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Abstract

Language as a problem in African literature has existed (recognised as such or not) from the outset when Africans started to write in the languages of their colonial rulers. The problem surfaced through the writers' own process of self-discovery, and there have been varying degrees of perception and awareness of the problem ranging from indifferent casual scrutiny to the realization that it is a problem which the serious African writer must face and must resolve to overcome.

Towards the Evolution of an African Language for African Literature

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The Nobel Prize has not changed the need felt for an African language for our literature. The problem still exists crying out for an urgent solution. Though it has not changed things, the Nobel Prize, as the symbol of European literary excellence and presumably of world acclaim, may create in some African writers the tendency to regard the self-evident language problem as non-existent or, at least, as one dreamed up by those who want it as cover for their deficiency in the use of the English language. Also, the uninhibited may come out to say that the so-called problem is a hindrance to their hopes of ever winning the Nobel Prize for Literature. Indeed, there is no glimmer of the Nobel Prize at the end of the tunnel; but for us who have dedicated our pens and minds to overcoming the problem of language, the search for a solution is a worthwhile task.

The debate, I think, actually began at the Makerere conference of African Writers in Kampala in 1962. It has continued ever since, and two schools of thought have emerged. One holds the view that there is no problem at all in the use of the English language as our medium of expression. Our Africanness will show anyhow, since a leopard never changes its spots. Those who belong to this school of thought I call the 'Neo-metropolitans'.

The second school of thought, to which I belong, feels that there is a need for something to be done to the English language in order to make it an adequate transmitter of the African message. This group of writers I call the 'Evolutionists/Experimenters'.

Quite recently, another school of thought has raised its strident voice to announce its bold stand against the other two. It advocates a total rejection of the English language as the medium of expression of African writers. This school of thought feels that authenticity and the artistic integrity of African creative writers can only be attained if they use their native African language as the medium of creative expression.

Meanwhile, let us go back a little in time, to examine how the English language has insinuated itself into the very core of the life of a very important and articulate segment of our society. To this segment of our society, the middle class, English is no longer an alien language; to them and many more, English has become a *de facto* African language. It seems to me that when speaking your native language becomes a conscious activity, it has lost its premier position to another which comes more easily and naturally to your lips. The urban middle-class dwellers and others less affluent, but who are also urban dwellers, have thus become speakers of some form or other of the English language in preference to their native languages. They only speak their native languages, some even haltingly, when it is absolutely necessary.

Such an outcome is inevitable when many of the children of the middle-class urban dwellers attend special expatriate schools. In these schools the girls are taught to curtsy and the boys to bow, from the waist up, with a flourish of the right hand holding a top hat, imitating the elegance of Elizabethan ladies and gentlemen! The most telling of all is the phenomenon in some middle-class families of mixed marriages in urban centres. The offspring of these families are now monolingual, not in their mother tongues, but in English. This may not be true of all such families, but the mustard seed of monolingual families has been sown in our society. And the number of such families will certainly grow by the simple but natural law of seed multiplication and dispersal or, like the leaven, it may over the years change the very complexion and tone of our society.

I am not given to hyperbolic statements but the situation as I see it is so ridiculous that I am driven to a state of mind which can only be appeased by such a flamboyant literary device to make a point, a statement, about some of the realities with which we are faced. Now here is a little story of alienation. It is a true story though much abbreviated by me.

A boy about eight years old went with his middle-class father, for the first time, to their home village. The boy became pressed for the toilet and told his father so. He was taken to a little hut at the back of the main house. That, he was told, was the toilet. He quickly went in and rushed out as quickly, shouting, 'I can't, I can't, I can't, that's no toilet.' It was a pit latrine!

Some of the factors which have contributed to this state of affairs are: the imported technologies and the life style which these promote, and our educational system, patterned after those of metropolitan Britain, with English as the medium of instruction. The very systems of government are adaptations of those of America and Britain – the Presidential and the Parliamentary – alternating between the two, or a combination of them, as the politicians attempt by trial and error to find one suitable to their countries' temperament. These systems of government are operated under the same laws, rules of conduct and ethics of the metropolitan ones. Even the laws of the land are replicas of those in metropolitan Britain. All agencies of government which regulate the lives of the people – the Judiciary, the Police and others – conduct their statutory functions in English and in the British tradition. These and the other examples above are all obvious facts, truths, which cannot be ignored when considering English as an African language.

Nonetheless, English has been of great benefit, whether radicals acknowledge it or not, in the countries where it is spoken as a second language. In such countries this European language is an insurance of their continued corporate existence. English is their official language and it is a *bona fide lingua franca* of these countries.

