

The Position of Foreign Language in African Literature

مكانة اللغة الأجنبية في الأدب الإفريقي

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ABSTRACT :

No critical issue has influenced so much the theory and practice of African literary studies than the issue of foreign language. Language choice is a moot and miscellaneous arena. Initially confined to the analysis of literature, culture and identity, the choice of English, French or Spanish languages has been proliferated extensively and speedily in the last two decades. The present paper sheds light on the unstable and wobbly position of the colonial language in African literature. This scrutiny explores the origins of the African debate on language choice and identifies its legitimacy. The nub of the study is the demonstration of the ongoing debate while it is hoped to argue that issue betrays a sense of aporia. The study heavily relies on the arguments of Kenya's gifted author Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Nigeria's prolific author Chinua Achebe. It also captures some evidences and reasonable arguments from the literary works of contemporary Francophone writers from Algeria to strengthen the different views.

Keywords: Postcolonialism; African literature; Language; Culture; Identity; Aporia;

ملخص: لم تؤثر أي قضية حرجة على نظرية وممارسات الدراسات الأدبية الأفريقية أكثر من قضية اللغة الأجنبية. اختيار اللغة عبارة عن ساحة نقاش و متنوع. اقتصر في البداية على تحليل الأدب والثقافة والهوية، وانتشر اختيار اللغة الإنجليزية أو الفرنسية أو الإسبانية على نطاق واسع وسريع في العقدين الأخيرين. تسلط الورقة الحالية الضوء على الوضع غير المستقر والمتذبذب للغة الاستعمارية في الأدب الإفريقي. يستكشف هذا التمحيص أصول الجدل الإفريقي حول اختيار اللغة ويحدد شرعيته. إن جوهر هذه الدراسة هو إظهار للجدل الدائر في حين أنه من المأمول أن يجادل بأن هذه القضية تخون إحساسا بالأنبوية. وتعتمد الدراسة بشكل كبير على حجج المؤلف الموهوب في كينيا، نغفي واثيرونغو، والمؤلفة النيجيرية غزير الإنتاج، شينوا أتشيبي. كما يلتقط بعض الأدلة والحجج المعقولة من الأعمال الأدبية للكتاب الفرنكوفونية المعاصرين من الجزائر لتعزير وجهات النظر المختلفة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ما بعد الاستعمار; الأدب الإفريقي; اللغة; الثقافة; الهوية; أبوريا;

I- Introduction:

Postcolonial theory is an interdisciplinary field of study fusing set of other postmodern theories found among the texts and sub-texts of literature, philosophy and political science. As an intellectual literary movement, post-colonialism emerged around the close of the 20th century. As a matter of fact, scholars relate its birth to the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978. The beginning of the school was characterized by its vigorous concentration on the cruelty of the colonizer and the pathetic state of the masses upon whom Europeans practiced their philosophy of violence.

In the last two decades, the schools' aspects are not only found in literature, politics and history, but also in approaches to ideology, culture and identity. Further, the peak of postcolonialism is the violent-like clash of identities, ideologies and cultures as inevitable aftermaths of the former colonial age. Indeed, culture, ideology and identity have always been dominant preoccupations of the postcolonial writers.

The question of language choice in postcolonial literature is controversial and has always caused significant ripples in the pool of literary criticism. Certainly, language and empire have always gone together. Colonial powers were interested in increasing their own political interests and exploiting the colonies' resources. Moreover, they forced the natives to give up their cultural heritage and

assimilate to the colonizer's culture. This cultural colonization was meant to manipulate the colonized minds. In British colonies, the colonized had to convert to the Christian religion and adopt English language, while studying William Shakespeare and other canonical texts from English literature was a must.

African literature, in the words of Si Abderahmane Arab, is the "literature, written in European languages, by natives Africans (of whatever race) whose cultural matrix is exclusively African" (1). Mainly dealing with African problems during the colonial and postcolonial ages, African literature has been interpreted as the true voice of Africa's wretched and the last hope to restore their dignity. Following Arab's definition, it becomes evident that African literature is mainly characterized by its vigorous concentration on African cultural, political and economical issues on the one hand, while its messages are usually transmitted through the use of Western languages on the second. In the last decades, however, African literature has become a fertile area of debate and criticism.

