GLOBAL SOUTH STUDIES

Globalectics (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o)

By Arnav Adhikari | April 2, 2024

To read “globalectically,” as the Kenyan writer, scholar, and activist Ngugi wa Thiong’o has urged, is to engage a text “with the eyes of the world; it is to see the world with the eyes of the text” (Ngugi 2012, 60). Ngugi’s theory of globalectics, a portmanteau that combines “global” with “dialectics,” proposes an expansive vision for literary studies that is rooted in the interplay between the world and text, paying particular attention to material history, linguistic specificity, and comparative analysis. Though the term itself appears in more recent critical writings following the publication of *Globalectics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing* (2012), it gathers Ngugi’s long historical engagements with the aesthetics of decolonization. As a significant figure for postcolonial African literature, and the field of postcolonial criticism more broadly, Ngugi’s concept of globalectics — much like his novels — functions at a number of levels. It names not only an aesthetic idea but also a mode of reading, an aspirational pedagogy, and a contested theoretical terrain. Globalectics thus extends Ngugi’s sustained critique of empire and its neocolonial transformations in the wake of national liberation, to the problem of literary representation under globalized capitalism. This article explores some of these dimensions of globalectics, paying particular attention to its claims, stakes, and potential limitations as a literary concept. In doing so, it seeks to understand how a globalectical reading of the world might offer new orientations for the study of literatures of the Global South.

Dialectics, History, and Interconnection

The challenge of approaching Ngugi’s intellectual and artistic practice over six decades stems largely from the range of his critical engagement across a vast oeuvre of novels, plays, and criticism. As the literary scholar Simon Gikandi has argued, a central problem for Ngugi’s readers reflects one that the writer has been grappling with throughout his career — that is, how to reconcile the problem of text and context, the conflict between historical necessity and aesthetic autonomy more specifically (2000, 12-13). Ngugi’s early formal experiments in the 1960s and 70s emerged in dialogue and often in direct response to the challenge of representing Kenya’s fraught historical and social contradictions. Like with many anticolonial struggles for independence in this period, these contradictions were made increasingly evident through the passage of the Kenyan freedom movement, referred to as “Mau Mau.”[1] With revolutionary aspirations beset by internal conflict, overlapping claims to power, and the movement’s eventual manifestation in the postcolonial nation-state, modern Kenya appeared to adapt the idioms of colonial rule rather than eradicate it entirely. “The wind of change,” as Ngugi remarks, “had turned into a hurricane” (2012, 10). It is precisely such transformations, taking shape against ongoing contexts of class struggle, the loss of traditional communities, rapid urbanization, and global impositions of debt, which Ngugi makes the subject of his writing.

These are admittedly broad strokes to provide the general background against which Ngugi emerges as a critical voice in modern Kenya, and consequently in extended exile in the West. However, as the lectures in *Globalectics* show, the closely linked concerns of aesthetic form, politics, and history are as fundamental to the challenges of cultural study in the twenty-first century as they were in the immediate aftermath of decolonization. As recent literary scholarship debates the usefulness of fields like "world literature" against the reified categories of area studies or national literatures, Ngugi offers globalectics as an exercise in the reorganization of the space of knowledge creation. In other words, he urges literary scholars to look beyond the Cold War polarities of center and periphery, nation and region — residues of an era of proxy politics — and turn instead to the interconnectedness of texts, languages, and cultural histories.

This call to think relationally reflects the primary methodological move of globalectics, signaled within the word itself. Throughout the book, G. W. F. Hegel's famous dialectic of master and bondsman reappears in various forms of the colonial encounter, gesturing at the possibilities of its re-appropriation for anticolonial thought. As thinkers like Karl Marx, Frantz Fanon, C. L. R. James, and Aimé Césaire — to name just a few pillars for Ngugi's work — have shown, the master-bondsman dialectic does more than simply outline a philosophical basis of violence and domination. When read from the vantage point of the enslaved, from the basis of material history rather than abstract idealism (a larger dissatisfaction with "unmoored" theory that recurs in *Globalectics*), the relationship between the master and bondsman reveals the dependence of the former on the latter, indicating the possibility of the latter's political liberation through this moment of recognition. Without delving into the many interpretations of Hegel's parable, in a simplified example under contemporary capitalism, Ngugi connects this reorganization of perspective to the fact that "labor can do without capital; but capital can never do without labor" (2012, 30). It is this same project of reorganization that drives him to ask: how can literary education be structured? What might the dialectical reversal look like in the realm of cultural production or artistic representation? What is the relationship between literary knowledge and political freedom?[2]

