**International Journal of Academic Research**
P-ISSN: 2348-7666: Impact Factor: 7.215
Homepage: https://www.ijar.org.in/
Volume-13, Issue-2(2), Apr-Jun-2026


# TRANSLATING THE MARGINS: LANGUAGE, RESISTANCE, AND IDENTITY FORMATION IN THE WORKS OF BAMA AND NGŨGĨ WA THIONG'O

**Srinvas P.**
Assistant Professor of English, College of Horticulture, UHS Campus, GKVK, Bengaluru.

**Abstract**
In this research, the process of translation and transcreation is seen as an act of agency and assertion. The focus is on a comparative analysis of Bama and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. The research is based on subaltern and postcolonial theoretical perspectives and argues that translating a work is not a simple process of changing words from one language to another but is a highly political act of asserting identity against dominant power structures. In the case of Bama, the English version of her work *Karukku*, which is written in Tamil, is a strategic move for her. The Dalit narratives are being taken out of regional contexts and are being made to confront the mechanisms of "silencing" of the caste system on a global platform. Here, the role of translation is seen as a tool for marginalized subjectivity to engage with world literature without losing its regional beat.
Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, on the other hand, uses an opposite and radical opposition tactic. The colonial hierarchies ingrained in the English language itself are effectively undermined in Devil on the Cross by his refusal to write in English and preference for Gikuyu before self-translation. This approach is based on his theoretical position in Decolonizing the Mind, which holds that emphasizing indigenous tongues is a prerequisite for intellectual liberation.
This study makes the case that translation serves as a place of conflict as well as a connection by combining the frameworks of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Walter Benjamin, and Lawrence Venuti.
**Keywords**: Translation, Self-Assertion, Postcolonial Identity, Dalit Literature, Decolonization, Cultural Resistance, Language Politics

## Introduction

Translation is now widely acknowledged as a contentious political and cultural arena, despite the fact that it was originally written off as a straightforward linguistic bridge. Translating a work in a postcolonial setting actively shapes and proclaims identity rather than merely reproducing content. It is a place where power is wielded, where muted voices struggle to gain traction and dominant tongues exercise influence. Translation is therefore more of a "battleground" where historical oppression and modern resistance clash than a neutral bridge.

Two unique and potent examples of this self-assertion may be found in the writings of Bama and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. Both authors approach language as the key site of identity negotiation, despite their disparate geographical locations—the colonial/postcolonial realities of Africa vs the Dalit experience in India. Translation can serve as a megaphone, as seen by Bama's Karukku, which was first composed in Tamil before being translated into English. Subaltern narratives are able to penetrate local "caste-based silencing" and become part of a global political discourse. Ngũgĩ, on the other hand, directly challenges linguistic imperialism with his drastic switch from English to Gikuyu. According to him, self-translation turns into a decolonial strategy that reclaims cultural space from the inside out.

The tension between these two paths—trying to fit into the dominant conversation or working to dismantle it—shows just how messy language can be when it tries to define who we are. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak gives us a necessary warning here: we have to be hyper-aware of the "politics of representation" whenever we handle voices that have been pushed to the margins. This ties directly into Lawrence Venuti's ethical challenge for any translator: do we "domesticate" a text to make it easy and comfortable for the reader, or do we let it keep its jagged, uncomfortable cultural differences? These theories are a stark reminder that translation is never an innocent act. It is always, in some way, entangled in power.

This paper argues that in postcolonial writing, translation and "transcreation" are more than just literary exercises—they are acts of reclamation. By looking at Bama and Ngũgĩ together, we can see two different but equally vital strategies. Bama uses translation to amplify a marginalized voice within a global framework, making it heard where it was once silent. Ngũgĩ, on the other hand, uses translation to redefine that framework entirely, forcing the language of the colonizer to bend to the will of the colonized. Ultimately, their work proves that translation is both a way to become visible and a powerful form of defiance. It isn't just a bridge between languages; it is the very heartbeat of how postcolonial identity is formed.

**Translation and the Architecture of Power**

Translation is never just a neutral exercise in linguistics; it is a tug-of-war between ideology, power, and how we choose to represent others. In postcolonial studies, we recognize that translation is a site where cultural hierarchies are either reinforced or torn down. The moment a story moves from a marginalized language into a dominant one, we have to ask: whose voice is actually being heard, and what political filter is it passing through?

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak anchors this debate in The Politics of Translation, where she treats the process as a rigorous, even grueling, ethical encounter with the "Other." For Spivak, the translator's real job is to protect the "shreds" of the original language—the specific cultural quirks that make it unique. What she resists, in particular, is the impulse to "homogenize" a text, to iron out its linguistic and cultural textures in the name of readability. Translation, then, is never a neutral transfer. It turns into a kind of gamble—caught between the need to make a narrative accessible and the equally pressing need to remain faithful, even if that fidelity produces moments of opacity or discomfort.

