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Enslavement through Language Empowerment in African Literature

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“It is through the medium of language that we define and categorize areas of difference and similarity which in then allow us to comprehend the world around us.”

- Nelly Furman.

Abstract:

The most important L's of postcolonial writing: Land, Language and Labour, form a central part of African literature. Language, in particular has been in debate from the early sixties, in almost all of the colonized nations. Literature is simply inconceivable and unthinkable without language. At the academic level, European languages have taken an upper hand and marginalized the indigenous languages of the African continent. But with the need to define African literature and committed writing, many writers chose sides. The power structure of language at the academic level gave way to two opposing positions. On one side stands Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, an often contender for the Nobel, who proposes a return to the indigenous languages and on the other side is Chinua Achebe who believes that the English language no longer belongs to the British; instead he owns the language and takes liberty in changing it according to his choice. Both carry a different view on the language debate. This paper aims to present the two ideological divisions taken by the African writers and also gives a solution to this conflict.

Keywords: indigenous, language, power, marginalization, English.

Introduction

Literature coming out of Africa has always been about faithfulness to one's own roots. This theme of returning to one's own roots has been recurrent in almost all indigenous literatures. But has this dream been achieved in reality, is a question. To be more specific, often the idea of returning to one's own roots has been discussed in open when it comes to language and identity. Can the same dream be achieved when African literature is been

written in European languages? According to some prominent writers like Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, only literature written in African languages can be considered as 'African literature'. And writers like Chinua Achebe have made the European language as their own, often used as a weapon in postcolonial writing. This difference of opinion will further be discussed in this paper.

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, the well-known Kenyan novelist, dramatist, essayist and a literary critic, has been described by many as a 'novelist of the people' for his works show concern for the peasantry of his native country, who have been oppressed and exploited by colonialism, Christianity and in modern years businessmen and politicians. He strengthened his commitment to writing twice, once in 1967 when he renounced English and Christianity and the name James Ngugi and took back his indigenous name Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, and in 1977 when he stated his decision to write only in Gikuyu and not in English. He has been a writer of all ages. It was in 1986, when *Decolonising the Mind, the Politics of Language in African Literature* changed the geography of postcolonial literature in no time.

In postcolonial literature, language has often been in focus. Every language has two roles to play. One is it acts as an agent, the lingua franca. It enables us to communicate with each other for survival. The other role is it is a carrier of culture and history of a certain group or community of people. The harmony between languages is broken only when one tries to dominate the other. Language has been seen as carrier of memories as well. This real purpose of language has not been served rightly when colonizers started imposing their languages on the colonized natives to the extent of forbidding them to use their mother tongue. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o says that peace has been disrupted the moment when language is made into a war zone. Ashcroft et.al in *The Empire Writes Back* argues that it was the control over languages that became the main feature of imperial oppression. He further argues that the dominant European languages became the social norm as it got introduced into the imperial education system and marginalised all other African indigenous languages as 'impurities'. So here language became a medium through which the power structures came to be defined and ultimately truth, reality and order were dictated based on it. In response to this systematic oppression through languages by the colonial powers, few writers felt it right to go back to writing in indigenous languages and thereby rejecting truth, reality and order established by the European colonisers. African writers saw it as a threat, a way of denigrating the African culture and history carried by their native languages.

Thiong'o in *Decolonising the Mind*, mentions about a conference that took place in 1962 titled, 'A Conference of African Writers of English Expression'. The title automatically excluded those writers who wrote in African languages. The question comes to what is African literature. Thiong'o in his non-fiction book, *Moving the Centre* dedicates a chapter titled, "Imperialism of Language- English, a Language for the World?" Here he talks about how the European power came clamouring for gold to the African continent with Bible and sword in their hands. The gun made mining of this gold possible. But it was language which held captive the natives' cultures, values, and their minds. The two ways in which the European colonizers colonized the native minds are: first was to suppress the languages of the colonized nations. The culture and history these languages carried were thrown away and left

to perish. He draws an example from his school days; the children were made to sing the prayer: 'Lead kindly light amidst encircling gloom, lead thou me on'. The indigenous languages were part of that gloom. Their languages were suppressed so that they did not have their own mirror to look and observe themselves and their enemies. The second way of colonising the mind was by elevating the language of the colonizer. The European languages became the language of the elite, a norm in the education system. And they made the natives look down upon their own mother tongue. The French called this process 'assimilation' while the English called it 'education'. Thiong'o in *Decolonising the Mind*, discusses how this process of alienation from one's own language with the acquisition of a new one (indirect rule) actually worked in Africa.

