

Comparison: Dante and Ngugi on Vernacular

The discussion on vernacular language and its significance have been a perpetual sight in the realm of literature for many centuries. Dante Alighieri and Ngugi wa Thiongo are two strong contributors to the long argument on the use of vernacular in literary works. Both of them, in two different eras and two different parts of the world, raised their voice to shed light on the importance of everyday language. This paper shall discuss and compare the major ideas on vernacular presented by them along with the supporting evidence cited from *De Vulgari Eloquentia* and “The Language of African Fiction”.

Dante Alighieri, an Italian poet, believes the vernacular language was a powerful tool to express, convey and reach a wider audience. At his time, Latin was the dominant language, which was reserved for the elites. But he identified the capability of vernacular to transgress the limitations of classes and make literature unreserved. He wanted to remove a stereotype: literature should be only written in elitist language, in doing so, people come up with literature in vernacular, making them more accessible. In his essay, to show the edge of vernacular over *gramatica* (Latin), he writes that the vernacular is nobler with three supporting reasons: “first, because it was the language originally used by the human race; second, because the whole world employs it, though

with different pronunciations and using different words; and third because it is natural to us, while the other is, in contrast, artificial.” (Dante 1)

Moreover, Dante discusses the tripartite form of the vernacular language. He mentions the three parts of oil, oc, and Italian which argue in their favour for superiority. He writes “the language of oil adduces on its own behalf the fact that, because of the greater facility and pleasing quality of its vernacular style, everything that is recounted or invented in vernacular prose belongs to it... the language of oc, argues in its favour that eloquent writers in the vernacular first composed poems in this sweeter and more perfect language... the third part, which belongs to the Italians, declares itself to be superior because it enjoys a twofold privilege: first, because those who have written vernacular poetry more sweetly and subtly” (Dante 6)

Also, Dante considers that the vernacular language of Italy called Italian is illustrious, cardinal, aulic, and curial. He identifies this vernacular to be among the whole of Italy. In this way, he attracts the readers to view the vernacular language as a pathway to nationalistic feeling. He saw the vernacular language to be the catalyst of nationalistic unity and pride. He writes “that this vernacular, which has been shown to be illustrious, cardinal, aulic, and curial, is the vernacular that is called Italian... just as all these can be identified in this way, so can that which belongs to Italy as a whole.” (Dante 11)

Ngugi wa Thiongo, on the other hand, also puts forth strong arguments on the importance of vernacular. He is a Kenyan writer who advocated against the use of English in Africa instead of the vernacular languages. He insists that African writers writing in English are losing a huge number of readership of the natives who are not fluent in English and other European languages. Not just to preserve his native cultural heritage and nationalistic unity, but his arguments are deeply rooted enough to challenge the evils of imperialism. In the chapter “The Language of African

Fiction”, he begins his arguments against colonial powers by pointing out its negative impacts on African language orthographies. “Imperialism through missionaries of its ideology introduced writing to many African languages... Rival imperialisms and the colonial practice of divide and rule introduced contradictory representations of the sound systems of the very same language.” (Ngugi 67)

Secondly, Ngugi identifies the need to encourage writers to use vernacular languages instead of English. He conveys this idea through his own experiences and thought processes. “I knew whom I was writing about but whom was I writing for?” (Ngugi 72) He writes this after he wrote *A Grain of Wheat* because the targeted audiences for this book are the peasants and native Africans but then writing it in English would make none of them read it. “I have reached a point of crisis. I don’t know whether it is worth any longer writing in English” (Ngugi 72) His notions are evident in the title of the papers which he published later “Towards a National Culture” and “Cultural Policy in Africa”

Thirdly, Ngugi raises his voice against the colonial system that tries to implement and “impose its tongue on the subject races, and then downgrade the vernacular tongues of the people” He discovers, these thought processes and values can make one feel alienated from the values of his vernacular. He suggests that the vernacular languages should be taught in schools and colleges. In his opinion, vernacular language can carry the values of a society and bind them to their native culture.

Even though Dante and Ngugi share their arguments and thoughts on the vernacular during two different eras, patterns of similarities and differences are evident. While considering the context of both writers, scholars have identified that both of them had written or used the help of vernacular to resist something. In the case of Dante, when he was exiled from Florence (a city dominated by

Latin speakers), he uplifted the importance of the vernaculars of Italy and compares it with Latin to show the advantages of vernacular over Latin. It can be considered as a resistance against the Latin speakers who were the elite class of that time. Similarly, Ngugi wanted to resist the imperialist forces and their systems of implementation of their tongue. Even he used the vernacular as a tool for his resistance. However, Dante was more focused on the democratic approach as he wanted to make his work accessible to a wider audience. He mainly wanted as many people as possible to understand his ideas. Whereas, Ngugi's focus is on building a political and ideological agenda. He didn't care about the accessibility of English or any other colonial language, he wanted to use the vernacular tongue more than the foreign tongue. Additionally, Dante in his essay doesn't ask others to join in his resistance or empowerment of vernacular. He is primarily focused on the spread of his to any ideas and emotions. While Ngugi's thought process moves differently, he wanted it to be a movement spreading all over Africa. He motivates other African writers to follow his path and he wanted to make all understand the influence and significance of vernacular.

In conclusion, Dante and Ngugi share the belief in the value of vernacular as a tool for resistance and preservation. Both address strong arguments to influence people in realizing the true values of the vernacular. However, situated in two different parts of the world, the impact of these arguments on vernacular is still unmatched in the contemporary world.

References

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