

scrape in the rusted lock and end his grief.  
He *knew* she'd just popped out to get the tea.

I believe life ends with death, and that is all.  
You haven't both gone shopping; just the same,  
15 in my new black leather phone book there's your name  
and the disconnected number I still call.

### Turns

I thought it made me look more "working class"  
(as if a bit of chequered cloth could bridge that gap!)  
I did a turn in it before the glass.  
My mother said: *It suits you, your dad's cap.*  
5 (She preferred me to wear suits and part my hair:  
*You're every bit as good as that lot are!*)

All the pension queue<sup>1</sup> came out to stare.  
Dad was sprawled beside the postbox (still VR),<sup>2</sup>  
his cap turned inside up beside his head,  
10 smudged H A H in purple Indian ink  
and Brylcreem slicks<sup>3</sup> displayed so folk might think  
he wanted charity for dropping dead.

He never begged. For now!<sup>4</sup> Death's reticence  
crowns his life's, and *me*, I'm opening my trap  
15 to busk<sup>5</sup> the class that broke him for the pence  
that splash like brackish tears into our cap.

### Marked with D.<sup>1</sup>

When the chilled dough of his flesh went in an oven  
not unlike those he fuelled all his life,  
I thought of his cataracts ablaze with Heaven  
and radiant with the sight of his dead wife,  
5 light streaming from his mouth to shape her name,  
"not Florence and not Flo but always Florrie."  
I thought how his cold tongue burst into flame  
but only literally, which makes me sorry,

1. Line of retired people waiting for their pension (social security) payments.  
2. Sidewalk mailbox dating from the reign of Queen Victoria and carrying the initials of her name and Latin title: Victoria Regina.  
3. Play on Brylcreem Sticks, a hairstyling wax.  
4. Nothing (northern dialect).

5. Take around the hat; i.e., solicit money for street entertainment (from members of the middle class, in this case).  
1. Cf. the anonymous nursery rhyme "Pat-a-cake, pat-a-cake, baker's man / Bake me a cake as fast as you can / Pat it and prick it, and mark it with B, / Put it in the oven for baby and me."

sorry for his sake there's no Heaven to reach.  
10 I get it all from Earth my daily bread  
but he hungered for release from mortal speech  
that kept him down, the tongue that weighed like lead.

The baker's man that no-one will see rise  
and England made to feel like some dull oaf  
15 is smoke, enough to sting one person's eyes  
and ash (not unlike flour) for one small loaf.

### NGŪGĪ WA THIONG'O

b. 1938

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o was born in Limuru, Kenya, where his father was a peasant farmer. He was educated at the Alliance High School in Kikuyu, Kenya; Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda; and Leeds University in England. In the late 1960s, while teaching at University College, Nairobi, Kenya, he was one of the prime movers behind the abolition of the college's English department, arguing for its replacement by a Department of African Literature and Languages (two departments were formed, one of literature, the other of language). His novels include *Weep Not, Child* (1964), about the 1950s Mau Mau rebellion against British rule in Kenya, *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), about the war's aftermath, and *Petals of Blood* (1977), about the failure of the East African state, and he has written plays and novels in his native Gikūyū, also sharply critical of post-independence Kenya, such as the novel *Matigari* (1986). In 1982, after his imprisonment in Kenya and the banning of his books there, Ngũgĩ left to teach abroad, most recently at New York University.

At the beginning of *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), Ngũgĩ declares the book "my farewell to English as a vehicle for any of my writings. From now on it is Gikūyū and Kiswahili all the way." Although Ngũgĩ has subsequently modified this position, he lays out starkly the case against English language and literature as tools of colonialism, which continue to have insidious effects long after formal decolonization. As the student of a British colonial education, Ngũgĩ came to feel that, because of the close relation between language and cultural memory, the imposition of English language and literature severs colonized peoples from their cultural experience—an experience best recovered and explored in indigenous languages.

### From *Decolonising the Mind*

### From *The Language of African Literature*

### III

I was born into a large peasant family: father, four wives and about twenty-eight children. I also belonged, as we all did in those days, to a wider extended family and to the community as a whole.  
We spoke Gikūyū<sup>1</sup> as we worked in the fields. We spoke Gikūyū in and

<sup>1</sup> Bantu language spoken in western Kenya by approximately five million people.

outside the home. I can vividly recall those evenings of story-telling around the fireside. It was mostly the grown-ups telling the children but everybody was interested and involved. We children would re-tell the stories the following day to other children who worked in the fields picking the pyrethrum flowers,<sup>2</sup> tea-leaves or coffee beans of our European and African landlords.

