



Re-Considering Decolonization of Mind Though Said's Travel Theory in Caleb Azumah Nelson's "Open Water"

KEERTHI ROSINY R

Date of Submission: 13-07-2022

Date of Acceptance: 27-07-2022

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the transformation undergone by Ngugi's theory, "Decolonizing the mind" as the theory travels from one age to another age. It's been three decades since Ngugi published his book, *Decolonizing the Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature*, and it has been undeniably interpreted with new meanings and scrutinised under different lights. The problem arises when people view that as a misinterpretation or as a threat to the originality of the theory. Edward Said's "Travel Theory" has traced the changes undergone by any theory and still considers the changes authentic by analysing the theory with the critical consciousness proposed by Said. Hence, Said's theory enables a reader to understand the modifications of the theory by looking into the historical and literary context. Ngugi gave paramount importance to using the African mother tongue instead of using the English language for producing literary works as he wanted to protect their culture from the emergence of Neo-colonialism. He considered the renouncing of the English language as decolonizing the mind. On the contrary, Nelson, in his novella, *Open Water*, has shown the decolonization of the mind undergone by the protagonists, but ironically, has chosen English as his medium of language. This transformation from Ngugi to Nelson has led to brand new interpretations, which might be hard for certain academics to accept. But Said's aspect of scrutinising the travel of theory by using critical consciousness helps one to understand that Nelson has achieved what Ngugi wanted to achieve by writing in African tongues. Eventually, through this novella, Nelson has enhanced African culture and art and encouraged his people to embrace the beauty of their blackness.

"You wanted to smile, raising your hands in jubilation. You just wanted to feel something like joy, even if it was small. You just want to be free."

(Nelson 35) Nelson's *Open Water* is a novella which explicitly records the plight of the black people living in the city, as they are always prone to being labeled as criminals and hideous. The plot revolves around a nameless male and female. Both have an art background; he is a photographer and she is a dancer. They are unable to express the love they have for one another because of the fear they have been holding onto, as their bodies do not belong to themselves. The story ends with the male protagonist accepting to face the situation together instead of isolating his expressions.

Nelson's debut novel was published on February 4, 2021. He attended his schooling on a full scholarship and felt safe only when he was on the basketball court. Nelson has said that most of the incidents in the book are fictional, but the feelings are so real. He said, "There was this real reckoning with myself and who I was in identity, and how I was myself, but also how other people saw me." Hence, this novel can be considered as the expression of his self-introspection as the protagonist has so much in common with the author.

The novel shows how the gradual decolonizing of the mind happens in the life of the protagonist. The decolonization of mind in Nelson's protagonist is different from what Ngugi has proposed in his book, *Decolonizing the mind: The politics of language in African literature*. Hence, the theory has been modified throughout the ages, which can be seen through Said's travel theory. According to Said, travelling theory tracks how theories are converted, modified, adapted, and even distorted. It studies how theories take another form by travelling through time and space. According to Said, "Like people and schools of criticism, ideas and theories travel from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another."

(6)

Said proposes four stages in which the theory is traversed. The initial stage is the birth or



entering discourse where the decolonization of mind as a theory emerges. Secondly, the specific theory undergoes changes as it travels from one time and place to another, hence it enters into new prominence. Initially, Ngugi's decolonization of mind is solely focused on renouncing the English language and writing only in native languages; hence it talks more about the politics behind the language. Ngugi's book was written in 1986 when the aspect of neocolonialism was at its emergence, threatening the culture and tradition of African people to extinction. As time progresses and under different circumstances, it gets modified. Nelson has decolonized his mind by using the decolonizing mind of Ngugi. Briefly, instead of being hard on himself for being black, the protagonist decolonized his mind and accepted his blackness as his identity irrespective of how others view him.

The third stage is the stage of acceptance, where the transplanted theory is considered appropriate despite the difference it has undergone. The transmission of decolonizing the mind from linguistic decolonization to decolonization of one's mind from the colonizer's perception was accepted despite the alienness one finds when compared with the other. The theory was tolerated despite the resistance and newness it had attained from the predecessor's invention.

The fourth stage is a complete transformation stage where the theory has found its new position in a new time and new place. Ngugi sees language as the enabling condition of human consciousness: "The choice of language and the use of language are central to a person's definition of themselves in relation to the entire universe. As a result, language has always been at the heart of the two contending social forces in twentieth-century Africa." (4) On the other hand, Nelson, while talking about his book, says in his interview with Lauren Christensen, "Language really has its limitations. It doesn't take much for something you say to not be heard in the way that you said it, and more often than not, for you to feel something and not say anything at all" (New York Times). Nelson wanted to be heard in the right way, while Ngugi focused on using the right language, which might not exactly deliver what he wanted to say all the time. Nelson's desire to be heard and feel the way he felt made him concentrate less on the language he used. On the other hand, he concentrated more on the gradual transmission of the protagonist and how he identifies himself in the universe by analysing his mind.

