

British Colonialism in Africa, Resistance and Liberation: Returning to The Home That is No Longer There

By [Mahdi Ganjavi](#)

Global Research, April 01, 2017
[Socialist Project](#)

Region: [sub-Saharan Africa](#)

Theme: [History](#)

[Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o](#) (b. 1938), a Kenyan writer, is one of the most prominent African anti-colonial authors. He lived during the British colonial rule in Kenya, and was very young when he experienced the destruction of the village in which he was born, destroyed by the British colonizers. The post independent Kenya, however, was not a safe place for him as well. He was put in jail and faced violence for his criticisms toward the national bourgeoisie that came to power after the independence in 1963. Contrary to his Nigerian counterpart, [Chinua Achebe](#) (1930-2013), Ngũgĩ stopped writing his fiction in English in a critical decision in the 1970s, arguing that the English language is a colonial one to African authors. He engaged in writing in Gikuyu, spoken primarily by the Kikuyu people. In 1977, he was detained for a while in Kenya for one of his plays; *I Will Marry When I Want* (1977). While in Prison, Ngũgĩ wrote the first modern novel in Gikuyu, *Devil on the Cross*, on prison-issued toilet paper.

In my written interview with Ngũgĩ, I asked him to reflect on the authentic way of an anti-colonial struggle. I asked him to share his thoughts on the duality of "home and the world" in face of his experience of colonialism and anti-colonial struggle. Some post-colonial thinkers, such as the Indian scholar [Partha Chatterjee](#), intend to foreground home, interior, as the last setting in which the colonial penetration was resisted. Arguing that the public space, the world, was crucially affected by the experience of British colonialism, this argument intends to revive the pre-colonial culture and society by retrieving the culture of the interior spaces of a Hindu home in late 19th century. Anti-colonial thinkers have criticized this post-colonial argument. According to [Himani Bannerji](#), historical materialist sociologist, in her article, "[Projects of Hegemony: Towards a Critique of Subaltern Studies' 'Resolution of the Women's Question'](#)" this post-colonial argument is constructing a de-grounded and a-historical narration of the homes of Hindus in late 19th century, and by doing so is assisting the Hindu fundamentalism to pursue its cultural nationalism in contemporary Indian politics.

Ngũgĩ's experience of colonialism in Africa is also in line with this latter anti-colonial argument. For Ngũgĩ, in the struggle against capitalist colonialism there is no home left to return to. Instead of advocating for a home in the past, he argues

"But it is a home that has yet to be, for which we must all struggle, within our own countries and in the world." He contends, "My real home, whether in Kenya, or outside Kenya, is the place and space of struggle."

Similar to Frantz Fanon, for Ngũgĩ the struggle against colonialism is linked to the struggle

against capitalism; thus it is a struggle against bourgeoisie, both national and international.

Mahdi Ganjavi is a Ph.D. student at the department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education, OISE/University of Toronto. A prolific essayist and author, Ganjavi's criticisms, translations, a book review, and essays have been published in journals/websites such as the *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, *Encyclopedia Iranica*, *the Global Voices*, *the Bullet*, and *Ajam Media Collective*.

This interview was intended for a Farsi audience as well. The Farsi translation of this interview will be published soon by the quarterly *Cinema and Literature* in Tehran.

Mahdi Ganjavi (MG): Dear Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o, thank you so much for accepting this invitation. The idea of returning to the homeland is a shared concept among many anti-colonial authors of the twentieth century. Aime Césaire's famous poem, notebook of a return to the native land, meditates on such a moment of going back, such a moment of longing. We can see the same idea in Rabindranath Tagore's *The Home and the World*, in which he criticizes the idea of an ideal home to which we can return. There seems no home is left for many anti-colonial authors to return to.

In one of your volumes of memoir you meditate on the day you returned to your village after just a month, just to see that your village was literally destroyed by the British colonizers. If not to home, where can we go in our struggle against imperialism and colonialism?



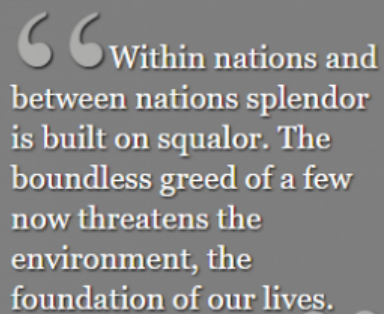
Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (Ngũgĩ): I tell this in my second memoir, [In the House of the Interpreter](#). Home is the site of our sense of being and belonging. The sense of the physical and social space that made me, often the site of our earliest and most formative images and dreams of the future. But we tend to think of home as a stable material and social space, the place of return, or possible return, even if I go to all the corners of the world. My village, in Limuru, Kenya, and where I was born and grew up, seemed such a center. But when I returned after three months away in a boarding school, I found the British colonial forces had razed the entire village to the ground. That was in April, 1955, and Kenya was then ruled under State of Emergency laws, meant to suppress the struggle for Independence led by the Kenya Land and Freedom Army, otherwise known as [Mau Mau](#). The impact of returning to a home that was no longer there was huge. It became an important theme in all my novels, particularly in [A Grain of Wheat](#).

