

African Literature (Drama) and the Language Issue

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Abstract

The issue of language in the expression of African literature has been an age-long debate. It has attracted lots of arguments and counter-arguments and is yet to be laid to rest. Such controversies are expected given the nature, vivacity, and coverage of the phenomenon and the caliber of African writers in all genres of literature. This paper's objective is to assess the views of different scholars on the issue of what language to use in writing African literature, by extension and more importantly, drama. It is a truism that the discussion of literature, to a large extent, is a discussion of its three genres. The importance of this discourse is subsumed in the fact that projecting the African philosophies, beliefs, and arts adequately and correctly demands the use of a language that will render such task less cumbersome and rich with much impact on the primary audience of such works of art. Therefore, this paper will provide a holistic overview of scholars' contributions to the subject-matter, offer humble suggestions, and state where the author's sympathy lies.

Key Words: African literature, language, drama.

Introduction

The issue of the language in which African literature should be written has become an ongoing debate. The contribution of the present work to the debate is engendered by the need to make an assessment of the views of scholars on the issue as well as providing humble suggestions on the subject matter. Creative writing has numerous challenges which include problem of limited readership because due to the economic situation in Africa, people tend to lose interest in purchasing books for reading. The problems writers encounter when it comes to publishing their works and how they are treated by publishers are other aspects of problems facing creative writers in Africa.

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This is coupled with the fact that they also need to write in a language that is assessable and acceptable by the majority of the people so that their labour will not be in vain economically and in term of scholarship. Language and literature are inseparable like two sides of a coin. They keep affecting each other, though sometimes negatively or positively. Language and literature have been considered as important attributes of national identity. It has also been argued that the nationality of any literature is determined by the language in which it is produced (Traore,1972; Menang, 2001). This makes the choice of language for African literature more precarious and an issue yet to be laid to rest by African scholars. This is more so that the “choices of language is one of expediency, or pragmatism, but above all, it reflects the writer’s desire to reach the largest possible audience” (Larson, 44). From all indications, it is pertinent to discuss the language for African literature and thereby find answers to questions such as, what language is suitable for African literature. What are the dangers or advantages of adopting foreign languages for African literature? Is there an alternative language for writing African literature, such as an abridged one that could at the moment solve the language problem?

This paper has its focus on drama, a genre of literature, due to its vivacity and adaptability, especially in relation to the stage. This is imperative as it hopes to encourage playwrights to write drama texts in other varieties of English language for a wider coverage.

Suggestions and Views on Language for African Literature

Wole Soyinka’s address at the UNESCO Conference in 1971 states in part that:... a meeting be summoned of African writers and linguists, representations in equal numbers from every state in Africa who shall decide, at a closed session, on an official language for the black continent, including the black peoples of America and set a time-limit for the adoption of this language by all African States (Soyinka, July 1971).

In every indication, the above quotation sounds optimistic and ambitious. The question is that how smooth operating will it be to choose or ‘impose’ an official language on the black continent? Even if adopted, how appropriate will it be for a continent as wide as Africa with myriads of languages to adopt a single language for communication, literature and commerce? There is no gainsaying the fact that language is a very sensitive part of African literature and that it has generated more reactions than any part of it. It then substantiates the fact that the choice of language for writing African literature is very sensitive and should be addressed as such.

It is imperative, therefore, to assess the views of different scholars on this issue, to properly foreground, to some extent, earlier submissions on the matter in order to be able to accentuate a position. First, the question is how and why did African writers begin to write in colonizer's languages? Mutiti (144) noted that expressions in the colonizer's language emerged due to the curiosity and aptitude of African writers to write back to the colonizers in their own idioms in order to gain independence but at the end, the language ended up colonizing them.

Let us set the tone for the discussion by quoting from the speech of Ibrahim Babangida, former Nigerian President, at *The Proceedings of The International Symposium on African Literature*, titled "African Literature Before and After the 1986 Nobel Prize", delivered on his behalf by former Vice President, Admiral Aikhomu on May 2nd, 1988. On the issue of language, he made the following conclusions:

I wish to observe..., that the adoption of foreign languages as vehicles of communication does not overshadow the essential African character of these literatures. It is the strength of these cultures that have given African literatures their unique character, which has reduced the foreign medium of communication to a secondary factor (in Osofisan, 24).

From the foregoing, it is deducible that Babangida believed that the character or elements of African literature remain intact even when a foreign language is employed in communication. This may not be entirely acceptable because there are some of such characters that do not have their equivalents in the vocabulary of the foreign language. Most of such words are given transliteration, which may not express the exact message or meaning as the original word. This may be misleading, as it may not capture, in entirety, what the writer meant. Another point could be looked at from the angle of Menang (7) that "language has been considered as one of the important attributes of national identity". Identity in this case refers to customs, cultures, myths, norms, ethics, religions, and proverbs of a group of people or nation.

