

The SPL Journal of Literary Hermeneutics

A Biannual International Journal of Independent Critical Thinking
Double-blind, Peer-reviewed, and Open Access Journal in English



Vol. 5 Issue 2 Monsoon Edition 2025 e-ISSN 2583-1674 Page no. 324-332

www.literaryherm.org
www.cavemarkpublications.com



Decolonizing the Digital Mind: Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's Linguistic Theory and the Age of Digital Colonialism

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Review Article

Keywords:

Decolonization, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Digital Colonialism, Linguistic Imperialism, Postcolonialism, Digital Humanities, Cultural Identity, Digital Sovereignty

Article History

Received:

June 10, 2025

Revised:

June 24, 2025

Accepted:

July 1, 2025



ISSN 2583-1674 (SPLJLH)



Abstract

Aim: *This paper argues that Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's linguistic theory, especially his concept of the "cultural bomb" offers a crucial analytic for diagnosing contemporary digital colonialism. It applies Ngũgĩ's decolonial vision, originally formulated for print culture, to the digital realm, demonstrating its continued relevance.*

Methodology and approaches: *This study adopts a hybrid, interdisciplinary methods, synthesizing postcolonial literary analysis with digital-studies scholarship. It examines how global technological infrastructures reproduce colonial power dynamics and impose Western epistemes via data extraction and technical design.*

Outcome: *The study shows that the "spiritual subjugation" Ngũgĩ described has been re-engineered through algorithms and data flows. The "cultural bomb" now operates via linguistic marginalization (for example, many AI assistants lack support for African languages) and algorithmic bias, reinforcing colonial-era messages that render indigenous cultures non-intelligible.*

Conclusion and Suggestions: *The study concludes that "decolonizing the digital mind" is an ongoing struggle for cultural sovereignty and self-definition. It argues that the technologies used for control can also be sites of decolonial praxis, digital language activism and cultural production thus, that Ngũgĩ's message remains a vital guide for the digital age.*

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The publication of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986) marked a pivotal moment in postcolonial thought. In this powerful collection of essays, the Kenyan novelist and theorist announced his definitive farewell to English, declaring his commitment to writing exclusively in Gikuyu, his native language (Gikandi). This decision was not merely a personal stylistic choice rather, it was a profound political act that placed him in the vanguard of scholars confronting how Western “scholarly schemes and archiving methods” have historically made the voices of the colonized “voiceless” and marginalized non-Western viewpoints (Elangbam 119).

Ngũgĩ's intellectual and political journey was forged in the crucible of colonial violence and post-independence disillusionment. Ngũgĩ's intellectual formation shaped by colonial education, the Mau Mau uprising, and encounters with Marxist and postcolonial thought at the University of Leeds informed his conviction that language is central to political and cultural liberation (“Life and Political”). Raised within an education system that privileged European values, Ngũgĩ came to view linguistic choice as integral to self-definition: language, he argued, is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture. For Ngũgĩ, continuing to write only in colonial languages perpetuated the epistemic structures of domination he sought to dismantle (wa Thiong'o 23).

Upon returning to East Africa, Ngũgĩ became a central figure in a movement at the University of Nairobi to “Africanize” the curriculum (“Biography Ngugi”). His work offered a distinctly anti-imperialist perspective, arguing that the choice of language was central to a people's self-definition and inextricably linked to their political and economic liberation (Hawley 321).

The project of decolonization, as Ngũgĩ conceived it, is not a historical event confined to the mid-20th century, but an ongoing struggle for cultural and intellectual sovereignty (Jandric and Kuzmanic 34). His theories, developed in the context of physical colonialism and print culture, possess a unique and enduring relevance for diagnosing the neocolonial structures of the 21st century's digital landscape, as digital postcolonialism “is an attempt to create a historical

framework for our understanding of human relationships to information and communication technologies” (Jandric and Kuzmanic 48).

The very mechanisms of global power that Ngũgĩ identified, that is the spiritual subjugation of the colonized through the imposition of language and the devaluation of indigenous culture has been replicated and amplified by the dominant technological infrastructures of the internet. This paper's central thesis is that Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's linguistic theory, particularly his concept of the “cultural bomb,” provides an essential analytical framework for understanding the mechanisms of digital colonialism.

Central to Ngũgĩ's argument is his theory of language as having a “dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture” (wa Thiong'o 13). He explains that language carries the “entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world” (wa Thiong'o 16). Therefore, the choice of language is not a neutral act but is “central to a people's definition of themselves” (wa Thiong'o 4).

This understanding forms the basis for his most powerful concept that is the “cultural bomb”. Ngũgĩ argues that the true aim of colonialism was not just economic or political control, but “mental control” which required the imposition of the colonizer's language as a tool of “spiritual subjugation.” He has this thought that colonialism could “never be complete or effective without mental control” (wa Thiong'o “The Colonial Language”). For Ngũgĩ, language was the ultimate tool for this “spiritual subjugation,” just as “the bullet was the means of the physical subjugation” (wa Thiong'o “The Colonial Language”). The effect of this cultural bomb is to “annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves” (wa Thiong'o, “The Colonial Language”).