Chinua Achebe, on the other hand, said in a speech titled, 'The African writer and the English language' as mentioned in *Decolonising the Mind*, "Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else's? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling. But for me there is no other choice. I have been given the language and I intend to use it." (7). For Thiong'o, writing in English became an exercise and not a natural, spontaneous process. According to the writer, if you know your mother tongue and add all other languages, that's empowerment. But if you know all other languages in the world and not your mother tongue, then that's enslavement. To Thiong'o question on Why should an African writer become so obsessed by taking from his mother-tongue to enrich other tongues, Achebe answers, ".....that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit new African surroundings."(8). Thiong'o expresses his views on this by saying, "how did we, as African writers come to be so feeble towards the claims of our languages on us and so aggressive in our claims on other languages, particularly the languages of our colonization?"(9).

In *Decolonising the Mind*, Thiong'o talks about Linguistic hegemony in Kenya, where English became more than a language; it was *the* language, and all the others had to bow before it in deference. The bullet was the means of physical subjugation while language was the means of spiritual subjugation. Thiong'o narrates an incident that happened to him in his imperial school where children who were caught speaking in their mother tongue were humiliated or given corporal punishments. "English became the measure of intelligence and ability of arts, the sciences, and all the other branches of learning. English became *the* main determinant of a child's progress up the ladder of formal education." (12).

For those who feel what is in a language to debate about, Thiong'o replies:

".....communication between human beings is also the basis and process of evolving culture. In doing similar kinds of things and actions over and over again under similar circumstances, similar even in mutability, certain patterns, moves, rhythms, habits, attitudes, experiences and knowledge emerges. Those experiences are handed over to the next generation and become the inherited basis for their further actions on nature and on themselves. There is a gradual accumulation of values which in time become almost self-evident truths,

governing their conception of what is right and wrong, good and bad, beautiful and ugly..... Over a time this becomes a way of life distinguishable from other ways of life. They develop a distinctive culture and history. Culture embodies those moral, ethical and aesthetic values, the set of spiritual eyeglasses, through which they come to view themselves and their place in the universe. Values are the basis of a people's identity, their sense of particularity as members of the human race. All this is carried by language.”(*Decolonising the Mind* 14-15)

Thiong'o strongly believes that language as culture is as an image-forming agent in the mind of a child. It thus mediates between one's own self and other selves, and with nature. Culture thus transmits those images of the world and reality through spoken and the written language, which is through a specific language. This whole process is like a cycle of events leading one into the other. To be brief, language carries culture and culture carries the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world, particularly through orature and literature. How a person perceives himself affects how he looks at his culture, at his politics and at the social production of wealth, his relationship to nature and to other beings. Language thus becomes inseparable from oneself, as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world.

Thiong'o unfolds the shrewd strategy of the colonialists in controlling the indigenous people's wealth through military conquest and subsequent political dictatorship. But the most important of all was the control of the 'mental universe' of the colonised. To control a people's culture, they had to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others. This happened in a two-step process: first they had to destroy and deliberately undervalue the people's culture, art, dance, religions, history, geography, education, orature and literature and then the conscious elevation of the coloniser's language. Though the language was imposed, the natives could not identify with it as it did not imitate or reflect the real life of their community. The newly imposed language could not completely break the native languages spoken. So the next move was written. An African child's formal education was all in foreign language. In his memoirs, Thiong'o explains how as a child the harmony with the school environment and the home environment had completely been destroyed. He read about Shakespeare at school. But the moment he stepped out of the gates, the homeland was different to him. The colonial child was forced to read and imagine in European languages. The clash between the real and reel was very much in conflict in the psyche of the African child.