In a televised discussion in the United States of America, Chinua Achebe was asked a question pertaining to the use of European languages in African literature and his answer was as follows: 'The linguistic situation is quite complex in Africa. In Nigeria you couldn't talk about Nigeria one minute longer as the country is today if you were to remove the English language.'¹ That was in 1973, but I do not think the situation in this country has changed. If anything, English is getting itself more and more enmeshed in the fabric of our society.

Apart from the impact of European technologies which tend to change the life style of the people, there are many complex and sensitive reasons for this phenomenon. These countries are made up of several ethnic groups with their hundreds of languages and dialects, particularly in the larger ones such as Nigeria. No one ethnic group, especially the large ones, in any of the countries under consideration, would acquiesce in the use of any language other than their own as the *lingua franca* of their countries. The ethnic groups in reality are different countries, sometimes very disparate ones, brought together in groupings with imposed names and geographical identities. Thus the imposition of any one language as *lingua franca* would only work over the dead bodies of those whose languages have been relegated to the background. This was what Achebe referred to in his answer to a question during the televised discussion.

Witness Sri Lanka's fratricidal war between the Tamil-speaking minority and the Government. The insurrection was sparked off by the replacement of English by Sinhalese, the language spoken by the majority, as the lingua franca of Sri Lanka. The Tamils want their own autonomy, a government of their own, in order to retain and sustain their own identity just as their kith and kin, separated only by a few nautical miles of sea, in their teeming millions in India. The anglophone and francophone countries have been spared this tragedy yet, because they see the wisdom of not undertaking such a perilous enterprise, a course of action which has been indicated by the recent unfortunate example of Sri Lanka.

Having seen the increasing hold the English language has on our lives, let us now turn to the three debating groups - the Neo-Metropolitans, the Evolutionists/Experimenters, and the Rejectionists.

THE NEO-METROPOLITANS

Those who belong to this school of thought were very vocal and assertive in their opposition to the Evolutionists/Experimenters at the beginning of the debate. Their slogan was 'a leopard cannot change its spots'. That means that an African should not waste his time and energy worrying himself, at the risk of developing hypertension, about the Africanness of his writing as this will show whether he likes it or not. There is therefore no need to do anything to the metropolitan language the African uses to express his African ideas. We should therefore write in impeccable English, surpassing, if possible, even the best of native English writers. I know many young writers who write profusely and with vibrant youthful exuberance in this style, but who have not come out to espouse their course. This, I believe, is due to lack of opportunity, and not due to lack of enthusiasm.

THE REJECTIONISTS

This group advocates the total rejection of all metropolitan languages as the languages of African literature. They should be rejected in their entirety as the medium of African literary expression.

By rejecting these languages Ngugi wa Thiong'o believes he is dealing a final blow aimed at eradicating cultural imperialism from the continent of Africa and thus getting closer to the goal: cultural freedom. No African writer who values his African heritage would fault Ngugi wa Thiong'o on this. It would have been a privilege to be one of his flag

bearers if not for the little problem of continental application. African reality would not permit this sort of thing now and would therefore brusquely consign the idea to the realm of dreams and confine it there as long as the balance of literacy remains weighted heavily in favour of the metropolitan languages. This will remain so far some time yet to come.

Pre-dating Ngugi's move, there have been writers who have been writing in their own languages and dialects. Some contemporary writers, Kunene, Okot p'Bitek, and Ngugi himself, are bilingual while the famous Fagunwa, the Yoruba story teller, wrote in Yoruba and Ogunde, the veteran playwright, continued to write his plays in Yoruba until his death recently. I am sure there are also similar writers practising their craft without fanfare, in the francophone countries. But the problem with writing in African languages is that such works are only known and appreciated in the localities where the languages are spoken. They become localised in a few pockets of the continent. This obviously falls far short of the Pan-Africanist vision of a continental literature written in a continental language.

Ngugi has declared that from now on he would write only in his native Gikuyu or Swahili. His works would now appear in English as translations only. Hear Ken Goodwin on Mazisi Kunene's English translations of his own Zulu poems: 'Kunene's English versions often representing a rather truncated version of the original are nevertheless important poems in their own right...'² I have a feeling that Ngugi would not like his works to appear in English as 'truncated' versions of his excellent Gikuyu originals.

Suggestions have been made over and over again for a language for Africa and its literature. At a conference in Tanzania, Swahili was suggested as such a language. I do not think this suggestion went beyond the thundering shouts of applause, the hand clappings and foot stampings with which it was acclaimed. It died with the last sound of the applause. The sudden realisation of the immensity and complexity of the problems which would have to be overcome before its implementation killed it. But like an *ogbanje* the idea is born again and again tauntingly at conferences, but only to die again and again with a mocking smile playing on its lips.