This kind of ideological pressure is central to Lawrence Venuti's well-known distinction between "domestication" and "foreignization." What Venuti draws attention to is how a translator's choices are never neutral—they can either obscure or foreground the cultural origins of a text. Domestication tends to smooth a work into the norms of the target culture, often at the cost of flattening its distinctiveness. Foreignization, by contrast, holds on to a certain degree of strangeness. It does not try to make the text entirely comfortable for the reader; instead, it allows moments of difficulty or unfamiliarity to remain. In the case of marginalized literatures, this insistence on linguistic and cultural difference can itself be read as a form of resistance rather than a limitation.

Walter Benjamin adds a more metaphysical layer in The Task of the Translator. He suggests that translation grants a text what he calls an "afterlife," allowing it to move beyond its original linguistic and cultural boundaries and take on new meanings in different contexts. Although his formulation is more philosophical than explicitly political, it draws attention to the way translation can reshape a text over time. In this sense, the translated work does not simply

reproduce the original; it evolves with each new reading, acquiring layers of meaning that were not fully present before.

In the postcolonial context, these theoretical positions begin to converge around a shared insight: translation is deeply entangled with questions of power. It can function as an instrument of empire, shaping and sometimes imposing dominant ways of thinking, but it can also open up spaces for resistance. The works of Bama and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o bring this tension into sharp focus. Bama's writing, for instance, seems to move carefully between the need for wider visibility and a commitment to linguistic and cultural rootedness. Ngũgĩ, on the other hand, approaches language more confrontationally, with his shift away from English often read as a deliberate challenge to what he describes as the lingering "colonial ghosts" embedded within it.

Ultimately, translation cannot be seen as merely reflective of who we are. It functions as a dynamic site where identity is actively constructed, reworked, and at times contested. This study steps into that contested space, exploring how translation works as both a tool for empowerment and a sophisticated strategy of defiance.

**Bama – Translation as Visibility and Defiance**

Bama occupies a distinctive and, in many ways, transformative space in Indian literature, particularly in the way she draws on language and memory to articulate Dalit identity. Her autobiography, Karukku, has come to be seen as a foundational text, tracing the complex intersections of caste, gender, and faith. What stands out in her writing is the deliberate use of the raw, "unfiltered" textures of Dalit Tamil, rather than the more polished, Sanskritized forms often associated with canonical literary expression. This choice is not merely stylistic. It can be read as a conscious refusal of the linguistic hierarchies embedded within Tamil itself, and as a way of asserting a voice that resists assimilation into dominant norms.

Moving Karukku into English marks an important moment in extending this sense of defiance beyond its original context. While the Tamil text carries the immediacy and texture of lived experience, the English translation opens up the narrative to a much wider readership. In doing so, it illustrates how translation can function as a kind of "technology of visibility," bringing stories that have long remained marginalized into broader academic and literary conversations. What was once confined to a specific linguistic and cultural space begins to circulate more widely, challenging older structures of exclusion in the process.

At the same time, this movement into English is far from straightforward. It reflects precisely the kind of "politics of representation" that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak draws attention to. Efforts to make a text more accessible can sometimes come at the cost of its cultural specificity. In Bama's case, the difficulty lies in retaining Dalit idioms, oral rhythms, and culturally embedded expressions that do not always translate easily into English. The translated text thus becomes a space of ongoing negotiation, shaped by the need to communicate across contexts while remaining attentive to what might be lost or altered in the process.

There is also a sense in which Bama's narrative approaches what might be called "transcreation." Through its reliance on oral storytelling modes, episodic movement, and a voice that often gestures toward a collective experience.

**Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o – Translation as Decolonization**

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o offers a model of translation that is as provocative as it is powerful. While many writers turn to translation as a way of entering dominant linguistic spaces, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o takes a markedly different path. His decision to move away from English and return

to his mother tongue, Gikuyu, marks a significant moment in postcolonial literary history. In doing so, he reframes language itself as a site of struggle—one closely tied to questions of cultural recovery and self-definition.

In Decolonising the Mind, his position is made explicit: language is central to the formation of identity. Ngũgĩ argues that colonial domination operated not only through political and economic control but also through linguistic displacement, which distanced people from their own cultural frameworks. This shift is also evident in his novel Devil on the Cross, which was originally written in Gikuyu and only later translated into English by the author himself. The trajectory of the text underscores his broader commitment to re-centering African languages within literary production, rather than treating them as secondary to global ones. This distinction is vital. Unlike conventional translation, where an external mediator might reshape or soften the tone, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's practice of self-translation allows him a greater degree of control over how meaning travels across languages. In this sense, self-translation can be understood as a strategic practice—one that enables wider circulation while still safeguarding the integrity of the original voice.

