic decolonisation is essential to broader struggles against neocolonial domination.

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