II- Issue and Methodology

One of the major debates in African literature and criticism is language choice. As a matter of fact, some African writers chose their indigenous languages, denying foreign languages to produce a literature of their own. Others, however, still write in European languages seeking universality. The present study examines the legitimacy of the colonizers' languages in African literature from a postcolonial angle. The aim is to reveal the different attitudes towards the colonizer's tongue in the writings of African thinkers. The study, however, argues that out of the different and contradictory attitudes, it is a must to perceive the blurred image of the issue. In other words, its position, as far as African literature is concerned, is puzzling and vehemently indistinct.

III- Early Origins of the Debate in Africa:

It is widely acknowledged that language is the human capacity for acquiring and using complex systems of communication. Researchers proved that languages—both code and content—is a complicated dance between internal and external interpretations of our identities. Further, language is still regarded as a means that connects people belonging to different regions and origins. George Bernard Shaw once stated that "England and America were one people separated by the same language" (qtd in. Singh and Khatri1). By the same count, one is able to argue that inspite of their differences, Commonwealth countries are united by the same language and similar colonial experiences. Taking into consideration the ex-British colonies, English language is an important link by which numerous African and Asian countries are brought on the same bridge. Similarly, French language is vital in the sense that it makes the ex-French colonies on the same level.

Postcolonial thinkers in general and African writers in particular have never agreed on the use of foreign languages in their literary works. As a matter of fact, the debate on language choice dates back to Obiajunwa Wali's article "The Dead End of African Literature" in 1963. Wali claims that "the whole uncritical acceptance of English and French as the inevitable medium of educated African writing, is misdirected, and has no chance of advancing African literature and culture" (qtd in. 282). In this respect, Wali has put forward the belief that until African writers turn to write in their indigenous languages, they would get rid of and avoid the dead end. Further, he is convinced that "African languages would face inevitable extinction, if they do not embody some kind of intelligent literature, and the only way to hasten this, is by continuing in our present illusion that we can produce African literature in English or French" (282). Wali's fatalistic claims established the ground of language choice's debates in African literature.

IV- Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Logic on the Rejection of Foreign Tongues in African Literature:

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, formerly known as James Ngugi, is a Kenyan essayist, dramatist and a novelist of an international repute. Born in Limuru Kamirithu, Kenya, on the 5th January, 1938, Ngugi is the fifth child of his father's four wives. He is considered the foremost writer among East African writers in English to emerge after Kenya's independence in 1963. The author of *Weep Not*,

Child (1964), *The River Between* (1965), *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), *Petals of Blood* (1977), *Devil on The Cross* (1980), *Matigari* (1987), and *Wizard of the Crow* (2006), is still regarded as Kenya's spokesman. On the masses, Ngugi wrote numerous essays, books and articles to demonstrate their plight and their position during the colonial experience and the postcolonial epoch.

Of all African writers, Ngugi wa Thiong'o is undoubtedly the most recognized as far as language choice is concerned. His position in African literature is well established for a number of reasons. Certainly, his works combine the issues that are overloaded with various examples which illustrate the state of agony and ennui that reached the African continent during and after colonialism. In her book *African Literature as a Political Philosophy*, MSC Okollo argues that part of his criticism is "the entrenchment of colonial rule and foreign culture and the beginnings of the anti-imperialist movement; revolt against imperialism and colonialism; and the post-independence period of disappointment" (36).

Following independence, Ngugi wa Thiong'o emerged as Kenya's commoners' spokesman. The plight of the masses is the centre of his fictional and non-fictional works. However, this plight is expressed through different mediums of communication. During his pre-detention career, Ngugi exclusively expressed his anger and disappointment using English language. The author of *Petals of Blood* (1977), which was a reason behind his imprisonment, took the decision of rejecting English language and thus he adopted the Gikuyu as a reaction to the unfair imprisonment. The temper is explained through the publication of *Caitani Mutharaba-ini*, which he translated as *Devil on the Cross* in 1980. Significantly, the question that readers of Ngugi are supposed to ask is; for which reasons James Ngugi took such a remarkable decision?