The quotation at the outset of this section by Soyinka at Dares Salaam Conference led to the choice of Swahili as an official language for the Black continent. A big applause greeted that resolution but it is disheartening to note that the whole euphoria died at that Conference which may largely be due to the immensity of the problems of application or implementation. Another serious issue relating to language that has generated lots of comments from critics is the position of Ngugi wa Thiong'o on this matter. Ngugi (16) asserts that "imposing a foreign language and suppressing the native languages as spoken and written, were already breaking the harmony previously existing between the African child". He states further that "African literature can only be written in African languages" (27).

He has since been writing in his mother tongue, Gikuyu, and also advocates and agitates for the use of all other African languages for writing African literature. Gabriel Okara earlier aligned with Ngugi as he felt that ‘there is nothing better to reach the masses’ (53), but he stated further the danger inherent in it that it may “create pockets of localized literature in Africa and someday bring about the divisive nature of language” (34). He goes further to posit that for now English and French should be seen as Nigerian or African languages and suggests that what should be done is to “emulsify either English or French with our own native African systems or African ethics or African aesthetics” (54). If that is accepted, he feels it may culminate in a “certain form of English... that they refer to as a derivation of English” (54).

He feels that Ngugi’s position is too extreme and should be confined to the world of dreams. For Mazisi Kunene (38), European languages are “totally inadequate to express the African philosophy” and Oyekan Owomoyela (93) urges that, “if we wish to assert and preserve distinctly African ways of being and distinct living, we must cultivate distinctly African ways of speaking”. Kunene felt strongly that for him to project African philosophies, beliefs, arts and institution correctly, he must write in Zulu, his mother tongue, this he embarked upon for quite a while before his death. He started writing in Zulu language as early as 11 years of age and before he died in 2006, he translated many of his poems from Zulu to English and was praised by critics for the freshness of the English translations, with patterns and imagery successfully carried over from Zulu vernacular traditions (<http://www.britannica.com>).

In his contribution to this debate, Obi Wali feels that African languages are sacrosanct to African literature. He gave the following opinion regarding African literature and the issue of language: ...the 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. 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. (in Olaniyan & Quayson, 282).

To Obi Wali, any literature written outside African languages cannot be termed African literature, no matter how clearly it describes the African experience. To him, since “literature is the exploitation of the possibilities of language” (283), African languages have the requisites for the development of their potentials and not French or English that has been overworked and over-used. He mentions the danger inherent in this by adding that, “African languages would face inevitable extinction, if they do not embody some kind of intelligent literature, and the only way to hasten this, is by continuing in our present illusion that we can produce African literature in English and French” (284).

This same thought is embodied in Ayo Bamgbose's paper title *Deprived, Endangered and Dying Languages* (1993) where he expresses the fear that our indigenous languages will go into extinction if urgent steps are not taken to address this downward trend in their usage, especially for creative writing. Toeing this same line of argument is the famous critic, Lewis Nkosi. He acknowledges the fact "that black Africans possess a rich and living heritage in philosophy, ethics, religion and artistic creation, the deepest roots of which are embedded in the rich soil of African languages" (3), and concludes with the following ardent statement: ... it would seem that the advantages of writing in the African languages would prove overwhelming that the most sophisticated and articulate of modern African writers feel unable to do so has created, I suggest, both for the writer and his African audience, a situation of extreme cultural ambiguity (3).

Such ambiguity is traceable to the attempt by African writers to think and feel in their indigenous languages or mother tongue and then write such experiences in a foreign language. The critique of Obi Wali to such incongruity is explicitly stated as follows:

An African writer who thinks and feels in his own language *must* write in that language. The question of transliteration, whatever that means, is unwise as it is unacceptable, for the 'original', which is spoken of (sic), is the real stuff of literature and the imagination, and must not be discarded in favour of a *copy*, which, as the passage admits, is merely an approximation (283, Original italics). The above quotation represents Mutiti's (146,147) position as he posits that: ... there is nothing inherently African in the elitist African literature in foreign languages ... writing in foreign languages is a formidable drawback to Africa's literary creativity; this is because it is not possible to achieve ultimate equivalence in the adaptation of the intrinsic idiom in an alien linguistic mode of expression.

