

The Politics of English Language

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In all postcolonial debates the issue of a foreign language has been a site of controversy and a major source of contention regarding issues of identity and cultural authenticity. The colonizer wherever he went imposed his own language on the colonized, thereby denying them the freedom to choose their medium of expression. As language carries cultural assumptions within it, the colonized learnt to name the world in terms of a foreign culture. The power to name the world provides the terms by which reality is constituted, understood and ultimately controlled. But for the colonized, it was only a borrowed means of perception; it was an indoctrination of belief and value systems. As he was forced to learn the foreign language, he had the opportunity to view the world from the oppressor's point of view. The tool he was asked to acquire spoke for somebody else's culture and worldview. According to Franz Fanon, to use a language is to assume a culture.¹ To be cut off from one's mother tongue implies a loss of contact with the culture the language represents. It is what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o calls the 'cultural bomb' whose effect is to 'annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves.'²

English literature was introduced in British India as a discipline even before it appeared in England itself. Gauri Viswanathan in *Masks of Conquest* writes that in 1820s, English was introduced not simply as a language but more as a study of culture in the British Indian curriculum. Viswanathan argues that it was the policy of the empire to introduce British values without trying to convert the colonized directly. Another purpose, which the introduction of English served, was to create educated elite who would mediate between the colonizers and the colonized and who was made to

realize that they could benefit from the continuation of British rule in India. 3

However the policy of the British to rule through language ultimately proved to be paradoxical. As a consequence of promotion of English the colonized were given access to the knowledge of the world. The initially inferior people could now be equal linguistically. The liberating effect of English ultimately led to independence movements. But the going away of the foreign rulers was not the end of language issue; the beginning of de-colonization was also a beginning of new dilemmas.

The process of de-colonization is accompanied by cultural and political assertion. The immediate reaction of the formerly colonized is to desperately resurrect his particular image. He feels he has to find means to articulate his refusal to be dictated. One way is to do away with the language of the oppressors. For this he looks back to his own culture and his own languages. But the trouble does not stop here. To his dismay the colonized finds out that the dividing lines have been blurred. The colonial situation forces two cultures together and despite the collision and resulting tension an unconscious assimilation takes place. The change inevitably occurs whether in the form of hybridization of cultures or in the form of an inherited foreign language. Therefore to think that an immediate linguistic overhaul would be possible is naïve. The new language and values cannot be shed easily and completely. This leads to the most important question: Should English be rejected or accepted or perhaps subverted in order to show defiance. Many intellectuals and writers argue that national literature must be written in local languages in order to be authentic representations of national aspirations. After many years of writing in English, Ngugi wa Thiongo decided to write in his mother tongue, Gikuyu. Not only has he changed his language but also resists euro centric approaches to literature to avoid any kind of linguistic subjugation.

However for many societies the answer does not seem to come from rejection nor from assimilation into a foreign culture. The resolution has been to transform the intrusion of language into a

tool and use it against the oppressor. It places them on a level equal to the colonizers. Not only has English been used to voice opinions against colonization, it has been amalgamated with indigenous cultures to assert one's particular identity. The various conflicts and anomalies of the post-colonial situation are displayed within the new hybridized medium of expression. Elleke Boehmer describes this process as "cultural boomeranging" or switchback where the once colonized take the artifacts of the former master and make them their own." 4 In remaking of the language not only the privilege of the English language as belonging to a certain powerful nation is rejected but the concept of a single form of English is also denied. De- colonization thus works on two levels. Not only it is done through the issue of language, it is also done through de-colonizing the language itself. The language, which is produced as a result of contact with two cultures, is known as contact language. To be able to create such language, English in this case, the writer should feel comfortable with code switching and different discourse strategies available in both the languages. Such variations in language usage result in reconstruction of the familiar norms of language usage. The authors of the book *The Empire Writes Back* list a number of ways in which postcolonial writers have replaced the language usage strategies. One very common practice is to use words of native language within the English text without any effort to translate or explain. The linguistic gap created is a political assertion, a demand to accept and understand the native culture on its own terms. Thus through the use of such language two realities are constructed, of the 'one' and the 'other', the friction between the center and the margin gives them a parallel status. In his play *Kongi's Harvest* Soyinka inserts songs without translation.

E ma gun' yan Oba kere o
E ma gun' yan Oba kere
Kaun elepini ko se e gbe mi
Eweyo noin ni I fi yo' nu
E ma gun' yan Oba kere 5

The ethnographic details too assert the gap between the colonizer and the colonized. They too become an act of appropriation as they

force the readers into an active engagement with the culture in question.

