

NGŪGĨ WA THIONG'O (1938-2025): A PILLAR OF RESISTANCE

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On Wednesday 28 May 2025, news that the Kenyan writer and academic Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o had passed at the age of 87 was announced by his daughter through Facebook (Wako 2025). Following the sad news, tributes featured the great author's life on all major international news platforms (Aljazeera 2025; Chibelushi 2025; Lea and Cain 2025; Kimani 2025). The world had lost one of its literary giants and Africa one of its bravest and most productive decolonial scholars. Ngũgĩ will always be revered as one of Africa's most prolific writers whose life was committed to fighting social injustice through his works. His staunch resistance to multiple colonial and postcolonial injustices on the African continent inspired generations of scholars.

Ngũgĩ's Life as a Writer

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o was born in 1938, in colonial Kenya. He went to Kamandura, Manguu, and Kinyogori primary schools, all in Kenya. After graduating from the Alliance High School in Kenya, he studied at Makerere University in Uganda, and then at the University of Leeds in Britain. Ngũgĩ wrote his first two novels, *Weep Not, Child* (1964) and *The River Between* (1965) when he was an undergraduate at Makerere University (Kimani 2025). Before these novels, Ngũgĩ's major work was a play, *The Black Hermit* (1962), which was performed in Uganda in celebration of the country's independence. He continued publishing in the 1960s, with the novel, *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), and his first set of literary essays, *Homecoming* (1969) (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o Foundation 2025). During this time, he worked as an English Literature lecturer at the University of Nairobi, where he stayed from 1967 until 1977. He also served as a Fellow in Creative Writing at Makerere University from 1969 to 1970.

During the 1970s, Ngũgĩ served at Northwestern University, USA, as a Visiting Associate Professor of English and African Studies, from 1970 to 1971. He published the plays *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (with Micere Mugo) (1976),

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and *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (with Ngũgĩ wa Mirii) (1977), along with the novel, *Petals of Blood* (1977). After being detained at Kamiti Maximum Security Prison in Nairobi, for a year without charge for the play *Ngaahika Ndeenda* [translated as *I Will Marry When I Want*], Ngũgĩ opted to write in his native language, Gĩkũyũ. Apart from the need to better connect with ordinary Kenyans, this imprisonment for writing in his native tongue motivated Ngũgĩ to reject writing in English (Trivedi 2003). Thus, in the 1980s, he published the novels, *Caĩtaani Mũtharabaini* [translated as *Devil on the Cross*] (1980), and *Matigari Ma Njirũũngi* [translated as *Remains of Bullets*] (1986). He also published the literary essays, *Writers in Politics* (1982), and *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), along with his first memoir, *Detained: A Writers Prison Diary* (1982). From 1982 until 1998, Ngũgĩ worked at the Committee for the Release of Political Prisoners in Kenya, a London-based organisation fighting for human rights. He also served at Bayreuth University in 1984, as a Visiting Professor, and as a Writer in Residence at the Borough of Islington, in London, during 1985. From 1989 to 1992, Ngũgĩ became Visiting Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Yale University, while holding the position of Visiting Distinguished Professor of English and African Literature at the Five College Consortium in Amherst, USA, in 1991.

The 1990s also saw Ngũgĩ work at New York University as Professor of Comparative Literature and Performance Studies as well as Erich Maria Remarque Professor of Languages, from 1992 until 2002. Subsequently, he moved to the University of California Irvine, where he served as Distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature. During the 1990s, Ngũgĩ's most notable publications were the literary essays, *Moving the Centre: Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* (1993), and *Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams* (1998).

In the early-2000s, Ngũgĩ returned with the novel, *Murogi wa Kagogo* [translated as *Wizard of the Crow*] (2006), and several collections of literary essays, including *Globalectics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing* (2014), along with four memoirs, including *Wrestling with the Devil: A Prison Memoir* (2018). Among his last publications were the epic, *Kenda Mũiyũru: Rũgano rwa Gĩkũyũ na Mũmbi* (2018) [translated as *The Perfect Nine: The Epic of Gĩkũyũ and Mũmbi*] (2020), as well as essays on translation in *The Language of Languages* (2023).