In his own view, Lere Adeyemi (77) avers that novels written in indigenous languages are more qualified to be regarded as Nigerian or National literature than novels written in English language. On this premise, he suggests that "multilingualism is not a divisive factor rather, it is a potential strength". He goes further to state that: If the indigenous novels are translated into English and vice versa, they will all contribute to the shaping of the national culture and identity which will equally solve some of the linguistic problems in Nigeria (Adeyemi, 77). Prah (in Rafiu, 204) nails it on the head when he says that "Africans learn best in their own languages, the languages they know from their parents, from home... it is in these languages that they can best create and innovate". The question then is, how many homes tolerate the use of vernacular for interaction, especially in the cities? English is strictly spoken at home and it is the language for teaching and for instruction even in the villages.

Olu Obafemi's (21) contribution to this debate is that it is "high time our tribal and ethnic differences were put aside to enhance the development of a national language in which we can think, speak and write". He suggests further that concerted efforts should be geared towards drafting a language policy that would be embraced by both peoples and governments of Africa. According to him, the advantages of using the indigenous language for literature are enormous:

Without doubt, language is the means by which the writer reveals his soul and by the same token the writer's language is the vehicle whereby the reader or the critic attempts to fathom the depth of feeling he or she conveys (Obafemi, 17). In his own perspective, Larson (43) sees such clamor for writing African literature in African languages as "excesses of tribalism". According to him, African writing in European languages may be regarded by some intellectuals as un-African, contrary to indigenous values and traditions, but the legacy of colonialism cannot be obliterated by a reversion to African languages, writing in European languages may, in fact, help break down tribal barriers (43).

The troika, Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike, feel that when "the deep diseases" inherent in our culture is cured, most African writers will tend towards writing in indigenous languages and that before that is achieved, "what we write in borrowed Western languages will still be African if it is addressed to Africans and if it captures the qualities of African life" (248). To them, what matters most is not the languages in which the writer writes, but that the writer should be faithful to his cause by writing "beautiful and effective things" that are not obscure but are very relevant to the yearnings and aspirations of African society and that will ultimately raise their nationalist consciousness. Their argument on the issue of language is as follows:

We would like to call an end to the debate over the use of Western languages by African writers. The use of these languages is a part of the problem of contemporary African culture. Ideally, African literature should be written in African languages. But the same historical circumstance that presently compel African nations to use Western languages as their official languages also compel African writers to write in them until these historical circumstances are changed – and we hope they change soon – it is pointless debating whether or not to use these Western languages in our literature. (242).

In support of the above position, African writers can also employ Achebe's style who deliberately "recreate a pre-Westernized African reality using authentic Igbo characters, situations, values and religious concepts and bending the language to express Igbo proverbs and idioms" (288,289).

This is a vibrant style and it is commendable as it makes the proverbs and idioms easily decipherable even by non-Igbos and close to the original Igbo proverbs and idioms. This must have been the reason why *Things Fall Apart* has been translated into many languages, mostly European languages.

In his own view, Femi Osofisan feels uneasy and traumatized finding “himself addressing mostly foreigners or just an ineffective fraction of the people for whom his work is intended” (48). Therefore, to bridge the gulf between the writer and his audience, he proposes translation. This proposal for translation is in the following areas that concern the African writer:

- i. To translate our English writings into French or Portuguese, and vice-versa;
- ii. To translate French, English, Portuguese authors including foreign classics into our indigenous languages.
- iii. To translate works from indigenous languages into French, English, Portuguese; and
- iv. To translate works from one indigenous language into another (49).

Osofisan feels that, if African writers imbibe this method or not, it will lead to either of these two outcomes: We can remain as we are - safe, self-deciding revolutionaries whose voices are heard only in classrooms by a fraction of the petite bourgeoisie, or we can choose to take our message out there to the people and run the risk of being smashed by government. (49, 50). Yakubu Nasidi argues that since the world is gradually becoming a ‘mono-culture, and this ‘mono-culture’ is founded on the West, on a market system specifically derived from the West and everything seems to be ‘tied to Western language’ (60), the language issue is made more complicated and complex. He, therefore, aligns with the suggestion of Femi Osofisan on translation as “a very, very important step in the right direction” (61). Other scholars who, either completely or tacitly align with him on the issue of translation are Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, Chukwuemeka Ike, Mambel Segun, Odun Balogun, Nelson Fashina and others.

The idea of translating African works written in colonial languages into African languages is a laudable suggestion, and if given the needed push could solve the problems associated with readership as far as African literature is concerned. An author who has tried this successfully is Ngugi wa Thiong’o. Since he started writing in Gikuyu language in 1977, he has translated some of those works into English, after writing them in the local language. Examples are, a collaborative effort with Ngugi wa Mirii that resulted in the play script, *Ngaahika Ndeenda* with the English translation, *I Will Marry When I want*. Others are *Cantani Mutharabani* translated as *Devil on the Cross*; a musical drama, *Mkaitu Ngugira*, translated as *Mother Sing for Me*.