Derek Gregory has grouped the four stages introduced by Said into three critical moments. As

people began to travel from one location to another, travel theory evolved. The initial stage of Gregory's proposal is known as 'Origination.' According to Said, ideas are not free-floating constructions, but rather need to be seen in their 'contextual history.' In order to comprehend the theory or idea, the place and time from which it emerges need to be taken into consideration. Ngugi's *Decolonizing the Mind* emerges to preserve the art, culture, and tradition of the African people from the emergence of Neocolonialism, which he strongly believes leads to the annihilation of their culture. He says in his book, "To write fiction in English is to foster a neocolonial mentality (28)." On the other hand, neocolonialism has succeeded in a way, and people have moved from their natives to cities to have a better future. In the story, for example, both protagonists live in southeast London, far from their hometown. Hence, in order to preserve his culture and tradition, Nelson unlike Ngugi needs to articulate in the language which everyone has grown up learning with, as his own kin and kith might not have excelled in their native language due to the migration. The predominant part of his book talks about the songs and movies that treasure black culture and also talks of the plight and injustice that black people experience. Following the publication, Nelson created a Spotify playlist called "Open Water official playlist: Caleb Azumah Nelson," which further enriched Black culture.

The second stage of the theory is the process of institutionalization, where the theory undergoes a prominent change when it travels from one context to another. The book is Ngugi's "Farewell to English" and he called it the "language problem" faced by African authors. On the other hand, Nelson was focusing on broader aspects, as he says in his interview with Pearce, "When I'm confronted by the blank page, in a way, I'm confronting myself, who I am, all of the nuances that make me. There's a freedom in affording myself or others this kind of space, to just be themselves, even if that's for a brief moment." (Shado Magazine) Nelson is not mindful of the language he uses. On the other hand, he wants to express the pain they have been undergoing by searching for the words from his soul, which is beyond the limitations of the language. Nelson, in his book *Open Water*, says, "Language fails us, always." (138)

The third stage by Gregory is the revivification of the travel theory, where the travel theory is reinvigorated by reinterpretations according to the new situation. According to Said, the aspect of critical consciousness is essential for



the revivification of the theory. Said defines critical consciousness as a “sort of spatial sense, a sort of measuring faculty for locating or situating theory.” (Said 241) Critical consciousness is also considered as the response to the social and historical situation. Said says, “It should consider the differences in context between the situation of origin and the theory’s later destinations.” (Said 241)

Ngugi spent the majority of his time in Kenya before and after independence, so writing in his native language enabled him to preserve Black culture. In his book, Ngugi says, “Colonial Alienation is like separating the mind from the body so that they are occupying two unrelated linguistic spheres in the same person. On a larger scale, it is like producing a society of bodiless heads and headless bodies.” (28) He himself broke his principles again by writing in English and by taking up a familiar role as a critic of imperial European languages. Hence, Ngugi’s effort to use Gikuyu as the language of both his fiction and critical discourse was not possible because of the exile and American professional life. The critic, Gikandi, says how his return has created a complicated problem as he left people with no explanation. In a way, Nelson has brought a new interpretation to this theory through his novel.

“Walking towards the cinema, you pass a police van. They aren’t questioning you or her, but glancing in your direction. With this act, they confirm what you already know: that your bodies are not your own. You are scared that they will take them back.” (99) Through this line, Nelson addresses the primary issue that is their ownership towards their body itself is questioned, which wasn’t the case of Ngugi and his people. “Sometimes you forget there’s nothing in your pockets. Sometimes you forget that to be you is to be unseen and unheard, or it is to be seen and heard in ways you did not ask for. Sometimes you forget that to be you is to be a black body and not much else.” (Nelson 114) It is seen that changing the language alone is not going to change the situation or the suffering. Freedom is, to be in the open water, which exposes all of you and not how others want to expose you.

Ngugi’s perception of liberation is a little different from that of Nelson. “The call for rediscovery and the resumption of our language is a call for a regenerative reconnection with the millions of revolutionary tongues in Africa and the world over demanding liberation. He is trying to protect the language while Nelson wanted to preserve the spirit from dying, as they are already living a lifeless life. “They don’t hear you. They don’t see you. They see someone, but the person is

not you. You have always thought that if you opened your mouth in open water you would drown, but if you didn’t open your mouth you would suffocate. So here you are, drowning.” (136) Nelson is talking about saving humanity through decolonizing their minds because in the midst of chaotic life, people choose to end their lives rather than have the desire to live. He is giving a call to everyone who is suffocating to speak up. This in itself is a regeneration of humanity.