Another device used is known as inter language in which the linguistic structures of two different languages are fused. *The Empire Writes Back* quotes the lines from the novel of Amos Tutuola as an example,

I was a palm wine drinkard since I was a boy of ten years of age. I had no other work more than to drink palm wine in my life. 6

According to Achebe, a world language must pay the price of being subjected to a variety of changes. He warned, ‘let no one be fooled by the fact that we write in English for we intend to do unheard things with it.’ 7

The choice of language is also important in the context of the audience it addresses. It is said that writers who choose to write in a European language limit their audience to a more elite and westernized one. In India and Pakistan English is used, as a language for official use but the national languages are Urdu and Hindi respectively. Retaining English as a language for official use retains its superior status. It is the language of the job market both locally and internationally. Talking about the decline of higher education in Pakistan, Eqbal Ahmed blames it all to having two sets of languages. Having two different languages implies having two different standards and yardsticks. As a result he thinks we have a higher education without a language. Thus a way has to be found towards ‘some congruence between inherited traditions a contemporary knowledge.’ (Ahmed, 2000, 21) 8

However at the same time in some countries English actually acts a unifying factor. In Africa, for instance the wide diversity of languages makes it impossible to reach all African people or even the majority of people in one country with one language. According to Kirk Greene, ‘...Scholars have identified over four hundred

ethnic groups within the borders of Nigeria and several hundred languages...’ 9

Writers such as Achebe defend this position from a pragmatic point of view. According to him the dominance of English in written literature is not just a fact of present day Africa but also a potential way of unifying Africans of different linguistic backgrounds. Phanuel Akubueze takes the same line of argument, ‘It is easier, for instance, to retain the language of colonialism than to face the dilemma of choosing one tribe’s language as the national language and run the risk of incurring the hatred of other groups or even losing them entirely.’ 10 African writers also reason quite correctly, that the foreign language is about the only basis of unity among the various tribes within the new nations.

As argued earlier the changes brought about by colonialism are very pervasive, therefore a rejectionist stance would only result in denial of a historical reality. Although the widespread use of English has arisen from the oppressive institution of colonialism, its presence does not have to imply a continual subjugation, a reversion to a glorified pre-colonial past is impossibility. The language of the colonizer is a reality in the present postcolonial situation. In the view of Achebe, English is so much a part of Nigerian life as to qualify as an African language. He realistically asserts that for him there is no choice. He uses English because he has been given this language. Cultural authenticity or linguistic purity is not on offer in the mixed, heterogeneous worlds. Considering the dilemma of writers writing in English, Buddhadeva Bose wrote in 1969 that ‘a poet must have the right to change and recreate language, and this no foreigner can ever acquire.’ To this Nissim Ezekiel, the famous Indian poet writing in English replied, ‘Is Mr. Bose completely devoid of a sense of history? Does it not occur to him that since English was introduced as a medium of higher education in India, some Indians naturally took to writing verse in it.... Historical situations create cultural consequences.’ 11

So instead of using a stiff and approved variety of Standard English, the post-colonial writers replaced it with kinds, which exhibit a more natural and personal form of writing.

In Britain the idea of Standard English emerged largely from the work of Daniel Jones who produced a series of pronunciation guides for the foreigners. The purity of the English language was felt to be threatened but it was a fear that came to be true.

Thus with the dissolution of the British Empire and the emergence of the new nations, the concept of the English language as belonging solely to the people of England faded. It has been observed that each national English develops its distinct characteristics and bears an individual stance. One can for instance recognize African English or Indian English. In answer to the question asked by Phanuel Egejuru 'What distinguishes an African writer' Cheikh Hamidou Kane replied 'because ... their sensitivity is African. Sometimes even their language, the way they write is influenced by African cultural tradition even if they are not writing in their traditional language.' 12

As a result of cultural fragmentation of the English-speaking world, the old concept of English literature has been broken and new national literatures have emerged. The national literatures in English reveal cultural preferences and have roots in their communities. The presence of tribal proverbs, pidgins and creolization is not just an example of a writer's nationalistic preference, such amalgamation also represents the way society and its values are depicted in serious writing. Deviations from standard usage carry political, cultural and social implications. By adopting local idioms, a language is acclimatized and made one's own. Raja Rao, an Indian writer, filtered Indian speech rhythms in order to reflect the Indian spirit.

The nationalistic climate has given rise to a renewed interest in indigenous myth. The figures of mythology are now not to be dismissed as outworn fetishes, it is felt by various writers that the local legends and oral epic still hold explanatory power for today's