Detailing the colonial education system and its prescriptive literary canon on which he was raised, the dialectical method brings an expansive mode of reading to reified or canonical Western texts. In a familiar example, Ngugi rehearses Prospero and Caliban's relationship in William Shakespeare's 17th-century play *The Tempest* (1623) as paradigmatic of the way colonial occupation, through the control and privileging of certain modes of knowledge, purposefully obscures other forms of knowing. To read globalectically is thus to look everywhere for the closely linked operations of power and knowledge, for potential connections across geographies, temporalities, and situated histories that might exceed these operations. In its rigorous search for contradiction in the face of social totality, the dialectical tradition from Hegel and Marx to György Lukács and Mikhail Bakhtin offers a particularly suitable method. Yet Ngugi's intervention, following transnational Afro-Caribbean thinkers like Fanon, Césaire, George Lamming, Kamau Brathwaite, and W. E. B. Du Bois, is to bring this tradition into direct contact with the historical realities of race, capitalism, and colonialism.

Space, Time, and the Global

If globalectics is derived from "the shape of the globe" where "there is no one center," then

we must take seriously the spatio-temporal implications of Ngugi's concept (2012, 8). Throughout the lectures in *Globalectics* and the recurrence of Hegel's parable that threads them together, there is a continued emphasis on the distinctly spatial structure of knowledge: its ordering, reorganization, and migrations. As in earlier critical works like *Moving the Center* (1993) and *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams* (1998), spatialized language for Ngugi extends beyond its metaphorical deployment and serves as the grounds on which the politics of knowledge can be — quite literally — staged. Drawing on his work as a playwright and student of performance, Ngugi argues that the organization of theatrical space (as in the novel or cinema) always expresses a "power relationship, consciously or unconsciously intended" that mirrors political space (2012, 36). To say that the plantation, colony, or postcolonial state are spatial entities is therefore not to suggest that they are limited to territorial organization. To the contrary, it underlines for Ngugi how hierarchies of educational systems or formations of artistic and intellectual knowledge are inextricable from their material realities.

This relationship of power and space to knowledge runs throughout *Globalectics*, which draws heavily on the "Nairobi Document" that Ngugi co-authored with colleagues at the University of Nairobi in 1968. A now-central text for postcolonial literary studies, it outlines a set of proposals calling for the abolishment of the English department, and an inclusive department of African literatures and languages in its place. The call to shift away from the disproportionate attention to European culture and instead "orientate ourselves towards placing Kenya, East Africa, and then Africa in the centre [sic]" reveals how the unequal distribution of space comes to bear directly on the structure of cultural consciousness (1995, 439). The figure of the land — its custodians, inheritors, and rights — also recurs in Ngugi's own fiction and the greater archive of African literature that he analyzes.

The issue of space and time in debates around canon-formation has of course been a formative one for the field of postcolonial studies, which in its early iterations sought to define its scope in direct response to such inequities — we might think here of works like Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983), Ashcroft et al.'s *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), and Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994), which tackle these questions explicitly. However, what happens to this problem in the context of globalized capitalism, where the ideal of connection exists alongside the persistence of bounded ideas of nation and region? How contemporary forms of empire both erase spatial boundaries while reifying its underlying hierarchies of power is a key consideration that globalectics brings to the study of literature.

These concerns, it should be said, do not inaugurate a radically new line of inquiry. Indeed, globalectics invokes a lively critical conversation in literary studies that has been concerned with the very question of whose "world" constitutes the field of "world literature." Fundamental debates around world-literary approaches to translation, its flattening of historical difference, and the divestment of political or aesthetic specificity under a new universalist program continue to dominate the field.[3] We can similarly track contemporary disputes around the value of institutionalized categories like "Global Anglophone" literatures, and the potential relevance of the postcolonial as such. Though Ngugi is well-versed in the discourse around these categorical distinctions — assimilated in their very establishment — globalectics is not overly mired in theoretical minutiae. As his lectures demonstrate, these

are perennial issues that have changed form over the decades (one particularly memorable version is the controversy over the category of Third-World literature (opens in a new tab)). The concern in *Globalectics* is to thus turn away from the metatheoretical discourse and towards the way literary texts themselves rehearse what he calls (following the Polish theater practitioner Jerzy Grotowski) "poor theory."