But in reality home is never quite that stable. Home is also a place of change. Even within members of the same family, they may have different experiences and hence images of the place they call home. The question is really whether one is part of the changes, part of the agency of change, or a victim of forced change, like when oppressive forces force a people to abandon the place they called home. Home is both physical space and also space of the mind and the soul. My real home, whether in Kenya, or outside Kenya, is the place and space of struggle. I like to believe that I am an integral part of all the struggles in the world, for a people powered world. Imperialism and colonialism, or systems of slavery, were always enemies of the human. I still believe in a world where the condition of my development is the development of all. I am because you are: you are because I am. It is African proverb. It describes my home. But it is a home that has yet to be, for which we must all struggle,

within our own countries and in the world.

MG: In your novel, *Petals of Blood*, meditating on the reasons for why the villages are losing their youth to the cities, Muturi says: “You forgot that in those days the land was not for buying. It was for use. It was also plenty, you need not have beaten one yard over and over again. The land was also covered with forests. The trees called rain. They also cast a shadow on the land. But the forest was eaten by the railway. You remember they used to come for wood as far as here – to feed the iron thing. Aah, they only knew how to eat, how to take away everything. But then, those were Foreigners – white people.” How do you differentiate between criticism of modernism and criticism of capitalist colonialism?

Ngũgĩ: I reject the logic of progress and modernity that decrees that one can only be rich by



“Within nations and between nations splendor is built on squalor. The boundless greed of a few now threatens the environment, the foundation of our lives.”

making another poor; that they can be clean, only by pouring their dirt on another; that they can be healthy only by making another diseased. Look at the world in which we now live, in America, Europe, Africa or Asia, I find it a world in which a handful of nations consume 90 per cent of the resources of all the other nations. The gap of wealth and power between a handful *Have-Nations* and the majority *Have-Not* nations is widening and deepening. But within each nation, the gap of wealth and power, between a small group of *Haves* and the majority of *Have-Nots*, is widening and deepening. Within nations and between nations splendor is built on squalor. The boundless greed of a few now threatens the environment, the foundation of our lives. A modernity erected on the destruction of the very environment that makes life possible, is barbarism. We poison the air; we poison the earth; we even poison the waters! Then we develop technologies for making the poisoned water drinkable, and sell it in bottles! It's sheer barbarism when nations pride themselves on the advances in technologies of mass death!

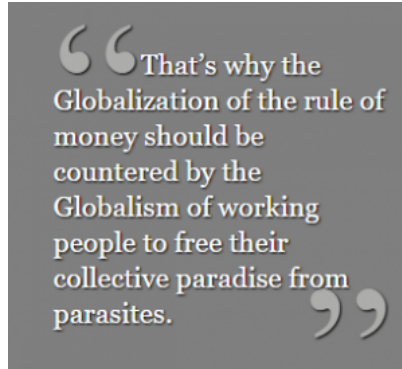
MG: Your novel, *Petals of Blood*, is an exemplary narration which gives life to [Marx's famous statement](#), “men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.” Your protagonists join each other to travel from village to city hoping that they would save their village. However, this travel, which is also stressed by the title of the chapters, is not to heaven or redemption. As Muniro says: “We went on a journey to the city to save Ilmorog from the drought. We brought back spiritual drought from the city!” As the novel unfolds the village changes, but not as the protagonists desired.

Once the capitalist relations are developed in the village, your protagonists change too. Every resistance gives rise to a new kind of suppression. Do you think that technologies of governance have become more powerful than the methods of resistance?

Ngũgĩ: In changing the conditions of our being, we also change ourselves, and we own the

change. That's why the whole notion that one people can export and force their systems of government to another is inherently alienating. One does not export liberation; people liberate themselves; then they own the outcome. Change comes from struggle. And struggle is inherent in thought and society and nature. Life itself arises out of struggle. The new has always had to struggle with the old, but its newness incorporates progressive elements of the old. Technology, from the natural technology of our hands to the most complex machinery, enhances the human capacity to eke – from nature and the environment – the means of enhancing life.

There is a huge contradiction in the world today. Technology makes it possible to eliminate



hunger, homelessness, diseases, and ignorance. And yet thousands still are without access to food, houses, health and knowledge. Technology, able to produce plenty, is used to create scarcity. The rate of profit depends on that scarcity. Technology is good. But technology should be in the service of the human; and not the human in the service technology. Do we really want a paradise of parasites? Paradise for parasites is hell for the host body. Globalization ensures the rule of parasites in paradise. That's why the Globalization of the rule of money should be countered by the Globalism of working people to free their collective paradise from parasites. This is the theme I try to explore in my novel, [Wizard of the Crow](#).