In his poem "Titi la Mama", the revolutionary Swahili novelist and poet Shaaban Roberts puts forward the famous line "Titi la Mama ni tamu ijapokuwa la mbwa". By this, Roberts means "a mother's beast is sweet, even if it's a dog's". This strong metaphorical expression is meant to capture the essence of linguistic nationalism. Accordingly, he was cognizant of the efficacy of African languages in "recover[ing] what the colonizing structure has sought to repress" (qtd in Gikandi 9). Drastically, the Nigerian critic Ernest Emenyonu argues that "the course of modern African literature as we know it today would have been altered for the good of Africans" (91). As a man of his time due to his ability to anticipate the acrimonious debate, Ngugi wa Thiong'o shares a national sentiment which is the ultimate result of the process of colonialism and the postcolonial decadence. In this thread, Ngugi perceives European languages as threats that Africans themselves must get rid of.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's position, as far as language is concerned, is unbendable. He vehemently rejects the privileging of European tongues in formal institutions and literary creation. Essentially, he shares with Wali the idea that European languages poison the literariness of Africa. By this, it is meant that the rejection of indigenous languages, whether in formal institution or literary domain, inevitably leads to their ends. Further, Ngugi associates language with imperialism and colonial aftermath. For him, "any language has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture" (*Decolonizing* 13). Ngugi's view is influenced by, as it reveals some aspects of Homi K. Bhabha's hybridity¹. Language as a means of communication and a sign of culture plays significant roles in the establishment of the third-space, or simply the "in-the between". Indeed, the use of foreign language is triggered by the colonial policies which were used to efface Africa's languages and erase its identity. Thus, "what can a nation that has not letters tell of its original?" (*Bhabha Nation and Narration* 231)

Language choice in Ngugi's criticism is a question of "to be or not to be". His fatalistic view is palpable in the sense that he urges the denial of foreign languages that were used as tools to divide and rule. In his book *Decolonizing the Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986), Ngugi asks the following questions:

[w]e as African writers have always complained about the neo-colonial economic and political relationship to Euro America. Right. But by our continuing to write in foreign

languages, paying homage to them, are not we on the cultural level continuing that neo-colonial slavish and cringing spirit? What is the difference between a politician who says Africa cannot do without imperialism and the writer who says Africa cannot do without European languages? (26)

Hence, Ngugi's intention is to argue that English language establishes the ground of neo-colonialism. Language and its more permanent sister, literature, attest to the existence of that which we call consciousness in ourselves and in others. Consciously, one must add to Ngugi's questions and think of African literature's originality. In other words, does language choice affect the origins and the originality of African literature?

With regards to the foreign languages' adoption, Mikhail Bakhtin once stated that the word "exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from this that one must take the word and make it one's own" (292). Seemingly positive, foreign languages, however, according to Ngugi dismiss the value of African literature. He once stated that Literature written by Africans in European languages "can only be termed Afro-European literature" (27). Ngugi probably derives this idea from Frantz Fanon who argues in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* that to speak a language stalwartly means "to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization" (8).

Africans were confronted with the language of the colonizer. Purposefully, language was a means of enslavement and a tool to devastate African traditions. Accordingly, Ngugi clarifies and exhibits the negative role of language stating that "[t]he bullet was the means of the physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation" (*Decolonizing the Mind* 9). It is therefore not accidental that at the same time as English and French languages were being used as tools to forge bourgeois unities in Africa, these foreign languages were also the tools to spread the empires². In this respect, Ngugi affirms that the use as well the teaching of English to Africans in general, and Kenyans in particular, must be seen as a process of "safeguarding European interests in Kenya" (*Writers in Politics* 61).

Strongly convinced that foreign language is a threat, Ngugi urges his fellows to ultimately reject and adopt native tongues. Indeed, he returned to the roots and chose Gikuyu as his official literary medium of communication. There must be two other reasons behind his rejection of English as stated in *Decolonizing the Mind*. First, Ngugi asserts that "African writers are bound by our calling to do for our languages what Spenser, Milton and Shakespeare did for English, what Pushkin and Tolstoy did for Russian" (29). By this, Ngugi opposes the claim that English is the medium of universality. For, it is through writing in indigenous languages that African writers would carry the fire and introduce African literature to the world. Second, Ngugi confronts the problem of Englishness in the following phrase: "I knew what I was writing about but whom I was writing for?" (72). It sounds reasonable that Ngugi's interest in the mother tongue is a matter of "who is my audience?" (*Writers* 60). In this respect, Amoko argues that his aim is to reach out "a broad popular Gikuyu audience" (92). In other words, the use of mother tongue is the way to make men and women not literate in English, perhaps not literate at all, Ngugi's readers.