Poor theory does not, however, invite a binary distinction between theory and object, which treats the former as instrumentalizing an essential meaning contained within the latter. A dynamic theorist in his own right, Ngugi's notion of poor theory, like its theatrical counterpart, highlights the possibilities of an interpretive method grounded in experimentation with the bare minimum. As with the social realities of poverty under contemporary globalization, where Trinidadian oil workers produce steel drum music from barrels, or the appearance of a corporate logo on the tattered cap of a Mexican laborer driven from the land by that very corporation, poor theory makes connections where they are unexpected, asserting that "the density of words is not the same thing as the complexity of thought" (2012, 3-4). A globalectical reading then resists theorizing the limits of the world in its study; it seeks instead to make theory accessible, as a tool for clarifying "interconnections of social phenomena and their mutual impact in the local and global space" through an act of reading that is simultaneously "a process of self-examination" (2012, 61).

As a novelist interested in the intersection of social reality and aesthetic form, as we have been discussing, it is the self-critical structure of the novel in particular that comes closest to the utopian vision of Ngugi's globalectics. Fiction, cast as myth, oral tradition, or written text, has always been the "original poor theory" in its capacity to integrate social life within a larger symbolic imagination (2012, 15). But the novel, and particularly the realist novel's embedded history in the European imagination, offers a distinct critical mode when adapted in the postcolonial idiom. As in the work of Achebe, Lamming, or Gordimer, the exemplary postcolonial novel in Ngugi's view generates a multidimensional representation of the complex political and historical world that it inhabits. It is the novel's distinctive capacity to reinvent itself, to make space and time both the limits and medium of its expression, which thus make it uniquely situated as a globalectical form.[4]

We might witness this interplay between world and text on the level of form and content in Ngugi's novel *Petals of Blood* (1977), the last to be written in English before his well-known turn to Gikuyu languages as his primary mode of expression[5]. As with *A Grain of Wheat* before it, *Petals of Blood* performs the spatio-temporal politics we have been exploring, unfolding around a central act of protest that is detailed obliquely through multiple voices, perspectives, and chronologies. In a fitting scene for this discussion of globalectics as theorizing from the South, the idealistic Karega stands in front of a classroom in the village of Ilmorog, caught in the cross-hairs of neocolonial rule in newly independent Kenya:

> He was concerned that the children knew no world outside Ilmorog: they thought of Kenya as a city or a large village somewhere outside Ilmorog. How could he enlarge their consciousness so that they could see themselves, Ilmorog and Kenya as part of a larger whole, a larger territory containing the history of African people and their struggles? In his mind he scanned the whole landscape where African people once trod to leave marks and monuments that were the marvel of ages, that not even the fatal encounter of black sweat and white imperialism could rub from the memory and

> recorded deeds of men. Egypt, Ethiopia, Monomotapata, Zimbabwe, Timbuctoo, Haiti, Malindi, Ghana, Mali, Songhai: the names were sweet to the ear and the children listened with eager enthusiastic wonder that was the measure of their deep-seated unbelief. He made them sing: I live in Ilmorog Division which is in Chiri District; Chiri which is in the Republic of Kenya; Kenya which is part of East Africa; East Africa which is part of Africa; Africa which is the land of African peoples; Africa from where other African people were scattered to other corners of the world. They sang it, but it seemed too abstract. (1991, 109)

We might see in Karega's pedagogical exercise a prefigurative theory of scale that is more fully unearthed by globalectics. Insisting that the students' lived realities are situated in deeply interwoven histories of the land and its diasporas, Karega attempts to undo the partitioning logic of the plantation, colony, and nation-state. That this knowledge is conveyed through musical performance gestures at other ways of embodying such histories outside the hegemony of the text and its inherited written forms. Yet, as the denouement of the novel and Karega's own doubts over the abstraction of understanding indicate, the struggle — and even idealized attempt — to reclaim a triumphant past does not always serve the exigencies of the present. The problem of historical recuperation and its uneven effects constitute a central thread in *Petals* and in *Globalectics*, which closes with a consideration of how oral, performative, and written traditions have been complicated or aided in the task of democratic knowledge production in an era of digital technology and techno-capitalism.