Ngũgĩ was prolific indeed. And the world recognised his hard work through countless awards and honorary degrees. To name but a few, Ngũgĩ won the Nonino International Prize for Literature (2001); the 6th Pak Kyong-ni Literature Award (October 2016); the Los Angeles Review of Books

Lifetime Achievement Award (2017); and the Erich Maria Remarque Peace Prize (2019). Ngũgĩ was also named Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters, by Albright College (1994); Honorary Doctor of Literature, University of Auckland (2005); Honorary Doctor of Letters, Yale University (2017); and Honorary Doctor of Letters, Edinburgh University (2019) (University of California, Irvine 2023).

Ngũgĩ's Life as a Pillar of Resistance

Apart from the countless literary gifts Ngũgĩ left behind, his spirit of resistance will never be forgotten. When he lectured at Nairobi in the 1970s, he successfully fought to rename the English Department to a Literature Department that prioritised African and third world literature (Kimani 2025; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o Foundation 2025). Ngũgĩ also decided to expunge his birth name, James, as a means of resisting his own colonial inheritance. As mentioned above, he would be arrested for a year, without charge, for staging a play that was critical of the postcolonial Kenyan society. Not to be deterred, he would write the scathing novel, *Caitani Mutharabaini* [translated as *Devil on the Cross*], during his detention on toilet paper. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, during this period Ngũgĩ relinquished writing in English in favour of his native tongue, Gĩkũyũ.

After his release, Ngũgĩ and his family were continuously harassed by the Kenyan government, and upon hearing of his imminent arrest in June 1982, he relinquished living in Kenya and chose to live in exile (Hawley 1998). Nevertheless, he was still rebuked by Kenya's political leadership, his 1986 novel *Matigari Ma Njiriuungi* [translated as *Remains of Bullets*] was taken off bookstores, and universities were not allowed to refer to it until 1996 (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o Foundation 2025). Yet, Ngũgĩ continued to resist. While in exile, he gave distinguished lectures on decolonisation around the world, along with countless interviews regarding his choice to write in Gĩkũyũ (Trivedi 2003; Pozo 2004). He would crown his exile with the publication of his novel, *Murogi wa Kagogo*, translated as *Wizard of the Crow* (2006). Upon their return to Kenya, Ngũgĩ and his family had a near death experience when intruders broke into their home. They were threatened with death, if they would not remain silent. Unperturbed, Ngũgĩ continued speaking and writing about the incident. Of course, he had resisted death on several occasions, including surviving health issues like prostate cancer in 1995 and heart surgery in 2019 (Chibelushi 2025).

In his books, Ngũgĩ relentlessly exposed how colonialism, and the struggles for independence fought by ordinary people, often resulted in the destruction of friendships, families, cultures, and even villages. He did not stop there but continued to explore the confusions, evils, misfortunes, and contradictions created by independence and the subsequent capitalist development of Africa. He alerted to the exploitation of ordinary Africans by the elites, and exposed the multiple collaborations of local private ventures with former colonisers. Ngũgĩ even ridiculed the partnerships of the African elite with institutions like the World Bank and IMF, and criticised the wasted expenditure on development projects that had not helped ordinary people. Yet, he still gave a sense of hope to the ordinary person that it is possible to resist such postcolonial structures.

After resisting different forms of oppression, Ngũgĩ shared his way of resisting with the rest of the world. He spent the last decades of his long and remarkably productive life translating pieces written in one marginalised language, into other marginalised languages, always emphasising that being marginalised did not mean that the language was marginal (Pozo 2004). Ngũgĩ's life will never be forgotten, for he was a pillar of resistance to the very end.

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