The stories, with mostly animals as the main characters, were all told in Gikūyū. Hare, being small, weak but full of innovative wit and cunning, was our hero. We identified with him as he struggled against the brutes of prey like lion, leopard, hyena. His victories were our victories and we learnt that the apparently weak can outwit the strong. We followed the animals in their struggle against hostile nature—drought, rain, sun, wind—a confrontation often forcing them to search for forms of co-operation. But we were also interested in their struggles amongst themselves, and particularly between the beasts and the victims of prey. These twin struggles, against nature and other animals, reflected real-life struggles in the human world.

Not that we neglected stories with human beings as the main characters. There were two types of characters in such human-centred narratives: the species of truly human beings with qualities of courage, kindness, mercy, hatred of evil, concern for others; and a man-eat-man two-mouthed species with qualities of greed, selfishness, individualism and hatred of what was good for the larger co-operative community. Co-operation as the ultimate good in a community was a constant theme. It could unite human beings with animals against ogres and beasts of prey, as in the story of how dove, after being fed with castor-oil seeds, was sent to fetch a smith working far away from home and whose pregnant wife was being threatened by these man-eating two-mouthed ogres.

There were good and bad story-tellers. A good one could tell the same story over and over again, and it would always be fresh to us, the listeners. He or she could tell a story told by someone else and make it more alive and dramatic. The differences really were in the use of words and images and the inflexion of voices to effect different tones.

We therefore learnt to value words for their meaning and nuances. Language was not a mere string of words. It had a suggestive power well beyond the immediate and lexical meaning. Our appreciation of the suggestive magical power of language was reinforced by the games we played with words through riddles, proverbs, transpositions of syllables, or through nonsensical but musically arranged words. So we learnt the music of our language on top of the content. The language, through images and symbols, gave us a view of the world, but it had a beauty of its own. The home and the field were then our pre-primary school but what is important, for this discussion, is that the language of our evening teach-ins, and the language of our immediate and wider community, and the language of our work in the fields were one.

And then I went to school, a colonial school, and this harmony was broken. The language of my education was no longer the language of my culture. I first went to Kamaandura, missionary run, and then to another called Maanguū run by nationalists grouped around the Gikūyū Independent and Karinga Schools Association. Our language of education was still Gikūyū. The very first time I was ever given an ovation for my writing was over a composition in Gikūyū. So for my first four years there was still harmony between the language of my formal education and that of the Limuru peasant community.

It was after the declaration of a state of emergency over Kenya in 1952<sup>3</sup> that all the schools run by patriotic nationalists were taken over by the colonial regime and were placed under District Education Boards chaired by Englishmen. English became the language of my formal education. In Kenya, English became more than a language: it was *the* language, and all the others had to bow before it in deference.

Thus one of the most humiliating experiences was to be caught speaking Gikūyū in the vicinity of the school. The culprit was given corporal punishment—three to five strokes of the cane on bare buttocks—or was made to carry a metal plate around the neck with inscriptions such as I AM STUPID OR I AM A DONKEY. Sometimes the culprits were fined money they could hardly afford. And how did the teachers catch the culprits? A button was initially given to one pupil who was supposed to hand it over to whoever was caught speaking his mother tongue. Whoever had the button at the end of the day would sing who had given it to him and the ensuing process would bring out all the culprits of the day. Thus children were turned into witch-hunters and in the process were being taught the lucrative value of being a traitor to one's immediate community.

The attitude to English was the exact opposite: any achievement in spoken or written English was highly rewarded; prizes, prestige, applause; the ticket to higher realms. English became the measure of intelligence and ability in the arts, the sciences, and all the other branches of learning. English became the main determinant of a child's progress up the ladder of formal education.

As you may know, the colonial system of education in addition to its apartheid racial demarcation had the structure of a pyramid: a broad primary base, a narrowing secondary middle, and an even narrower university apex. Selections from primary into secondary were through an examination, in my time called Kenya African Preliminary Examination, in which one had to pass six subjects ranging from Maths to Nature Study and Kiswahili.<sup>4</sup> All the papers were written in English. Nobody could pass the exam who failed the English language paper no matter how brilliantly he had done in the other subjects. I remember one boy in my class of 1954 who had distinctions in all subjects except English, which he had failed. He was made to fail the entire exam. He went on to become a turn boy<sup>5</sup> in a bus company. I who had only passes but a credit in English got a place at the Alliance High School, one of the most elitist institutions for Africans in colonial Kenya. The requirements for a place at the University, Makerere University College,<sup>6</sup> were broadly the same: nobody could go on to wear the undergraduate red gown, no matter how brilliantly they had performed in all the other subjects unless they had a credit—not even a simple pass!—in English. Thus the most coveted place in the pyramid and in the system was only available to the holder of an English language credit card. English was the official vehicle and the magic formula to colonial elitism.