Nelson has used second-person narrative to make it more intimate. Ngugi wanted to create a revolution by choosing to write in his mother tongue. On the other hand, Nelson created a revolution by questioning the reader, as the reader becomes a participant in the character’s life because of the narrative technique he chose to use. After watching the movie “Boyz n the Hood” by John Singleton, he was reminded of the scene where Tre asks the policemen, “Why are you doing this?” (101) With tears streaming down his cheeks, suddenly the policeman pointed his gun at their head by answering through their actions, “I am doing this because I can.” (101)

On the other hand, he is making people love themselves by giving assurance that it is natural to be black. “Love made you black, as in, you were most coloured when in her presence. It was not a cause for concern; therefore, one must rejoice!” (12) Nelson not only speaks for himself, but also for all of the oppressed in the universe, which is why his language is humanity, as he says “We find ourselves unheard. We find ourselves mislabeled. We are loud and angry. We are bold and brash. We are black people. We find ourselves not saying it how it is. We find ourselves scared. We find ourselves suppressed.” (41)

Ngugi believed that his book, through the decolonizing of the mind, would be able to “bring about the renaissance in African cultures and ultimately uplift African nations from their neocolonial conditions of oppression” (23). Nelson has achieved what Ngugi considered a renaissance in African culture by making them embrace their blackness and encouraging them to be proud of it by saying, “You could be yourselves.” (12)

It’s not sudden. The perception of a young black male existed long before this moment, before he fit a description, before two policemen and a helicopter deemed him to be the person smashing the windows of cars, despite not having proof, despite only being told ‘someone’ in the area was smashing the windows of the cars, no, it’s not sudden. This moment has been building for years, many years longer than any of these men have been



alive. This moment is older than us all, it's longer than the 1:47 clip which shows me a murder – (76)

Nelson has tried to rise from the oppression they face by not only talking about the movies and books that created a revolution, but by writing this work, he did what he wanted to be, "It's one thing to be looked at, and another to be seen." (86) Truly this *Open Water* has made them to be seen as he has given voice to his desire like he said, "To give desire a voice is to give it a body through which to breathe and to live." (66)

WORKS CITED

- [1]. Caleb Azumah Nelson. *Open Water*. Black Cat, 2021.
- [2]. "Caleb Nelson - Open Water."
- [3]. [www.youtube.com, youtu.be/tY45CBoca8g](http://www.youtube.com/youtu.be/tY45CBoca8g). Accessed 23 July 2022.
- [4]. Christensen, Lauren. "For Caleb Azumah Nelson, There's Freedom in Feeling Seen."
- [5]. *The New York Times*, 7 Apr. 2021,
- [6]. www.nytimes.com/2021/04/07/books/caleb-azumah-nelson-open-water.html.
- [7]. "Interview with Caleb Azumah Nelson."
- [8]. [www.youtube.com, youtu.be/b23GvIXu_SE](http://www.youtube.com/youtu.be/b23GvIXu_SE).
- [9]. "Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's 'Fly in League with the Night' – Criticism - Art-Agenda." www.art-agenda.com,
- [10]. www.art-agenda.com/criticism/371479/lynette-yiadom-boakye-s-fly-in-league-with-the-night.
- [11]. Accessed 23 July 2022.
- [12]. MacPherson, Sonia, et al. "Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o: An African Vision of Linguistic and Cultural Pluralism."
- [13]. *TESOL Quarterly*, vol. 31, no. 3, 1997, p. 641,
- [14]. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3587848>.
- [15]. Margulis, Jennifer, and John Cullen Gruesser.
- [16]. "Black on Black: Twentieth-Century Writing about Africa."
- [17]. *African Studies Review*, vol. 44, no. 3, Dec. 2001, p. 160, <https://doi.org/10.2307/525641>.
- [18]. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. *Decolonizing the Mind : The Politics of Language in African Literature*.
- [19]. J. Currey ; Nairobi, 1986.
- [20]. Pearce, Isabella; Washington, Mario; Robathan, Hannah (6 May 2021).
- [21]. "Caleb Azumah Nelson: "Open Water is for the young Black people who don't see themselves reflected in literature""
- [22]. *Shado Magazine*. Archived from the original on 13 May 2021.
- [23]. Retrieved 7 January 2022.
- [24]. Said, Edward W., and Moustafa Bayoumi.
- [25]. *The Selected Works of Edward Said, 1966-2006*.
- [26]. New York: Vintage Books, 2019.