

The Language Of African Literature In English

Julia Udofia

Literature and language have always had a tempestuous relationship with regard to the African continent. It has been argued whether it is proper for African writers to use English as the medium of expression in their literary writings. Also doubted is whether the African can ever learn English well enough to be able to use it effectively in creative writings. This paper highlights the major issues involved and the various positions taken by individual writers and critics on the question of the proper language for African written literature. It also attempts a possible way forward.

Language is a means of communication. But it is also a vehicle of culture, a signifier of tribal or national identity and pride. Chinua Achebe (1975,54) puts it succinctly when he observes that language is a philosophy, history and ideology. John Reed and Clive Wake (1972) also note that it is difficult to use a language without using some of the literary traditions that have grown up with that language; a remark which perhaps, informed Adrian Roescoe's (1971,x) assertion that if an African writes in English, his work must be considered as belonging to English letters as a whole and can be scrutinized accordingly. Implicit in this statement is the argument that whatever is not written in an African language is not African literature and whatever is written in a European language is an appendage to European literature.

On the whole, the views of scholars on the question of the medium of communication in literary creations by African writers can be grouped into two: "the radical / revolutionary" view and the "liberal" view. The "radical / revolutionary" view argues against the continued use of foreign languages by African writers in their literary creations. They notice the linguistic and political problems inherent in this situation and call for African literatures to be written in African languages. In fact, as early as 1963 when only a few works of art were written by Africans, Obi Wali had argued that African literatures must be written in African languages or lose their artistic validity and autonomy. According to Wali:

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. In other words, until these writers and their Western midwives accept the fact that any true African literature must be written in African languages, they would be merely pursuing a dead end which can only lead to sterility uncreativity and frustration (1963, 20).

Lewis Nkosi (1981) also sees hopelessness in African writers expressing themselves in English. In Nkosi's view, given the complexity of his linguistic situation, "this kind of African writer has insurmountable obstacles placed in the way toward full expression and thought, and so could only falsify the African experience, or at best create something that falls short of his true ideal: his struggle with his materials, the attempt to wrestle from language the true meaning of the world he seeks to depict is always endless and incomplete" (19).

Other writers who also see something wrong with expressing African literature in foreign languages and clamour for indigenous languages to be given pre-eminence above colonial languages are Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Chinweizu *et al.* This group argues that writing African literatures in African languages would serve as a means of curtailing neo-colonialism and ensuring that Africa assert itself in a globalized world. To them, abandoning the English language is a process of decolonizing the mind as whoever controls one's mind controls the person's existence. Ngugi, in particular argues that as long as Africans continue to use English, colonization is still at work. Ngugi wonders how one could think in his mother tongue and render it in a foreign language, as literature is an expression of the will of a people. He admonishes that all African writers who feel committed must be so from the point-of-view of language: communicate in the language of the masses. Megan Behrent (2008) encapsulates Ngugi's position thus:

The Kenyan writer, Ngugi wa Thiong'o argues that to rid African literature of the legacy of colonialism, African writers must begin writing in their native languages and that literature written by

Africans in a colonial language is not African literature, but “Afro-European literature”. He argues that using European languages inherently makes African literature, the literature of an elite class of Africans (“Right from its conception it was a literature of the petty-bourgeoisie born of the colonial schools and universities. It could not be otherwise, given the linguistic medium of its message”) which cannot relate to the majority of African peoples who do not necessarily speak or read European languages, but rather speak a variety of indigenous African languages.

However, although Ngugi’s pro- African language stance is highly admirable, the suggestion seems impracticable, first, because, his *Devil on the Cross* (1980), *I Will Marry When I Want* (1982), and, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976) which were originally written in Gikuyi before being translated into English took a very long time before being so realized. Second, the issue of how many of our kinsmen can actually be communicated with through such writings still remains an open question. As Ogunlesi (2008,101) observes, there is no point writing great novels in indigenous languages if the majority of the audience cannot read at all, or if the written form is an embarrassingly “artificial” or “mish-mash” of the original language.

Wole Soyinka (1975), on the other hand, argues for a continental language; a pan-African language, chosen from one of the indigenous African languages to be taught and spoken across the continent of Africa. Again, Soyinka’s pro- Africanism is commendable but unfeasible because the English language as a means of communication in some parts of Africa was learnt by force. But now, we have independent African states. So, it becomes a daunting task how to evolve a common language that everybody from the Arab world to the Zulu can identify with. In Nigeria, for instance, there have been attempts to create an indigenous national language (“Wazobia”) to be spoken across the length and breath of Nigeria, but this has not yielded any positive results. This is in addition to the fact that Soyinka’s suggestion, if implemented, will hinder the growth of individual community literatures.

Also worthy of note is the issue of the relationship between technology, globalization and industrialization and the state of indigenous African languages. Something that betrays our indigenous languages is the fact that we are primarily consumers of technology and not producers. As Ogunlesi further notes:

Our languages often require the use of “crutches” of foreign colonial languages to “walk” without contributing anything at all to the global pool of language/linguistic interactions. Yoruba, for example, does not have its own words for a lot of technological innovations – meaning that speakers have to regularly resort to English terminology to make their points clear (2008, 101).

Thus, because we do not “innovate” much vital technology that is of exportable value, or even of any value (automobile, electronics, etc), our indigenous languages have not had the chance to create new technological vocabulary that can cross-borders and burn themselves into global consciousness and thus, in the process serve as a foundation for a “linguistic renaissance”. And so, our indigenous African languages cannot serve the purpose of expressing African written literature. In addition, it is doubted that if English or even French has succeeded in converting African literature into the literature of an elite class as Ngugi argues, whether Gikuyi or Yoruba or Swahili would be an effective “de-elitising” tool.

As regards those with the “liberal view”, it is also their belief that there is something fundamentally wrong with expressing African thoughts in foreign languages. But to this group, it seems nothing could be done about it. This view is often expressed in the assertion that what cannot be cured must be endured. Proponents of this view liken the case of English to that of an uninvited guest, housed and nourished and now fully settled, becomes rather unwilling to depart. Being very useful to the host who somehow desires the guest to leave without being compelled to, the host is now at a loss as to what to do now that the guest so much desires to continue his stay with his generous host: “make the guest more useful and profitable to him. Tame him so that he would be more adaptable to the needs of his host” (Adedoyin, 2001, 215).

This seems to be the view of Chinua Achebe, the major proponent of this view. To Achebe, it would appear that the English language has come to stay. This, being the case, the language must be made to reflect the culture of its second language users, alien to that of its mother tongue users. And considering the aesthetics of English usage in a second- language situation (L 2), the English language, to Achebe must be “tamed” nativized and actively manipulated to admit its foreign surroundings. Thus, English must be compelled to blend

with the environment (of its users), thereby producing artistic works that will be aesthetically pleasing. It is by so doing, the argument goes, that Africans can hope to have the best African literary works in English and to achieve “an extra-ordinary novelty of expression and yet all of them blossoming on the native root”. (1975,45).

So, it is the belief of those with the “liberal” view that the English language, having come to stay must be skillfully and imaginatively used to express African feelings and the African heritage. The language, according to them, must be made to reflect the culture and world-view that is truly African. This “brand” or homegrown English, according to Ayo Bamgbose (1995) can manifest only after English has been subjected to nativization while still preserving its international intelligibility status. In other words, the frontiers of the language should be “expanded” to convey the African sensibility. It should be used in a way that brings out the message best, yet the value of the language as a medium of international exchange would still be preserved. This means that the African writer’s aim should be to create English which would expectedly be universal and at the same time able to carry his “peculiar experience”. And so, to the question whether an African can ever learn English well enough to be able to use it effectively in creative writings, Achebe answers in the affirmative. But as to whether the African writer can ever learn to use English like a native speaker, Achebe has this to say:

I should hope not. It is neither necessary nor desirable for him to be able to do so. The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of uses (1975, 54).

According to Achebe, his seeming encouragement of the use of English by African writers is predicated on the fact that there are not many countries in Africa today where the English language would be abolished and the facility for mutual communication would still be maintained. In addition, English is the linguistic medium for the Satellite Television and the Internet, so that today in many countries across Africa, English remains the medium of instruction in the schools, as well as being the language of the law, business and government, and this is in addition to the fact that the language has even assumed the status of an indigenous language of communication in some homes.

It is, therefore, Achebe who answers the question – to write or not to write in English – best:

It does not matter what language you write in, as long as what you write is good. Language is a weapon, and we use it. There's no point in fighting a language (1975,31).

The above observation repudiates Adrian Roescoe's assertion that if an African writes in English, his work must be considered as belonging to English letters as a whole and can be scrutinized accordingly. As Ernest Emenyonu (1986) points out, in both matter and manner, content and style, culture and "language" interest and expression, modern African literature in English has roots and contexts that lie outside the traditional cultural and linguistic soil which has nourished the literature of the West. Therefore, African literature because it is written in English or French is not an appendage to British or French literature. It is a second-language literature having its roots in Africa. Chinweizu *et al* (1980) also admonish that a distinction must be made between European national literatures and non-European literatures in European languages. They (Chinweizu *et al* argue further that because African literature is for the most part written in English does not detract from its value as an art conceived in the African mind according to an African world view, African ethics and African standards. In fact, Soyinka (1975) remarks that the English that is used has been so much "domesticated" that the language has been "compelled" to play unaccustomed roles and turned into a new organic series of mores, social goals, relationships, universal awareness - all of which go into the creation of a new culture (34). Therefore, to Soyinka, "black people twisted the linguistic blade in the hands of the traditional cultural castrator and carved new concepts into the flesh of white supremacy. What follows this experimentation therefore, is the conversion of the enslaving medium (the English language) into an insurgent weapon" (1975,34).

Similarly, Ayo Bamgbose (1995) notes that the English language has been "pidginized, nativized, acculturated and twisted to express unaccustomed concepts and modes of interaction" (26,) while Achebe describes it as "a new English still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings" (1975,21). This being the case, the fact that modern African literature is written in English

does not make it English literature, as African literature is about Africa and Africa as Ngugi points out is not only a geographical expression but, a metaphysical landscape, a view of the world and of the whole cosmos perceived from a particular position. And since literature is the expression of a people's culture and values, African literature conveys the imaginative experience of the African people with roots in both the oral tradition and the modern industrial culture.

In conclusion therefore, African literature, like any other literature should ideally be expressed in African languages. In Emenyonu's words: "No, one can argue against the fact that if possible, Africans should not honour their erstwhile colonial masters for their degradation of African life, institutions and cultures. They are so honoured when European languages are placed above African languages for communication within the African continent" (1986,21), but we are quickly reminded of the fact that there are not many countries in Africa today where the language could be abolished and the facility for mutual communication would still be retained, so that those African writers who have chosen to write in English or French are not "unpatriotic smart alecs" with an eye on the main chance – outside their own countries – but by-products of the some processes that made the new nation states of Africa. And so, it would appear that African writers may continue to use the English language in their literary writings but "domesticate" it to express their Africanness, with the ultimate goal of projecting African literature in African languages. Although this realization of having African literature in African languages may not be achieved in this century, there should be a definite programme towards this end. Emenyonu sums it up this way:

No one need pontificate to the African writer what to say and how to say it. He should be allowed to choose the medium which suits his art best . . . African cultures must be preserved and this is probably best done in African languages, but this does not mean that anything – everything - said and written in Africa which seeks to portray African life must be in an indigenous language or else lose its validity. It is a different matter if the writer is

proved to have a better mastery of his form in his vernacular language but chooses a foreign language or if his portrayal of an aspect of his culture in a foreign language has done it irreparable damage. Any deliberate attempt by an artist competent in the vernacular to create in a foreign language as an escape from the challenges of writing in the vernacular, merits of course, all possible criticism. (1986,35).

WORKS CITED

- Achebe, Chinua. 1975. *Morning Yet on Creation Day*. London: Heinemann.
- Adedoyin, Adebukunulo. 2001. "The language of African literature. In *The English Compendium* 3 & 4. Lagos: Browns Communications (Nig) Ltd.
- Bamgbose, Ayo. 1995. "The English language in the Nigerian Environment". In *New Englishes*, ed., Ayo Bamgbose et al. Ibadan: Mosuro.
- Behrent, Megan. 2008. Quoted by Tolu Ogunlesi in *THISDAY*, The Sunday Newspaper, Lagos, July.
- Chinweizu, et al. 1980. *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Press.
- Emenyonu, Ernest. 1986. *The Rise of the Igbo Novel*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Press.
- Nkosi, Lewis. 1981. *Tasks and Masks*. London: Heinemann.
- Ogunlesi, Tolu. 2008. *THISDAY*, The Sunday Newspaper, Lagos, July.
- Reed, John and Clive Wake. 1972. Quoted by Romanus Egudu in *Four Modern West African Poets*. Ibadan: Heinemann.
- Roscoe, Adrian. 1971. *Mother is Gold: A Study in West African Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Soyinka, Wole. 1975. "Neo-Tarzanism: The Poetics of Pseudo- Tradition". In *Transition*, 48.
- Wali, Obi. 1963. "The Dead End of African Literature? In *Transition*, No 10.
- Wa Thiong'o Ngugi. 1976. *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. London: Heinemann.
- _____. 1980. *Devil on the Cross*. London: Heinemann.
- _____. 1982. *I Will Mary When I Want*. London: Heinemann.
- _____. 1986. *Decolonizing the Mind*. London: James Curry.