Conclusion

If an exact concept of globalectics eludes us, it is partly by design. In Ngugi's book, the interchanging use of globalectics as theoretical method, way of reading, and historical description raises questions about its value for literary study against already existing frameworks of postcolonial, decolonial, or more recently, world literature. How the globalectical imagination differs precisely from these institutionalized fields remains unclear, as do the potential risks of re-inscribing universalist tendencies in its fixation on interconnected aesthetic forms. To underscore non-Western cultural texts as always performing these connections risks flattening them further — a long-running critique of postcolonial theory's early struggles with reconciling difference and universality. Furthermore, the gaps around the uneven effects of modern capitalist society for questions of gender remain outside the scope of analysis.

However, despite these lingering ambiguities, what is most helpful about globalectics is its refusal to fetishize the need for new categories of knowledge, calling instead for an attention to how existing resources might be creatively refashioned and complicated in the spirit of "poor theory." As the scholar of Africana literature Carole Boyce Davies notes, the constructive method of globalectics engages a "variety of cultural and theoretical positions" that brings multiple fields and discourses into conversation (2018, 149). This polyvocal approach, which allows for a comparative study of culture across language and region that are nonetheless linked by histories of racial capital or imperial conquest, is where its significance to the study of the Global South might prevail. As a self-reflexive field (opens in a new tab)that looks for interconnections beyond traditional circuits of politics or nationalist histories that privilege the dichotomies of center and periphery, globalectics — like Karega in *Petals* — challenges us to unlearn sedimented narratives, to register the appearance of

power under changing conditions, and to reject distinction for complexity.

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[1] Mau Mau names both the events of revolutionary struggle against the British empire during the emergency years (c. 1952 – 1960), as well as the Kenya Land and Freedom Army, the anticolonial force constituted primarily of the Gikuyu community, Kenya's largest ethnic group to which Ngugi belongs. The complicated impact of Gikuyu nationalism and its discourses on Ngugi's writing are explored in Gikandi 2000.

[2] What remains missing from such considerations of power is a fuller reckoning with the fraught place of gender in Ngugi's work, and in his legacy as an exemplary figure of revolutionary African letters more broadly. Indeed, the concept of globalectics opens up useful and counterintuitive ways to read the world, and yet it must be harnessed to ask what forms of power such a theory itself occludes. Recent conversations around Ngugi's alleged history of domestic abuse and neglect have made particularly apparent the critical task of reading the uneven effects of power across the Global South alongside the internalization of this disparity within narratives of resistance. As Elleke Boehmer reminds us: while Ngugi's representations of women within the fold of a postcolonial liberatory politics are distinct from the work of his (largely male) African counterparts, they nonetheless emphasize a conventional view that "women's emancipation takes a second place to the national struggle against neocolonialism" (2005, 44). Across a number of novels including *Petals of Blood*, which we will consider briefly, Boehmer diagnoses what is an often-overlooked aspect of gender obscured by the patriarchal view of a proper, revolutionary subjectivity. See Boehmer 2005; also see Spivak 1999, for a foundational feminist critique of the masculinist politics of postcoloniality. See Edoro 2024 for a sharply observed piece that takes into account these questions in light of the recent allegations by Mũkoma wa Ngugi about his father's domestic violence and neglect towards his late first wife, Nyambura. Edoro demonstrates the rifts these revelations have created within the African literary community in which Ngugi is so revered, and the consequent need to expand anticolonial discourses beyond the hagiography of powerful men. I offer this note and these sources as a means to complicate the claims of globalectics that will ensue in this article, as a concept that insists on "self-examination."

[3] Yogita Goyal's essay on the "transnational turn" and the contested position of the postcolonial amongst other emerging categories, provides a particularly helpful diagnosis. See Goyal 2017, and the bibliography for additional resources on critical scholarship on definitions of world literature.

[4] For a more specific engagement with the theory of the realist novel, and the links between globalectics and the spatio-temporal aspects of Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope or Foucault's concept of heterotopia, see Ngugi 2016.

[5] The choice to write in the dominant language of the working-class masses as opposed to in the language of elite, colonial inheritance, is explored in-depth in *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), an essential resource in a long-running debate (notably between Ngugi and Achebe) around the "appropriate" language of African literatures.

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How to Cite

Adhikari, Arnav. April 2, 2024. "Globalectics (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o)." *Global South Studies*. Accessed date.