Viewed through the framework proposed by Lawrence Venuti, Ngũgĩ's approach aligns closely with what is described as "foreignization." Instead of smoothing out linguistic and cultural differences, his translations often preserve elements of Gikuyu syntax, idiom, and worldview. This choice subtly unsettles the assumption that English functions as a neutral or universal medium. Rather than blending seamlessly into dominant literary norms, the text retains markers of its origin, encouraging readers to engage with its difference rather than bypass it.

Ngũgĩ's engagement with oral tradition further deepens this project. Gikuyu, shaped by a strong oral culture, carries rhythms and narrative patterns that are not always easily accommodated within conventional written forms. His work reflects this through shifts in voice, performative elements, and a sense of collective narration. In comparison, while Bama uses translation to extend the reach of a marginalized voice within English-language spaces, Ngũgĩ reconfigures that dynamic by prioritizing his primary audience within the Gikuyu-speaking community. English, in this framework, becomes secondary—useful, but not central. This reversal signals a deliberate repositioning of authority, where the terms of expression are no longer dictated by colonial linguistic hierarchies.

Ultimately, Ngũgĩ's work invites us to reconsider translation not simply as a movement toward global accessibility, but as a practice that can also challenge the very structures it operates within. By grounding his writing in an indigenous linguistic framework and approaching translation on his own terms, he demonstrates how the act of translating can become part of a broader effort to rethink questions of language, identity, and cultural autonomy.

**Visibility vs. Resistance – A Comparative View**

When the works of Bama and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o are considered alongside one another, two distinct yet interconnected approaches to translation begin to emerge. A range of strategies through which language can be used to negotiate power, visibility, and cultural identity.

One of the most noticeable differences lies in the direction their translations take. Bama's Karukku, originally written in Tamil, reaches a wider, global readership through its movement into English. This shift—from a regional language associated with marginalization to a globally dominant one—reshapes how the Dalit experience is positioned within broader

literary and academic contexts. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o does not position himself as seeking entry into an already established literary space; rather, he reorients that space by placing an indigenous worldview at its center. In this sense, translation does not simply function as a means of access to power, but as a way of rethinking how power itself is structured and circulated.

This distinction becomes clearer when viewed through the lens of translation theory. Bama's translated work operates within a space of ongoing negotiation, where readability for a wider audience must be balanced against the need to retain the specific textures of Dalit Tamil. Ngũgĩ's approach, by contrast, aligns more strongly with what Lawrence Venuti describes as "foreignization." The question of audience further highlights this divergence.

Despite these differing approaches, both Bama and Ngũgĩ converge on a crucial point: the reclamation of identity. Bama works to articulate Dalit experience within both Tamil and English literary spaces, while Ngũgĩ seeks to re-center African identity by challenging the dominance of colonial linguistic frameworks. In both cases, translation emerges not as a passive reflection of identity, but as an active site in which it is shaped and redefined.

Ultimately, comparing Bama and Ngũgĩ shows that resistance exists on a broad spectrum. For Bama, translation is a way to infiltrate and challenge the center from the inside; for Ngũgĩ, it is a way to ignore the center altogether and build a new world from an indigenous core. Together, they prove that translation is a dynamic, contested, and deeply personal process through which marginalized identities negotiate their power, their visibility, and their right to exist.

**Conclusion – The Heartbeat of Self-Definition**

As this study has shown, translation and "transcreation" are much more than just swapping words between languages; they are profound acts of cultural negotiation and a high-stakes way of saying, "I am here." In postcolonial landscapes—where the very history of a people is often etched into a language that was once forced upon them—the act of translating becomes a battlefield. It is within this space that marginalized identities are not only represented but actively articulated and reconfigured. Through the works of Bama and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, it becomes evident that there is no single approach to negotiating the relationship between language, power, and identity; rather, multiple strategies emerge, each shaped by specific historical and cultural conditions.

Ultimately, this discussion underscores the significance of translation and transcreation in postcolonial contexts. They do more than facilitate the movement of texts across languages; they participate in reshaping the terms through which those texts are read and understood. In this sense, translation becomes central to the ongoing work of preserving cultural memory, negotiating identity, and reasserting voices that have historically been pushed to the margins.

**Works Cited**

1. Bama. *Karukku*. Translated by Lakshmi Holmström, Oxford UP, 2012.
2. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. James Currey, 1986.
3. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. *Devil on the Cross*. Translated by the author, Heinemann, 1982.
4. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "The Politics of Translation." *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, Routledge, 1993, pp. 179–200.
5. Venuti, Lawrence. *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. Routledge, 1995.
6. Benjamin, Walter. "The Task of the Translator." *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, Schocken Books, 1968, pp. 69–82.