Literary education was now determined by the dominant language while also reinforcing that dominance. Orature (oral literature) in Kenyan languages stopped. In primary school I now read simplified Dickens and Stevenson alongside Rider Haggard. Jim Hawkins, *Oliver Twist*, *Tom Brown*—not Hare,

3. The Mau Mau, militant African nationalists, led a revolt in 1952 that resulted in four years of British military operations and the deaths of more than eleven thousand insurgents.

4. Swahili.

widely understood language in Africa.

5. I.e., the person who operates a turnstile.

6. University in Kampala, Uganda, that was connected with the University of London in the 1950s



Leopard and Lion—were now my daily companions in the world of imagination.<sup>7</sup> In secondary school, Scott and G. B. Shaw vied with more Rider Haggard, John Buchan, Alan Paton, Captain W. E. Johns.<sup>8</sup> At Makerere I read English: from Chaucer to T. S. Eliot with a touch of Graham Greene.<sup>9</sup>

Thus language and literature were taking us further and further from ourselves to other selves, from our world to other worlds.

\* \* \*

## IV

\* \* \*

\* \* \* Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture, at their politics and at the social production of wealth, at their entire relationship to nature and to other beings. Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world.

## V

So what was the colonialist imposition of a foreign language doing to us children?

The real aim of colonialism was to control the people's wealth: what they produced, how they produced it, and how it was distributed; to control, in other words, the entire realm of the language of real life. Colonialism imposed its control of the social production of wealth through military conquest and subsequent political dictatorship. But its most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonised, the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world. Economic and political control can never be complete or effective without mental control. To control a people's culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others.

For colonialism this involved two aspects of the same process: the destruction or the deliberate undervaluing of a people's culture, their art, dances, religions, history, geography, education, orature and literature, and the conscious elevation of the language of the coloniser. The domination of a people's language by the languages of the colonising nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonised.

\* \* \*

7. The English novelist Charles Dickens (1812–1870) wrote *Oliver Twist*. Jim Hawkins is the hero of *Treasure Island*, by the Scottish fiction writer and essayist Robert Louis Stevenson (1850–1894). The English novelist Rider Haggard (1856–1925) wrote African adventure stories. *Tom Brown's Schooldays* is by the English novelist Thomas Hughes (1822–1896).

8. Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832), Scottish novelist. George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950), Anglo-

Irish dramatist. John Buchan (1875–1940), Scottish author of adventure stories. Alan Paton (1903–1988), South African novelist. William Earl Johns (1893–1968), English author of children's fiction.

9. Geoffrey Chaucer (ca. 1343–1400), English poet. T. S. Eliot (1888–1965), Anglo-American poet. Graham Greene (1904–1991), English novelist. "Read": here "majored in."

## IX

I started writing in Gikūyū language in 1977 after seventeen years of involvement in Afro-European literature, in my case Afro-English literature. \* \* \* Wherever I have gone, particularly in Europe, I have been confronted with the question: why are you now writing in Gikūyū? Why do you now write in an African language? In some academic quarters I have been confronted with the rebuke, 'Why have you abandoned us?' It was almost as if, in choosing to write in Gikūyū, I was doing something abnormal. But Gikūyū is my mother tongue! The very fact that what common sense dictates in the literary practice of other cultures is being questioned in an African writer is a measure of how far imperialism has distorted the view of African realities. It has turned reality upside down: the abnormal is viewed as normal and the normal is viewed as abnormal. Africa actually enriches Europe: but Africa is made to believe that it needs Europe to rescue it from poverty. Africa's natural and human resources continue to develop Europe and America: but Africa is made to feel grateful for aid from the same quarters that still sit on the back of the continent. Africa even produces intellectuals who now rationalise this upside-down way of looking at Africa.

I believe that my writing in Gikūyū language, a Kenyan language, an African language, is part and parcel of the anti-imperialist struggles of Kenyan and African peoples. In schools and universities our Kenyan languages—that is the languages of the many nationalities which make up Kenya—were associated with negative qualities of backwardness, underdevelopment, humiliation and punishment. We who went through that school system were meant to graduate with a hatred of the people and the culture and the values of the language of our daily humiliation and punishment. I do not want to see Kenyan children growing up in that imperialist-imposed tradition of contempt for the tools of communication developed by their communities and their history. I want them to transcend colonial alienation.