MG: What Fanon calls “the alienated psyche” is also echoed by Karega. There is a moment in the novel, where Karega criticizes those “African brothers and sisters” who change their names to “Western” names. In your own life, you did the opposite; you put aside your Christian name and went back to Ngugi.

According to Fanon one way of enlightenment can be through violence. This is manifested in Abdullah who never forgets the moment when he humiliated the two European oppressors. The novel says: “He had rejected what his father stood for, rejected the promises of wealth and was born again as a fighter in the forest, a Kenyan.”

What do you think of “the alienated psyche” and the processes by which an oppressed psyche can reach to enlightenment?

Ngũgĩ: Human liberation should mean the liberation of the wholeness of the environment, economy, power and psyche. These are connected. Colonial conquests of a people and their land are always followed by the imposition of a colonial state and culture. The colonizers arrogated to themselves the right to name the world of the conquered including their bodies. I have talked about the politics of memory in my book, [Something Torn and New](#). Liberation can be summed up as the right to name one's world. To put it simply, economic, political, social and cultural liberation would be incomplete without the liberation of the mind. Hence the title of my other book: *Decolonizing the Mind*.

MG: In face of the appeals of the villagers, one of the first thoughts of Nderi wa Riera, the MP, is to use culture as a basic of ethnic unity. This strategy has become more and more common in the contemporary world, especially in countries that have had anti-colonial and anti-imperialist violent resistance.

How can literature assist us in our struggles against forms of oppression that intend to create unity by means of imposing an ahistorical nationalist culture?

Ngũgĩ: Imperialism has always followed the Roman maxim: Divide and Conquer. Imperialism and the forces that ally with it, tell the working people that their problems come from the faith or religion or the cultural practices of the other. Does the poor Muslim or Christian or Hindu become less poor because they share the same faith with the wealthy in their community? So while the oppressed fight each other in terms of religion, ethnicity and other marks of cultural difference, the oppressors are very contented. The outlook that says that my God is more of a God than your God, is actually very ungodly. For Imperialism, God and Gold are the same thing.

MG: In *Petals of Blood*, you criticize the idea that there is a neutral body of knowledge. The character lawyer says: "Educators, men of letters, intellectuals: these are only voices – not neutral, disembodied voices – but belonging to bodies of persons, of groups, of interests. You, who will seek the truth about words emitted by a voice, look first for the body behind the voice. The voice merely rationalizes the needs, whims, caprices, of its owner, the master."

What body creates the voice, the knowledge that you deem beneficial for humanity?

Ngũgĩ: The united body of the working people. Let me try another maxim. Development should be measured not by the condition of those at the mountain top but the condition of those at the bottom of the mountain. Don't measure progress and development by the number of millionaires in that society but by the conditions of the *millions* in that society. Education and knowledge can hinder or enlighten, and we want an education and knowledge that enlightens.

MG: You have experienced that anti-colonial projects can go wrong. What is the authentic anti-colonial movement in your view?

Ngũgĩ: That which fights for the liberation of the economy, politics, culture and psyche of a people, that liberates their capacity to make and name their world to empower the least among us.

MG: What do you think African literature can teach Middle Eastern people? There is a critical standpoint in Iran which argues that our literature should open itself to more sounds, not just the Europe and Western literature but should criticize the Eurocentric presumptions behind the so called "canons" of world literature. How do you think the literature of the developing countries can inform each other? Has any Middle Eastern writer had influence on you?

Ngũgĩ: [Edward Said](#), of course, in theory, but also poets like [Mahmoud Darwish](#). All literatures should be in conversation. I come from Kenya, and I know that there have been centuries of cultural contact between the Middle East and the East African coast. There were thousands of Africans relocated to the Middle East as slaves in the past. But there peoples

from the Middle East who settled in east Africa. Christianity and Islam – two religions of the Book – are dominant. In my recent book, *Globalectics: Theory and Politics of Knowing*, I have argued about the centrality of literature from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and that of the marginalized communities in the West, to the conception and practice of world literature.

MG: Do you think that African literature has lost its moment in the world literature in comparison with the seventies? If so, why?

Ngũgĩ: I don't think so. The problem with African literature is that much of it is written in European languages. The new literary movement is toward writing in African languages. I was very happy when my fable, *Ituĩka rĩa Mũrũgamo*, ([*The Upright Revolution, or How humans came to walk upright*](#)), originally written in Gĩkũyũ, was translated into more than thirty African languages. It has also been translated into Swedish and some languages in India. Check it out on the internet under *Jalada Translation* issue number 2.

The original source of this article is [Socialist Project](#)
Copyright © [Mahdi Ganjavi](#), [Socialist Project](#), 2017

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Mahdi Ganjavi](#)

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca

www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca