

ACHEBE'S USE OF ENGLISH: A COUNTERARGUMENT TO COLONIZATION

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to justify Chinua Achebe's use of English-a hegemonic language. History is a witness to the brutal ways colonists have adopted to colonize the nations before and after independence. Chinua Achebe, the great African postcolonial writer, has had a significant role in the fight against colonization and helping the African people to regain and revitalize their original and African identity through English. It is undoubtedly to his double benefit that he had been blessed with parents of Christian identity, exposed to European culture and customs and his education in English so as to capture both European and African perspectives on colonial expansion, religion, race and culture. Thus with multi-cultural upbringing he had stubborn determination to instill his literature deliberately so as to engage his culture and his international audience which he brings through his writings of "Things Fall Apart".

Keywords: colonization, hegemony, postcolonial, African identity, African culture

The editorial manager of the magazine 'Okike' and the founding editor of the Heinemann series on African literature, Chinua have acquired a virtually unchallenged reputation as the literary colossus of the modern African literature. Achebe was born in the Igbo (earlier *Ibo*) town of Ogidi in eastern Nigeria on November 16, 1930, the fifth child of Isaiah Okafo Achebe and Janet N. Achebe. His father was an instructor in Christian catechism for the Church Missionary Society. He began learning English when he was eight. Though Achebe instinctively took sides with the white people he later realized the danger of not having his own stories. The great proverb – 'until lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter,' (Achebe, 2000:73) had insisted him to be a writer, to be that historian.

The rights of every human being can only be maintained, says Malinowski (British anthropologist), if we recognize that the world is present one and the interests of all communities – united and interdependent. Achebe in The African writer and the English language holds that the colonizers have provided a language to the colonized from varying linguistic background to talk to one another. 'Igbo', according to Achebe is not standardized in western Africa. There are sixty languages in his country but those cannot be officially assimilated dividing them into sixty states. He says:An African and a nationalist looking at the situation now, there is a real value

in keeping our countries together using a language that has been imposed upon us (Writing across Worlds 68)

Achebe chose to write *Things Fall Apart* in English. Ngugi wa thiong'o severely puts to question as to why they as African writers came to be so feeble towards the claim of their own languages on them and so aggressive in their claims on other language, particularly the language of their colonizers. Although eulogized and condemned by authors for using usurper's tongue including Ngugi wa thiong'o- Achebe said "that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be new English still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surrounding" (Achebe, 2000:434). He had no bitterness against the English and their literature. He thought writing in hegemonic language will bring renaissance and reinvigoration in African culture. He saw a new voice coming out of Africa. Bruce King comments in *Introduction to Nigerian Literature*: "Achebe was the first Nigerian writer to successfully transmute the conventions of a novel, a European art form, into African literature." He skillfully incorporates Igbo proverbs, folktales and religious tenets in his fiction. The crowning glory of Achebe's novels lies in his dexterous handling of European form of art with the oral tradition without losing the freshness and vigor of the latter.

Achebe's choice and decision of writing in English *Things Fall Apart* was important and political too in a way that he wanted his novel to be responsive of earlier colonial accounts of Africa. Unlike some later African authors who wanted to revitalize native language as a form of resistance to colonial culture, Achebe wanted to achieve cultural reinvigoration within and through English. Undoubtedly he captures the innocent rhythm and originality of Igbo language and also integrates its vocabulary into his narrative.

While writing in English, the language of the imperialist conquerors of Nigeria, Achebe's stated goal was to create a "new" African language. His fiction is an oasis in the desert of African literature. It is refreshing in its candor, sincerity, fairness and art. It is a subtle portraiture of Africans, and a fascinating study of problems arising out of contact of Africa with the English. It doesn't flatter the English nor aims at pleasing the Africans. Language, according to him, is a weapon powerful tool to use rather than fight and he lives by these words throughout his entire career. Achebe says the Britishers did not force the language onto his face. He chose it and eventually decided to write in English to infiltrate the rank of his enemy, destroying him from within. What matters is what you write is good, becomes a moral responsibility of the writer.

Africa has been the subject of the great struggle between two mutually opposed forces: an imperialist tradition maintained by imperialist bourgeoisie on the one hand, and a resistant tradition on the other. The choice of language and the use to which language is put has been at center and point of contention which started a hundred years ago when in 1884 the capitalist European powers sat in Berlin and divided the entire continent into complexities of culture, people, and language into different colonies. To avoid the call up of hideous fear of rejection through the very adjective African, Achebe found it better to snap all the links with the homeland, this liability and become in one giant leap the universal man by adopting English.

Nigeria's past traces its association with hundreds of disassociated ethnic groups of self-governed towns with pidgin, as the only language to communicate. The entrance of English into the African land during the British regime was startling, forcing Africans to expel English. But it made its way to their homeland unavoidably and thus people began to form creoles to communicate eventually adopting whole portions of Standard English morphology, phonology and syntax. With his choice to write in English with Igbo supplements, Achebe in fact reverses

the natural creolization process and counteracts the pervasive tide of English within his African homeland. He has adopted English grammar and syntax grammar as the basis for this creolization process and has been the victim of wrath of so many African authors too, who argue that Achebe's adoption is the outward sign of his African betrayal. But after reading his fiction we never feel he loses hold of his Igbo roots, rather he uses them for the potency of his language. When Umofia gathers together in 'Things Fall Apart' to hear from the gods, to determine further course of action, or sharing news, the town crier calls the people who sing Igbo song first in English and then in Igbo. The well-crafted metaphor "proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten" (Achebe, 2010:6), captures the attention of African and non-African readers. African languages are by no means inferior in story-telling but Achebe reinvigorates the imperialist language to tell the African story and history. He successfully reconstructs his form of narration capturing the essence of his African ancestry and also the figurative richness of Igbo language.