Ngũgĩ's rejection of English contrasts with Chinua Achebe's pragmatism: Achebe suggests that English can be re-fashioned to carry African experience, advocating an indigenized, “universal” English. Achebe contended that a world language must “be prepared to pay... submission to many different kinds of use”, he further elaborated that the African writer “should aim at fashioning out an

English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience” (Achebe 82). For Ngũgĩ, however, the question remained, “What is the difference between a politician who says Africa cannot do without imperialism and the writer who says Africa cannot do without European languages?” (wa Thiong'o 26).

The critique has evolved to diagnose the new, insidious forms of neocolonial control. Today, this critique has found its most compelling application in the concept of “digital colonialism,” a scholarly framework that examines how digital technologies perpetuate and amplify colonial legacies and power asymmetries (Nothias 2). “Digital Colonialism,” whereby dominant tech platforms exercise power analogous to colonial powers: concentrated control, resource extraction, dependency creation, reproductions of structural violence (including algorithmic bias), cultural imperialism, and rhetorical framing as benevolence. The phenomenon is categorized by six core features, including the unequal concentration of power, extraction of data and resources, the creation of a strong societal dependency, the reproduction of violence (for example racially biased technology), cultural imperialism, and framing the exploitation in a discourse of benevolence (Nothias 3-4). This framework aligns with the concept of “data colonialism,” defined as the process by which corporations and governments claim ownership of and privatize the data produced by their users and citizens (“Data Colonialism”).

Ngũgĩ's “cultural bomb” is no longer just a powerful metaphor; it has become an operational reality, weaponized through the very infrastructure of the internet. A pervasive “monolingual mindset” persists, a direct legacy of colonialism, where non-European languages are systematically marginalized in digital spaces. In his discussion of linguistic imperialism in Nigeria, Yusuff highlights the far-reaching impact of retaining the colonial language, stating: “In Nigeria, for example, English remains the dominant language of officialdom. Because language is not just a means of communication, but also the repository of people's identity and memory, the continued use of English as the official language in Nigeria has significant implications for every aspect of the country's history” (Yusuff 1). For example, major AI assistants like Google Assistant and

Amazon's Alexa support little to no African languages, effectively rendering the cultural heritage and knowledge embedded in those languages invisible on a global scale (Nothias 1).

Furthermore, Ngũgĩ's concept of the cultural bomb making a people see their past as a “wasteland of non-achievement” (wa Thiong'o “The Colonial Language”) finds a chilling analogue in the reality of data colonialism. When data is extracted and owned by Western corporations, the histories and knowledge embedded in that data are alienated from their producers (“Theorizing in the Break”). Finally, the spiritual subjugation via language has evolved into algorithmic violence. When an AI fails to recognize a Black face or a search engine suppresses knowledge in an indigenous language, it sends the same message of worthlessness and non-intelligibility that Ngũgĩ described.

Digital activism offers concrete models of resistance: community initiatives to create corpora, online dictionaries, localized interfaces, and social campaigns that contest linguistic marginalization. These practices realize Ngũgĩ's call to reclaim language and demonstrate how digital tools can be repurposed for cultural sovereignty. The analysis of digital colonialism reveals a central tension: the very technologies that perpetuate neocolonial control are also the primary tools for decolonial praxis and resistance (Jandric and Kuzmanic 37).

A new generation of activists is directly challenging linguistic marginalization online, mirroring Ngũgĩ's call for the reclamation of language (Minhas and Salawu 58). These efforts align with the strategies of localizing technology and creating online archives for indigenous languages, thereby reclaiming the “entire body of values” that Ngũgĩ argued is carried by language and literature (wa Thiong'o 16). He writes and argues that language carries the “entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world” (16). Digital platforms are also fostering a new wave of Pan-Africanism, with youth-led movements utilizing civic technologies to organize protests, and the rise of Afrobeats and Amapiano demonstrating African agency on a global scale (Kuwonu).

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's interventions remain analytically potent for the digital age. Reframing his “cultural bomb” in terms of algorithmic design and

data colonialism reveals how spiritual subjugation persists online, but also how digital practices can be sites of decolonial praxis. Drawing on his core argument, the struggle for “decolonizing the digital mind” is ultimately a battle for self-definition and cultural sovereignty in a world where new technologies constantly challenge and threaten it. Ngũgĩ’s enduring legacy lies in his insistence that the decolonial project is continuous and requires a regenerative reconnection with indigenous knowledge systems. His ongoing message of liberation is completed through engagement in the digital sphere, reclaiming agency through digital language activism, social protest, and cultural expression.

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