Fortunately, the indigenous languages of Africa refused to die. The rural masses of people refused to surrender their souls to the English, French and Portuguese. It was not just the Third World where English tried its best to grow on the graveyard of other people's languages. Even in European countries, many indigenous languages had been swallowed up by the English language. For instance, the Canadian poet, Rita Joe's poem, "I Lost My Talk", explains it all.

“I lost my talk
The talk you took away
When I was a little girl
At Shubenacadie school.

You snatched it away
I speak like you
I think like you
I create like you
The scrambled ballad, about my word.

Two ways I talk
Both ways I say,
So gently I offer my hand and ask,
Let me find my talk
So I can teach you about me.”

It was not just Rita Joe who was waiting for a transition. But also Obi Wali, a Nigerian politician, orator and writer. He presented a paper titled, “The Dead End of African Literature”, in 1962 at Makerere University, Uganda, where Ngugi Wa Thiong'o was also present. This paper went on to be published in the Transition magazine. Thiong'o quotes,

“that the whole uncritical acceptance of English and French as the inevitable medium for educated African writing is misdirected, and has no chance of advancing African Literature and culture” and that until African writers accepted that any true African literature must be written in African languages, they would merely be pursuing a dead end’. (*Decolonising the Mind* 24)

Although some opposed Wali's essay, it was lauded by many African literary giants such as Ngugi Wa Thiong'o.

To add on to Thiong'o's polemic stance on the language battle, Rajiv Malhotra in his book, *The Battle for Sanskrit*, talks about how an ancient Indian language which is the source to Indian civilisation is systematically attacked politicized and ultimately declared dead. This he calls it a conspiracy of the outsiders as well as the insiders. Commenting on the death of a particular language, Thiong'o says that no language dies. “They do not become irrelevant to the ‘modern age’ due to some intrinsic fault in their composition. They are lost when the predominant class in society has no use for them”. (*Moving the Centre* 54) In the Indian scenario this was not the case. During the rule of the colonizers, Indian scriptures were stolen

and translated into many European languages. Sanskrit has mothered a majority of languages, including German. But till today it has not been acknowledged. Cultural wealth was found to be abundant in Sanskrit scriptures.

“Ancient Sanskrit is mined for its philosophical sophistication, spiritual guidance, and potential for expanding systematic knowledge in fields ranging from physics to mind science. The West has a stake in Sanskrit studies to extract the underlying cultural wealth accumulated by the civilization over many millennia.” (*The Battle for Sanskrit* 357)

Many European writers of yester years made use of the words and concepts of Sanskrit in their works. One major literary recipient of this knowledge was T.S. Eliot. A number of Sanskrit words have been included into the English dictionary, for example, the word *Karma*, and many more. The colonizers stole not just wealth but also knowledge which they found to be abundant in the colonies, to enrich their language and history. Today the American Orientalists have replaced the European Orientalists in controlling the knowledge production in the Eastern countries.

Rajiv Malhotra gives us a detailed study on how this system of stealing and controlling is worked out by the American Orientalists. The colonial enterprise were clearly branded as the ‘outsiders’ in India, but today the American Orientalists have skilfully camouflaged as ‘insiders’ in the minds of many Indians. The European Orientalists did not have Indians trained in their team of scholars. But today, many Indians have been working with the American Orientalists as scholars in denigrating the Indian culture. Previously, the Europeans had limited access to the original Sanskrit texts and did not receive any financial help from the Indian elites or from the Hindu learning centres. Today, the American academicians have greater access to Sanskrit texts, and have built a close alliance with some of the Indian billionaires and learning centres. This power game is not only happening in India but also everywhere else. It was Frantz Fanon who foresaw the neo-colonial dangers of the world decades ago which makes his works so relevant even today.