Achebe realized in the late 1950's that to produce a novel in Africa, by an African, in the English language would be risky. But despite this he writes *Things Fall Apart* with authorial intention, as a part of fiction that is representative of the entire African culture. When we read his *No Longer at Ease* and *Arrow of God* we feel that the Igbos fully realized that the Europeans would help them come out of state of backwardness through western education. They even sponsor English education of Obi Okonkwo at England in *No Longer at Ease*. In *Arrow of God* we find people accepting Christian religion voluntarily. Even the Protagonists in *Anthills of the Savannah*, are active members in the government structure having acquired western education. The best example can be quoted from *Arrow of God* which gives us an idea of his approach to use of English when the chief priest tells one of his sons why it is imperative to send him to church:

"I want one of my sons to join these people and be my eye there. If there is nothing in it you will come back. But if there is something there you will bring home my share. This world is like a mask, dancing .if you want to see it well you do not stand in one place. My spirit tells me that those who do not befriend the white man today will be saying had we known tomorrow" (Achebe, 1974:45-46).

Achebe may be charged with unpatriotism as many writers condemn his insistence on writing African literature in English. But it was though Achebe had envisaged present day Africa. According to him it is a losing battle of African purists who see the relevance of writing African literature in African language only for Africans only because English is a hegemonic force. His use of English was to broaden and open new vistas and horizons for African literature. Will not writing in English bring about renaissance in Africa literature? It will surely bind the Africans to the people of other nationalities with this multilingual diversity. Chinua never advises to forsake the traditional Igbo language –its richness and variedness –for the hegemonic language rather creates a "new" one. He feels writing in native language can close their works to the vast majority of the people forever, though however they may be written by the worthiest of the writer.

Achebe in "The African writer and the English Language", said:

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 (qtd. in Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind* 7)

With decolonization process in 1950's Achebe was no exception to face the problem of choosing language. His purpose was to communicate across Nigeria, and he uses the one central popular language, transforming it into a distinctly African style –a language which can be actively claimed as an effective weapon, as a “counterargument to colonization “, (Atlantic unbound). This international language must pay a price for being used by non –native speakers. Achebe claimed that Amado was a leading Brazilian novelist and that most Brazilian writers would remain unknown to the world if they chose to write in Portuguese .This quick tour across Brazilian literature led him to conclude that it would be to a great advantage writing in a world language. Had he written *Things Fall Apart* in Igbo, only Igbo would have the access not the Yorubas, the Hausas, the Ibibo and other Africans, the Kikuyus, the Luas etc. (ethnic tribes of Africa) Rabindra Nath Tagore rightly said, “a lamp can't light another lamp, unless it itself is also lit”. Africa is bound to sink into the abyss of nothingness and darkness if it is unable to lit this lamp of language.

Hegel has the most controversial philosophy of history, from which it would seem that rationality of west marks the highest expression of human development that world has seen. Later 20th century western philosophizing largely rejected racist view and imperialist overtones that ‘west is best’ and that all other views of the world are underdeveloped, uncultured, naïve and simple. What philosophy of history reveals is the history of human misrecognition of itself and of the knowledge of truth, and the forms in which the misrecognition is being represented. But, and what is our ‘philosophical’ stage of western development .It is that in which our own negativity is still also our own subjectivity. This is further more characterized by misrecognition and struggle and not the final solutions which are indeed the expressions of what happens when struggle of freedom of education are refused or are themselves reified.

Rather than trying to paint his novel in anti-African hues, Achebe keeps a wholly African perspective on *Things Fall Apart*, retaining a leitmotif of African tribalism and utilizing his own multilingual abilities through an extensive vocabulary of the Igbo language. Sydney opines “to Achebe, the novelist is a teacher, and educating African and foreigners about a heritage that has been demeaned and eroded through colonization is a viable tool of fulfilling an important social mission”.

Achebe ultimately faces the same choice as Okonkwo, and just as Okonkwo's physical decisions has repercussions, so do Achebe's. Achebe can embrace the world of postcolonialism, become a model for European culture and write for the future of African literature. In a bold move and in a discerning moment of cultural awareness, Achebe doesn't give up like Okonkwo. He creates literature as a vehicle to issue challenges on social reforms and to inspire his people towards unification. He chooses life of writing literature that recounts the African experience, both good and bad, the language of English. Indeed he heralded English language to African literature (Ravenscroft). Olaniyan heralds Achebe as an ‘indefatigable and visionary prophet, a literary sage who saw the coming doom of African life and literature and who sought to warn his readers of the encroaching darkness’.

“For an African, writing in English is not without its serious setbacks”, wrote Achebe. He has been eulogized as well as condemned by critics equally competent for his use of usurper's tongue, but what he felt, with the political freedom national literature was also important for regeneration of Africa. He has arrived as a genius on the scene who restores to the language its original vitality .He has dragged to light some of the hidden things to his generation who were grappling within intricacies and complexities .He has done much to make his age conscious of itself with the foreign language. He indeed strove hard to adapt to English language

so that it befits his African culture. Undoubtedly, Achebe radicalized African society by ‘Africanizing’ literature written in English, rendering it a recognizable identity and hitherto re-educating society through it. It was useless hanging on alien and discredited tenets of colonial literature which was only the means of distorting and disparaging native cultures. Achebe’s main concern was the cause of his society and his commitment to serve the society through his creativity. He has succinctly framed his mission for himself and other writers too holding them accountable for this noble cause. His novels exquisitely delineate for the first time Africa’s rich culture and forces the reader to think about biased images of African society, thus leaving profound impact upon its readers. We assign him as a teacher, a social critic, a reformer and a crusader when we read his articles, critical views, fictional and non –fictional works.

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