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# The Writers' Forum: Ngugi wa Thiong'o

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## Ngugi wa Thiong'o

It would make my task easier if I could begin and end my speech by saying that I absolutely agree with everything that has been said by the two previous speakers. The themes they have isolated for discussion are pertinent to this particular panel and also to our entire enterprise as writers of African origins who now inhabit all the corners of the world. It is important that we are having this discussion in the context of the work of Ousmane Sembène. When I read his work or come to his films, one of the questions which I find fairly central is that of language. Even in his earliest work he tried to address the question of language—not only language as a system of signs, but also language in the larger context of social struggle.

I was thinking about this panel two days ago when one of the students in my class at Yale told me that she was going to watch a film on Kenya called "Kitchen Toto," and she invited me to see the film on video along with one or two others from Kenya. The issues arising from that film are pertinent to the whole question of language. For those of you who have not seen that particular film, it opens with shots of Kenyan colonial settlers playing with African children in a school context. So the opening shot of the film shows the colonial settler clearly in harmony with Kenyan African children. There follows a sequence of shots of a good Christian African and these shots are such that we are placed in a very sympathetic relationship to him. We are also shown stills of the African Christian priest with his family. Our eyes focus on that particular family. Later we see him in a church preaching against the evil that has come to the land. Into this very sympathetic family—Christian, African, obedient to the West and so on—come Mau Mau terrorists. They come with their machetes and they hack the good Christian African family into pieces. No explanation is given as to why they are doing it; it's just an act of sheer brutality. So no matter what the film says afterwards about the struggle between the two polarities of white racism and African resistance, we are already against these Mau Mau terrorists. In the same film the colonial state as represented by the good white policeman becomes the arbiter in a kind of semi-civil war between extremist whites and, I presume, also equally extremist actors in the resistance. So at the end of the film, in a sense, we are shown that a colonial state is really a liberal state. It is a liberal referee in a system of civil war. In the film the African people involved in resistance have been denied a voice. They do not even have a language, for the language which they speak—even when they are peasants and workers—is good King's or Queen's English. It is as if the Mau Mau resistance forces did not really have a language of their own.

Now this denial of the voice to those who resist is fairly central to the literary consciousness in the West which on the whole has been in harmony with the forces of imperialist domination of other countries. I want to illustrate this gradual denial of the voice to those who resist by mentioning just a couple of texts which you will all recognize. And these texts cover the whole historical period of this domination of the rest

of the world by a handful of European nations.

The first text is Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. And you remember there that Caliban, whose island has been taken over by Prospero, is represented as having no language although we presume that before Prospero came to the island Caliban had been speaking to his mother in a certain language. But in the play he has no language of his own. However, it is very interesting that Shakespeare, after he has given him the English language, at least makes Caliban have a voice even though this voice is in the English language.

We come to another text, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. And you remember the contact between Friday and Crusoe: Crusoe here meets Friday and begins to teach him a language. Again we perceive that Friday is presumed to have no language. He is being given a language. And the first thing he is told is, "Your name is Friday." Then he is told to say, "Master, Master," and then he is told, "that is my name." "Your name is Friday; my name is Master." It is again interesting that Defoe was quite satiric about this whole encounter. Friday has some kind of voice for he does, or he is made to, doubt Crusoe's conception of the origins of the world in the divine order. But still, Friday has much less of a voice than Caliban.

We come to the twentieth century, to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, a text which is in so many ways consistently against colonial adventurism. It paints colonial adventurism in very strong negative colors. Nevertheless, the African people there have absolutely no voice. This time they don't have a language. And one of only two sentences Africans are given is: "Mistah Kurtz—he dead." Otherwise, they are seen as merging with the shadows and the darkness. They are part of the gloom.

Now, I want to mention a fourth text—this time from South Africa. It is written by a novelist who is right now very much celebrated in the West: J. M. Coetzee. And he has rendered, or he has told, Friday's story under the title *Foe*. And here in the midst of South Africa, where you would think that the retelling of the story would make an entirely different statement, here Friday's/Caliban's tongue has been pulled out. So there is not even a pretense that he has a tongue, a physical tongue with which he can speak.

I mention these cases because the whole enterprise of writers on the African continent—and in many ways symbolized by Ousmane Sembène—has been to give voice to those forces which have been struggling over the centuries to regain their voice, to regain their language. In other words, to regain their space in the twentieth century. Now, as these writers give voice to those forces which have been trying to reclaim their voices and their languages, they are, in so many ways, the central literary voices of the twentieth century. For the twentieth century is in effect a creation of two traditions. One is the imperialist—the colonial—tradition with its roots in slavery, slave trade, classical colonialism, and to today's transnational type of neo-colonialism—the one which is also connected with those forces described by Toni as "psychopaths who are trying to ruin the world." The other tradition is the tradition of resistance against slavery, against classical colonialism, against today's various forms of colonial control, and various other forms of domination.

So as we move towards the twenty-first century, we can say that those forces

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which are part of the struggle against enslavement and colonialism are the makers of the twentieth century. The neglect of this crucial resistance tradition in studies in various universities of the world is really a neglect of voices which are not marginal to the twentieth century, but voices which are central to the twentieth century and to the making of a new tomorrow in the world. I'm glad that these voices are so ably represented here, more so in the work of Ousmane Sembène in both literature and film.