The imperialism of languages of what Thiong’o talks about is a very much twenty first century condition. It began in the early sixties and continues to be in debate till date. Thiong’o boldly questions,

“... we 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 we not 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?” (*Decolonising the Mind* 26)

Thiong'o chose to shift from writing in English for seventeen years to writing in Gikuyu language in 1977. It was then that people confronted him with the same question, Why do you now write in an African language? Why have you abandoned us? “It was almost

as if, in choosing to write in Gikuyu, I was doing something abnormal. But Gikuyu is my mother tongue! ... It has turned upside down: the abnormal is viewed as normal and the normal is viewed as abnormal.” (*Decolonising the Mind* 27) He says that his decision to write in Gikuyu is his effort towards the anti-imperialist struggles of Kenyan and African peoples who were often associated with negative qualities like backwardness and underdevelopment. By choosing a regional language, he is aware of the fact that he will be reducing his audience by half. By choosing a language one tends to choose his audience as well. In Thiong'o's case yes he writes for his people, the Kenyan peasants and then to the rest of the world.

As a solution to this, he says translation can do the wonders. One tends to forget that the literary works by Aristotle, Plato and Karl Marx are all read in translation even today. Even Bible has been read worldwide in translations. When someone writes in German or French, no question is raised. But writing in Gikuyu even Africans tend to ask Why. Writing in a regional language does not mean that the access to the work is been denied. The solution is either to learn the language of the work written or choose translation. Again a question arises: whether reading translation, are we missing something. Thiong'o agrees to this. A lot of connotations and proverbs do go missing in the process of translation since the syntax of each language varies.

Thiong'o gives a reality check to his fellow men by stating that Africa actually enriches Europe. But Africa is made to believe that it needs Europe to rescue it from poverty. Africa's natural and human resources continue to develop Europe and America to this day. But Africa is made to feel grateful for the aid from the same colonial West that still depends on the continent like a parasite. In *Moving the Centre*, Thiong'o is concerned about the African people who receive education only in English, French and Portuguese languages. The results of his people's research in the field of science, technology, and other achievements in creative arts are stored in these European languages. Thus “a large portion of vast knowledge is locked up in the linguistic prison of English, French and Portuguese.”(55) The elite in Africa, linguistically, are completely distanced from the people of Africa and tied to the West.

Thiong'o is of the opinion that any language like English, would be certainly good for the whole world to communicate and participate beyond boundaries. A common language within a country and a common language for the whole world would be ideal and best. But he is also stresses on the fact that that particular language should not be built on the graveyard of other languages. He advises the younger generation to not destroy other languages as English language did. Many languages can coexist in harmony. And this should be the ultimate aim. He also asks the younger generation to distance themselves from the false logic of development theory given to us by imperialism:

“the claim that the cleanliness of one person must depend on pouring dirt onto others: that the health of a few must depend in their passing their leprosy onto others: that the wealth of a few people or a few nations must be rooted in poverty of the masses of people and nations.”(*Moving the Centre* 57)

Languages in the world, he says are real products of human history and are our common heritage. The different languages should be encouraged to talk to one another through the medium of interpretation and translation. He compares the world of languages with a field of flowers of different colours.

“There is not flower which becomes more of a flower on account of its colour or its shape. So we should let all our languages sing of the unity of the people of the earth, of our common humanity, above all of the people’s love for peace, equality, independence and social justice.”(*Moving the Centre* 57)

Thiong’o proposes Kiswahili language to be made a world language. The reasons would be that Kiswahili has never grown in the graveyard of other languages, and it has created a space for itself in Africa and the world without exhibiting any national chauvinism. The power of Kiswahili has not depended on its economic, political or cultural agenda. And also it has not wet its hands in the blood of oppression or domination of other cultures, like English. Kiswahili is being spoken as a major language in many major parts of Africa as well as in many other parts of the world. He strongly believes that only an African-language literature can effectively help in producing a genuine African literary work: as a counter response to the negative Eurocentric images of Africans depicted by some Western writers. He is of the opinion that making Kiswahili the world language would be the beginning of a new era in world history. Ngugi Wa Thiong’o’s contribution to the language debate has been unprecedented and therefore his stance on the debate is very important.

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