problems. Wole Soyinka delves into Yoruba mythology to explain the situation of present day Nigeria. In the article, *The Fourth Stage*, his identification of Yoruba deities with Greek gods has invited the label of 'Europhile' intellectualism. Soyinka says that he would never 'preach the cutting off of any source of knowledge'.¹³ Having nationalistic interests does not mean taking up an exclusivist attitude. Comparisons are not only a means of exploring points of meeting; they bring to focus the areas of departure as well. In any case, it implies a confident assertion of one's own culture, on equal terms. It also reveals that spiritual or any kind of human experiences are not the property of any particular race. In Ake, Soyinka's biography of his early years, young Wole in his dialogue with the sergeant and the white officer wonders why the officer speaks through his nose and likens his language to that of Hausa traders. This passage told from the point of view of young Wole illustrates the fact that both Yoruba and English can take different forms depending upon who speaks them and suggests a certain influence of background and culture on the use and understanding of language. It has also been noticed that the same words when applied in different cultural situations, assume different implications. In an answer to the questions, 'Are you saying that the Nigerian English exists?' Achebe replied, 'Oh yes, though its' not something you can define, but you can sense its presence. For instance, when Chief Nanga said, "imagine" I knew this was an appropriate thing for Nanga to say, but it gets a very different meaning for a Nigerian in the context in which it was said. An Englishman would not say, "imagine" in the same circumstances. This "imagine" means a whole lot more. Nanga is dumbfounded and in utter disbelief of what he heard. He exclaims, "Imagine!" You may not find words and phrases that are Nigerian or African but you can find uses. This is how it begins; ultimately it will have a flavour, which is recognizable.'¹⁴

Achebe's stance speaks for the fact that language is not a dead phenomenon, restricted to represent only its native culture. Had it been so, it would have been legitimate to feel threatened by a foreign language but if it is mastered enough; it can be used as a flexible tool to address one's own problems. Words carry different

implications throughout the English-speaking world, thereby making the history of the meanings of words also a history of changing cultural values.

Thus language can only be rescued from the stasis of history if it is allowed to grow and given a chance to amalgamate within it the changes inevitably brought by historical situations. If it asserted that words do have some essential cultural essence which is not subject to any change, languages would have been imprisoned in origins and not, as demonstrated through postcolonial literature be readily available for appropriation and further development. The best of commonwealth writers have done more than just use the language; they have modified it and in the process have generated alternative literary possibilities. When language is used to serve the ends of the writers, those ends may well change the language itself.

The English language is adaptable and can create in its texture and imagery, a feeling of actual experience. When R. K. Narayan was asked whether he found it any strain to write in English, he replied that English is 'so transparent, it can take on the tint of any country.' 15

A foreign language can be effectively employed only when it is used confidently without the self-consciousness of using someone else's language, otherwise the gap and insecurity induced by the colonizers would never be overcome. For literature, to use Cardinal Newman's words, is 'the personal use or exercise of language. That this is so is further proved from the fact that one author uses it so differently from another.' 16

In the same way a rejectionistic stance would only be a manifestation of negritudinism through a linguistic agenda. Wole Soyinka reacted against Negritude because it gives a defensive character to any African ideas. The past according to him should be accepted so that it helps clarify the present and explain the future.

The postcolonial enterprise is thus concerned with the forging of a language that cannot be simply dismissed as blind imitation and a

form of subjugation but which in the process of its development creates new aesthetic and linguistic standards.

End Notes

1. Boehmer, Elleke, *Colonial and Post- colonial Literature* (OUP, 1995) pp207
2. [file://A\](#) emperor's English.htm pp 5
3. Ibid
4. Boehmer, Elleke, *Colonial and Post- colonial Literature* (OUP, 1995) pp210
5. Soyinka, Wole, *Kongi,s Harvest, Collected Plays 2*, (OUP, 1987) pp62
6. Ashcroft, Bill, Griffiths, Gareth, Tiffin Helen, *The Empire Writes Back*, (Routledge, London) pp 66, 67
7. Ahebe, Chinua, *Colonialist Criticism, Literature in the Modern World: Critical Essays And Documents* ed. Dennis Walder (OUP, 1990) pp274
8. Ahmed, Eqbal, *Confronting Empire, Interviews with David Barsamian*, (Pluto Press, London, 2000) pp21
9. Greene Kirk, *The Peoples of Nigeria: The Cultural Background to the Crisis, African Affairs, Vol.66, No. 22* (Michigan 1967)
10. Akubeze, Phamuel, *Introduction, Towards African Literary Independence*, (Greenwood Press, London. 1980) pp 9
11. Walsh, William, *Common Wealth Literature*, (Macmillan London, 1979) pp2
12. Akubeze, Phamuel, *Introduction, Towards African Literary Independence*, (Greenwood Press, London. 1980)
13. From an interview with Soyinkaby Dr. Biodin Jeyifo, published in *Wole Soyinka, Six Plays*, (Methuen, London, 1984) pp XV
14. Egejuru, Phanuel Akubueze, *What Distinguishes an African Writer, Towards African Literary Independence: A Dialogue with Cotemporary African Writers*, (Greenwood Press, London. 1980) pp 49
15. Walsh, William, *Common Wealth Literature*, (Macmillan London, 1979) pp5

16. Chukwukere, B.I, The Problem of Language in Creative African Writing, *African Literature Today*. No. 1,2,3, 4 ed. Elderred D. Jones (Heinemann, New York, 1978) pp 18.