V- The Authenticity of the Colonizer's Language in Chinua Achebe's Criticism:

Born in Ogidii, in Eastern Nigeria on the 15th November, 1930, Albert Chinualumogo Achebe was Nigeria's gift to the world of literature and politics. Known as Chinua Achebe, the author of *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964), *A Man of the People* (1966), and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), is worldwide novelist, poet and critic. He studied at the University College of Ibadan. He once became the director of External Broadcasting for the Nigerian Broadcasting Service. After that, he taught English literature at American and Nigerian universities. His literary career is filled with fame and success.

Unlike Ngugi wa Thiong'o who rejects the use of English in African literature, Chinua Achebe extremely welcomes its use. However, the use of English in his literary career does not mean he is

fond of it. He believes that English language proposed itself as a linguistic imperialism and that he is obliged to literary communicate through. In this respect, he writes: "But for me there is no other choice. I have been given the language and I intend to use it" (*Morning Yet on Creation Day* 62). Significantly, the same view is shared by the Algerian writer Mohammed Dib. On his part, Rachid Boujedra also feels his duty to write in French. In his book *Lettres Algérienne*, Boujedra echoes Achebe's claim and writes: "As an Algerian, I did not choose French. It chose me, or rather it was imposed on me throughout centuries of blood and tears and during a long and painful colonial history" (qtd. in Armitage 52).

Mourad Bourboune has always been strappingly convinced that foreign language's use has no impact on the writer's identity. In this respect he writes: "What should matter to a writer was not whose language he spoke, but rather the actual skill of manipulating language itself, any language, to express what he intended" (qtd. in Armitage 53). Similarly, Chinua Achebe rejects the idea that language affects its speaker's identity. Indeed, it is through English that he successfully introduced Igbo culture to the world. Further, Achebe vehemently shares with Mouloud Mammeri and Abdallah Mazouni the claim that foreign language is a means of liberation and communion with the rest of the world. Thus, language choice, in Achebe's criticism, is also a matter of "who is my audience". Indeed, how many people would have read *Things Fall Apart* (1958) or *No Longer at Ease* (1960) if they were written in Igbo?

Achebe was convinced that Africans must write about themselves and never let non-Africans distort the image of the natives. To achieve this goal, Achebe believes that "English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience" (qtd. in Killam 62). In his essay "The African Writer and English Language", Achebe tries to limit the span of African literature in the following questions:

Was it literature produced *in* Africa or *about* Africa? Could African literature be on any subject, or must it have an African theme? Should it embrace the whole continent or south of the Sahara, or just *black* Africa? And then the question of language. Should it be in indigenous African languages or should it include Arabic, English, French, Portuguese, Afrikaans, and so on?

Achebe knows that it is not an easy task to find reasonable answers for these questions. However, he takes the position of "leave it alone"; let African literature define itself in action, instead of restricting its scope by such precocious attempts. For Achebe and his followers, it is not a duty that African literature must be written in native tongues to fulfill its objectives and successfully convey its messages. Essentially, what matters is the writer's responsibility to reflect or refract the image of Africa, using whatever language at his/her disposal.

Chinua Achebe was not the only African author to welcome the Englishness of African literature. His fatalistic logic of the unassailable position of English was accepted by a number of African literature's leading pioneers. The South African leading critic Ezekiel Mphahlele was even more forthright in his total embrace of English language. For him, English and French "have become the common languages with which to present a nationalistic front against white oppressors" (*Writers* 56). He states that these languages "are still a unifying force" (56). His claim opposes Ngugi's belief in the indigenous tongue as the medium of nationalism. Mphahlele's claim has been echoed by Professor Ali Mazrui. In his book *Cultural Engineering and Nation Building in East Africa*, Mazrui tends to claim that "it was English language, English literature, and English culture in that order that created nationalism in East Africa" (*Writers* 56). On his part, Kateb Yacine states: "I am an Algerian, but I write in French because I have to make French people know about the tragedy of Algeria" (qtd. in Alaarj 76). This means that foreign language is not only a means of communication, but also "a means of investigation of the past, of knowledge conquest and of liberation" (Dejeux 11).