\* \* \*

We African writers are bound by our calling to do for our languages what Spenser, Milton and Shakespeare did for English; what Pushkin and Tolstoy<sup>1</sup> did for Russian; indeed what all writers in world history have done for their languages by meeting the challenge of creating a literature in them, which process later opens the languages for philosophy, science, technology and all the other areas of human creative endeavours.

1986

1. Aleksandr Pushkin (1799–1837), Russian poet, and Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910), Russian novelist.

## SALMAN RUSHDIE

In these excerpts from his essay "‘Commonwealth Literature’ Does Not Exist," fiction writer Salman Rushdie (b. 1947; see the headnote to him and see his story "The Prophet's Hair," later in this volume) counters the nativist view of English as an imperial yoke that must be thrown off. Recounting the spread of English as a world

language and describing its indigenization by the non-English, Rushdie claims it as a vital and expressive South Asian literary language, with its own history and tradition.

### [English Is an Indian Literary Language]

I'll begin from an obvious starting place. English is by now the world language. It achieved this status partly as a result of the physical colonization of a quarter of the globe by the British, and it remains ambiguous but central to the affairs of just about all the countries to whom it was given, along with mission schools, trunk roads<sup>1</sup> and the rules of cricket, as a gift of the British colonizers.

But its present-day pre-eminence is not solely—perhaps not even primarily—the result of the British legacy. It is also the effect of the primacy of the United States of America in the affairs of the world. This second impetus towards English could be termed a kind of linguistic neo-colonialism, or just plain pragmatism on the part of many of the world's governments and educationists, according to your point of view.

As for myself, I don't think it is always necessary to take up the anti-colonial—or is it post-colonial?—cudgels against English. What seems to me to be happening is that those peoples who were once colonized by the language are now rapidly remaking it, domesticating it, becoming more and more relaxed about the way they use it—assisted by the English language's enormous flexibility and size, they are carving out large territories for themselves within its frontiers.

To take the case of India, only because it's the one with which I'm most familiar. The debate about the appropriateness of English in post-British India has been raging ever since 1947,<sup>2</sup> but today, I find, it is a debate which has meaning only for the older generation. The children of independent India seem not to think of English as being irredeemably tainted by its colonial provenance. They use it as an Indian language, as one of the tools they have to hand.

(I am simplifying, of course, but the point is broadly true.)

There is also an interesting North-South divide in Indian attitudes to English. In the North, in the so-called 'Hindi belt', where the capital, Delhi, is located, it is possible to think of Hindi as a future national language; but in South India, which is at present suffering from the attempts of central government to impose this national language on it, the resentment of Hindi is far greater than of English. After spending quite some time in South India, I've become convinced that English is an essential language in India, not only because of its technical vocabularies and the international communication which it makes possible, but also simply to permit two Indians to talk to each other in a tongue which neither party hates.

Incidentally, in West Bengal, where there is a State-led move against English, the following graffito, a sharp dig at the State's Marxist chief minister, Jyoti Basu, appeared on a wall, in English: it said, 'My son won't learn English; your son won't learn English; but Jyoti Basu will send his son abroad to learn English.'

1. Main roads, such as the Grand Trunk Road, the immense highway between Calcutta and Amritsar

constructed during the British Raj.  
2. When the British relinquished control of India.

One of the points I want to make is that what I've said indicates, I hope, that Indian society and Indian literature have a complex and developing relationship with the English language. \* \* \*

English literature has its Indian branch. By this I mean the literature of the English language. This literature is also Indian literature. There is no incompatibility here. If history creates complexities, let us not try to simplify them.

So: English is an Indian literary language, and by now, thanks to writers like Tagore, Desani, Chaudhuri, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, Anita Desai<sup>3</sup> and others, it has quite a pedigree. \* \* \*

In my own case, I have constantly been asked whether I am British, or Indian. The formulation 'Indian-born British writer' has been invented to explain me. But, as I said last night, my new book deals with Pakistan. So what now? 'British-resident Indo-Pakistani writer'? You see the folly of trying to contain writers inside passports.