THE EVOLUTIONISTS/EXPERIMENTERS

The Kampala conference of anglophone writers in 1962 marked the beginning of the articulation of the search for an authentic African literature and the suggestions of how this could be achieved. And if I were

writing the history of African literature in English I would say that this also marked the second phase, a follow-up, in our search for our cultural identity. The first phase which was characterised by the so-called informational and anthropological novels had established the fact that Africans have a culture and are proud of their heritage.

The second phase has carried the search further into the mode of application of the metropolitan language as our means of literary expression. For it is now an established fact that our African ideas, philosophy and culture, as experienced and expressed in our African languages, cannot be expressed effectively in English. The corollary to this of course has been the continuing quest, through experimentation, for a mode of employing the English language, which we have appropriated, to give full expression to our culture and our point of view, to our message, without our seeing ourselves, or others seeing us, as through a distorting mirror. This is the stand of the Evolutionists/Experimenters.

Writers of this third group therefore take a position between the two extremist ones we have already discussed briefly. They are of the opinion that while English remains, at least for the time being, their medium of expression, it must be used in such a way as to make their creative writing indisputably African in concept and execution. Members of this group may differ in their individual approaches, which is healthy, but they have one burning purpose: to evolve a way in which to make the English language express the totality of the message of African culture in their works. In the televised discussion already quoted, Professor Achebe who belongs to this group speaks more about what the group is doing: 'What we are trying to do in a way is an experiment... But if we keep the metropolitan, the English language, then it certainly has to be able to cope with our experience. In other words, we ought to be able to do something to it that it can carry our particular message.'³ That is exactly what we are doing, though our approaches may be a little different. Some writers of this group have, however, had critical acclaim while others have received both acclaim and critical uncertainty or have been led to despair.

Only a few discerning critics were aware of what was happening or what we of this group were trying to achieve by the way we used the English language in our individual approaches to the problem of authenticity and identity. We were looking for a form of language evolved from English, a literary language common to all anglophone countries in Africa.

It will not be African English like American English, Canadian English or Australian English. These are possible only because the nationals of these countries have the metropolitan culture as their reference

culture. An African cannot claim such a reference. His culture is different. His culture is rooted nowhere else but in Africa. If, therefore, an African wishes to use English as an effective medium of literary expression, he has to emulsify it with the patterns, modes and idioms of African speech until it becomes so attenuated that it bears little resemblance to the original.

There is a parallel to this would-be phenomenon in music. Our brothers and sisters introduced a form of African music to America which came to be known as jazz after it had been assimilated into the idiom of main-stream American music. Jazz has now assumed classical dimensions the world over. We the Africans, the originators, have to learn not only how to play it but also how to enjoy it. Now only historians of jazz would trace it back to Africa. There is another example, this time in the plastic arts. When Picasso could no longer get inspiration from Europe he turned to Africa. His eyes fell on the so-called 'primitive' art. He liked it, and it fired his imagination. He incorporated some of the African art forms into his own works. This gave him instant fame! Again, only historians of Picasso's art would note that his later works were informed by African so-called primitive forms of art. We should indeed evolve a language that could only be traced back as a derivative of the English language.

The triumvirate of scholars, Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike, in their book *The Decolonization of African Literature*, Vol. 1, endorses what the Evolutionists/Experimenters have been doing for decades:

A necessity for linguistic experimentation lies in the fact that Africans do not use English the way the English do, and in the fact that the rhetorical devices of each African language and community are peculiar to it and are a legacy of its cultural inheritance.

If a flavour of African life is therefore to be captured in novels written in English, the English language has to be flexed and bent to allow these idiomatic and rhetorical usages to be presented. Several African writers have experimented to this end. Some have been more successful than others.⁴

We who have put our pens to it, will continue undaunted to do the flexing and bending, and even brow-beating, of the English language until some common language emerges. We cannot now retreat into our countless languages as languages of African literature. That would be building a Chinese wall in the twentieth century to exclude what is already very much within.

It would be a futile effort. We let in the Trojan Horse hundreds of years ago. We have appropriated the English language. Let us assimilate

it into our African systems and patterns and evolve the new language we need for the effective expression of our African message.

NOTES

1. Karen L. Morell, ed., *In Person: Achebe, Awoonor, and Soyinka* (Institute for Comparative and Foreign Area Studies, University of Washington, Seattle, 1975), p. 27.
2. Ken Goodwin, *Understanding African Poetry* (London: Heinemann, 1982), p. 173.
3. Karen L. Morell, op. cit., p. 27.
4. Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechuckwu Madubuike, *The Decolonisation of African Literature*, Vol. 1 (Washington: Howard University Press, 1983), p. 262.