Taban lo Liyong's position is similar to Achebe's. Surprisingly, he declares in his book *The Last Word* how happy he was after his father's death. Taban's father opposed the use of English

language. Thus, by his death, Taban could finally study English without restraint. Ngugi wa Thiong'o believes that Achebe's or Taban's position is not very different from that of foreign critics like Gerald Moore. Most of African writers who appreciate the colonizer's language are convinced that English, for instance, imposes itself. In his book *The Chosen Tongue*, Gerald Moore commends the creative intelligence of Africans who chose English to address the audience. The book's title echoes the Biblical notion of the Chosen people. It becomes more apparent that English language, for Achebe and his followers, was probably seen as the God chosen tongue "in the same way as the Israelites saw themselves as the God chosen race on earth" (*Writers* 57).

VI- Conclusion:

As far as African literature is concerned, foreign language's position is definitely puzzling and indistinct. There are two tendencies regarding the issue of the legitimacy of the colonial language as an official medium of communication in African literature. On the one hand, the political Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o is against this legitimacy. On the other hand, however, the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe gives the colonial language its due and welcomes its legitimacy. Ngugi's rejection of English, as a matter of fact, is in a favor of the mother tongue. He is strongly convinced that language and culture inseparable. This means that language is a means to impose one's culture and keep a given identity.

No one denies that Ngugi's and Achebe's views about the position of foreign language in African literature are paradoxical and clearly defined by disturbing ambiguities. Obviously, Ngugi's rejection of English is stemmed from his conviction that foreign language is a sign of European dominance, and a medium of communication that would probably make Kenyans unable to receive his conveyed messages. Nevertheless, Ngugi still writes in English in spite of the already explained decision. Thus, how can we explain and justify his recent English publications of memoirs like *Dreams in the Time of War*? Isn't this a clear sign of contradiction? What is the difference between a politician who says that Africa cannot do without imperialism and Ngugi who uses the language of imperialism?

Achebe had always been inspired by Homi K. Bhabha and that is evident in his fictional works. Throughout his long literary career, the author of *Things Fall Apart* proved his dissatisfaction with the cultural ambiguities that characterize the neo-colonized Nigeria. In this respect, he deliberately tackled issues such as mimicry, ambiguity and hybridity. Yet, Achebe's image looks blurred in the sense that he criticizes the colonizer's culture and the hybrid culture of Nigeria on the one hand, while he extensively uses a language that represents the pillar of that culture on the second hand. Language and culture are seen as two faces of the same coin in the sense that they perpetuate the neo-colonial dominance, it is necessary to maintain that Achebe's position, just like Ngugi's, is definitely bamboozling. Giving it a Ngugian interpretation, one may ask what is the difference between a Nigerian politician who says that Nigeria cannot do without Great Britain and Achebe who uses the colonizer's language in spite of his criticism of Westernizing the Igbo society?

In a nutshell, the current debate on the use of English and other European languages in African literature has caused significant flows in African literary criticism. While the origins of the debate are found in Wali's 1963 article, the issue has been strengthened out of the views of contemporary African writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe, Mohammad Dib, and Rachid Boujedra. Although African literature better conveys its messages and preserves its well defined traditionalism through its indigenous languages, English language makes it universal. Additionally, it is the use of English which has been valuable at making heard the African agony and the natives' resistance against cultural imperialism and other forms of neo-colonial oppression. The two tendencies towards foreign languages in African literature are reasonably justified. However, it must be stated that the only way to end-up the debate is giving writers the right and freedom to choose the language that better conveys his thematic concerns. Language's choice is a solid step towards the establishment of the African identity. Nevertheless, it is not the only recognized

parameter that makes a book African. For, African texts require African writers, African messages, and at some extent an African setting. .

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¹ One of the most disputed terms in post-colonial theory. It refers to the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization. As used in horticulture, the term refers to the cross-breeding of two species by grafting or cross-pollination to form a third, 'hybrid' species. (Aschrof et al. 118)

² Elio Antonio de Nebrija reinforces this idea and gives it a Foucauldian interpretation by maintaining that "Language has always been the consort of empire and forever shall remain its mate. Together they came into being together they grow and flower" (qtd. in Hiwarkar 139)