One of the most absurd aspects of this quest for national authenticity is that—as far as India is concerned, anyway—it is completely fallacious to suppose that there is such a thing as a pure, unalloyed tradition from which to draw. The only people who seriously believe this are religious extremists. The rest of us understand that the very essence of Indian culture is that we possess a mixed tradition, a *mélange* of elements as disparate as ancient Mughal<sup>4</sup> and contemporary Coca-Cola American. To say nothing of Muslim, Buddhist, Jain,<sup>5</sup> Christian, Jewish, British, French, Portuguese, Marxist, Maoist, Trotskyist, Vietnamese, capitalist, and of course Hindu elements. Eclecticism, the ability to take from the world what seems fitting and to leave the rest, has always been a hallmark of the Indian tradition, and today it is at the centre of the best work being done both in the visual arts and in literature. \* \* \*

\* \* \* As far as Eng. Lit. itself is concerned, I think that if *all* English literatures could be studied together, a shape would emerge which would truly reflect the new shape of the language in the world, and we could see that Eng. Lit. has never been in better shape, because the world language now also possesses a world literature, which is proliferating in every conceivable direction.

The English language ceased to be the sole possession of the English some time ago. \* \* \*

1983

3. Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), Bengali poet, G. V. Desani (1909–2000), Nirad C. Chaudhuri (1897–1999), Mulk Raj Anand (1905–2004), Raja Rao (b. 1909), Anita Desai (b. 1937):

Indian fiction and nonfiction writers.

4. Dynasty of Muslim emperors who reigned in India, 1526–1858.

5. Jainism is one of India's oldest religions.

'n get bex<sup>o</sup> and walk tru de door,  
 a head eena de air;  
 e gal-dem bawl out affa him,<sup>5</sup>  
 'Not going? What! Oh deah!'

45 An from dat night till tedeh, mah,  
 Dem all got him fi mock.  
 Miss Mary dry-foot bwoy!  
 Cyaan get over de shock!

1957

Colonization in Reverse

What a joyful news, Miss Mattie;  
 Ah feel like me heart gwine burs—  
 Jamaica people colonizin  
 Englan in reverse.<sup>1</sup>

5 By de hundred, by de tousan,  
 From country an from town,  
 By de ship-load, by de plane-load,  
 Jamaica is Englan boun.

10 Dem a pour out a Jamaica;  
 Everybody future plan  
 Is fi get a big-time job  
 An settle in de motherlan.

15 What a islan! What a people!  
 Man an woman, ole an young  
 Jussa pack dem bag an baggage  
 An tun history upside dung!<sup>o</sup>

20 Some people doan like travel,  
 But fi show dem loyalty  
 Dem all a open up cheap-fare-  
 To-Englan agency;

An week by week dem shippin off  
 Dem countryman like fire  
 Fi immigrate an populate  
 De seat a de Empire.

25 Oonoo<sup>o</sup> se how life is funny,  
 Oonoo see de tunabout?  
 Jamaica live fi box bread  
 Out a English people mout.

5. The girls went crying after him.  
 1. Encouraged by the postwar labor shortage in England and the scarcity of work at home, three

hundred thousand Jamaicans migrated to Britain from 1948 to 1962.

30 For when dem catch a Englan  
 An start play dem different role  
 Some will settle down to work  
 An some will settle fi de dole.<sup>o</sup> *for unemployment benefits*

35 Jane seh de dole is not too bad  
 Because dey payin she  
 Two pounds a week fi seek a job  
 Dat suit her dignity.

40 Me seh Jane will never fine work  
 At de rate how she dah look  
 For all day she stay pon Aunt Fan couch  
 An read love-story book.

What a devilment a Englan!  
 Dem face war an brave de worse;  
 But ah wonderin how dem gwine stan  
 Colonizin in reverse.

1957

Jamaica Oman<sup>1</sup>

Jamaica oman cunny, sah!<sup>o</sup> *cunning, sir*  
 Is how dem jinnal so?<sup>o</sup> *how are they so tricky?*  
 Look how long dem liberated  
 An de man dem never know!

5 Look how long Jamaica oman  
 —Modder, sister, wife, sweetheart—  
 Outa road an eena yard<sup>o</sup> deh pon  
 A dominate her part! *home*

10 From Maroon Nanny<sup>2</sup> teck her body  
 Bounce bullet back pon man,  
 To when nowadays gal-pickney<sup>o</sup> tun  
 Spellin-Bee champion. *girl-child*

15 From de grass root to de hill-top,  
 In profession, skill an trade,  
 Jamaica oman teck her time  
 Dah mount an meck de grade.

20 Some backa man a push, some side-a  
 Man a hole him han,  
 Some a lick sense eena man head,  
 Some a guide him pon him plan!

1. Woman.  
 2. Jamaican national hero who led the Maroons, fugitive slaves, in battle during the eighteenth cen-

tury. Bullets reputedly ricocheted off her and killed her enemies.