

## NGUGI WA THIONG'O, "MOVING THE CENTRE. THE STRUGGLE FOR CULTURAL FREEDOMS"

*James Currey Publishers, London, 1993, 184 pp.*

This latest book of the Kenyan author and literary scholar **Ngugi wa Thiong'o** is a compilation of lectures he gave in the period 1981-1990.

The subtitle of the book expresses very well the main topic of all the lectures: the struggle for cultural freedoms; freedom for all the oppressed in the Third World, be they peasants and workers strongly dependant on imperialistic governments, banks and companies, or be they artists and scholars firmly infected by western neo-colonial ideas and visions. Although most African countries have become officially independent in the sixties, according to **Ngugi** they are still dominated politically, economically and culturally by western imperial forces and their allies in the Third World. Western dominated regimes, dictators, bourgeois people, Coca Cola, IMF and the World Bank have a suffocating and destructive effect on indigenous societies and their culture. No one like **Ngugi** can express this situation:

*Imperialism is a threeheaded monster with one head spitting or threatening to spit fire at the socialist world; the other head is spitting fire at the working people in its own home base; and the third head is directing fire and brimstone at the national liberation struggles in the 'Third' World that seem committed to fundamental social change. (p. 55)*

Given these circumstances, **Ngugi** asks what the position of a writer and a scholar is in such a society: *Where, for instance, did he stand in relation to the neo-colonial state in which he was a citizen, and within which he was trying to function?*

(p. 71); *For whom does he write? For the people? But then what language does he use?* (p. 73); *Thus, a scholar is immediately confronted with the question of identity: what is African literature?* (p. 84).

The title *Moving the Centre*, taken from a lecture **Ngugi** gave at Leeds University in 1990, holds the key for a solution. In the *Preface*, **Ngugi** explains this very clearly: *I am concerned with moving the centre in two senses at least. One is the need to move the centre from its assumed location in the West to a multiplicity of spheres in all the cultures of the world (p. XIV).*

*The second sense is even more important although it is not explored extensively in these essays [...]. Hence the need to move the centre from all minority class*

*establishments within nations to the real creative centres among the working people in conditions of gender, racial and religious equality.* (p. XVII)

Later on, **Ngugi** opts for moving the centre in a third way: [...] *from European languages to all the other languages all over Africa and the world* [...] (p. 10). In the colonial period the foreign languages and the African languages never met as equals under conditions of equality, independence, and democracy. This unsatisfying situation still holds on today. Therefore **Ngugi** suggests the use of a common language of communication for the world.

According to **Ngugi** authors and scholars must come to the fore in the struggle for a move of centres. **Ngugi** himself sets good examples to the people he addresses in *Moving the Centre*: in his novels and plays he aligns himself with the people, with their economic, political and cultural struggle for survival in a (neo-) imperialistic Kenya. For **Ngugi**, writing for the masses also means writing in a language that is understood by the people. As a consequence, in the eighties he has quite radically chosen for the use of his mother-tongue, giKuyu, as the language medium in his literary works. In his book **Ngugi** urges African writers and scholars to make comparable choices and to free themselves of the deadly cultural grip of the 'neo-colonial centres' of the western world and its allies. African writers and scholars ought to explore other centres: the indigenous African languages (medium) and the masses, peasants and workers (audience) of the African community.

This message and particularly the way in which **Ngugi** presents it, is however not very renewing for readers familiar with intercultural literary studies. Already in 1980 the Nigerian scholars **Chinweizu, Jemie** and **Madubuike** criticized in a furious way the western domination in regards to African literature and culture<sup>1</sup>. In *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) **Ngugi** explored intensively the language problem with which an African writer is confronted<sup>2</sup>. Also in *Moving the Centre* this theme is properly dealt with. Like the above mentioned Nigerian scholars did thirteen years earlier **Ngugi** sometimes indulges himself too freely in using heroic, romantic and poetical language. Compare the following phrase about the Kenyan liberation struggle: *History is subversive because truth is. The unavenged father's ghost of Kimathi's struggle and his KLFA, walks the days and nights of today's neo-colonial Kenya* (p. 100).

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1. Chinweizu, O. Jemie & I. Madubuike, (1980), *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*, Enugu (Nigeria), Fourth Dimension Publishing

2. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, (1986), *Decolonising the Mind. The Politics of Language in African Literature*, Nairobi, East African Educational Publishers Ltd et. al.

Especially these kind of phrases show the original lecture-identity of the texts in *Moving the Centre*. They were meant to trigger the listeners to action. In an essay, stated in an other setting a couple of years later, they sound however a bit cliché. Not that the problems **Ngugi** describes are cliché, on the contrary, but rather the way in which he presents them. In that sense it's a bit enduring to read all the essays in one time. While reading you get the feeling that it's a little bit too much of the same and that you have read most of it before, either in publications of **Ngugi** himself or in other works.

Notwithstanding the foregoing shortcomings, *Moving the Centre* is at least in two ways of remarkable value for the intercultural study of literature. First of all it stresses the still existing need for cultural freedom regarding African literature, and secondly, it offers a valuable overview of the intellectual thinking of one of the most notable literary artists in Africa today.

Review by:

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