Therefore, since originally our literature emanated from the European tradition, it is pertinent to still share some resemblance with such tradition, no matter how infinitesimal. This is because, “the ultimate destination of a society of which refuse to learn from other societies is parochialism and ignorant ethnocentrism” (Ngara, 6).

Translation: Matters Arising

As stated above, translation is a very vibrant suggestion which can, for the moment, solve the language problem. But a major problem facing this proposition of translating prose, drama and poems written in indigenous languages into English language and vice versa is the alarming mass illiteracy in our indigenous languages. Therefore, there should be concerted efforts at making these languages taught at the earliest stages of African-child education. Policies should be put in place that will enhance the study of these languages from early stages of studentship. The orthography of such languages should be developed and expanded to accommodate new trends and words.

The Issue of Nigerian English, Pidgin English and Drama

On the problem of adopting a language for African literature, the Nigerian English and the pidgin English readily come to mind. The “English language in Nigeria has been domesticated by the employment of the variety known as Nigerian English”, though not yet codified, “playwrights of Nigerian extraction have found ways of presenting in writing, the varieties that their characters speak on stage” (Owoeye, 321,322). The Nigerian English has been with us for a while because for some time now it is being used, though most times unconsciously, in speeches, even at seminars and workshops. In the words of Owoeye (322), “Nigerian English has since grown and is now widely accepted country wide as a distinct variety in its own right rather than an erroneous usage of the Standard English language”. Therefore, efforts should be geared towards codifying this variety of English to allow for its smooth operation and free use in creative writings. Another point is that it can be extended to other parts of Africa because if we have Nigerian English, we can as well have Kenyan English, Ghanaian English and so on and so forth.

The pidgin English, which is also a derivative of the English language, has attained an enviable height due to the swelling number of speakers of the language. According to Dada (58), “... today, English has become a second language in Nigeria, while pidgin English, with probably the largest number of speakers, has also emerged as a result of the contact of English and the indigenous languages”.

Since the Pidgin English has attained such height, it is only wise that a language with such coverage would be developed through developing its orthography and backing its usage with policies that will assist its further growth.

Pidgin English has gone beyond a language for communication for the purpose of commerce or business or informal interaction to a language of serious business, especially in the area of creative writing. The importance of the pidgin English, especially to Nigeria and Africa by extension, has been underscored by David Cook (in Osofisan, 19) that,

Pidgin English is the nearest that we have to a genuine Nigerian lingua franca, wrongly underrated and dismissed as it may be by pundits who ought to know better. It probably has a wide influence as Swahili does in East Africa and, no doubt, if we look along the whole West Africa coast, it has a much larger clientele numerically.

Drama, due to its vivacity and adaptability will benefit more from this venture. Such varieties of English will, without doubt, add colour and depth to drama texts, and by extension, will be a delight to watch on stage. It will also encourage those who are efficient in these varieties of language to have outlets for their ingenuity. Many authors, especially playwrights, in the past and present have explored this communication tool for creative writing endeavours. Examples are Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Soza Boy*, Olu Obafemi's *Naira Has no Gender* and others.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is obvious that the language issue in relation to African literature portends a continuous debate that may not be easily put to rest. But as it appears, the way out is to adopt the suggestions of translation and transliteration, codify and expand the orthography of Nigerian English and pidgin English and strengthen them through efficient policies. It is, therefore, appropriate to conclude this discussion, at least for now, with the suggestion of Chinua Achebe for employing English in diversified ways to accommodate African writings. He posited that:

I feel 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 (62).

This position is made clearer with the submission of Nyamndi in the following quotation:

Having discovered that a complete debunking of foreign languages is not feasible, the task for African writers now lies in fashioning a new synthesis out of the dual linguistic heritage, a synthesis capable of imparting colour and depth in African reality (574).

With this tedious but necessary exercise, the writer will cut across all strata, as he has taken care of the local people, who are in majority and with whom resides the revolutionary ethos and the elites as well as the international community. The time may come, probably in some decades to come, when concerted efforts would be concentrated on such landmark achievement through drafting of good policy and proper implementation that Africans will adopt one language for her literature. Before this is achieved, let us stop contending with a language that has served the African interest in all facets of life for decades now because it has helped to an unimaginable extent to “break down tribal barriers” (Larson, 44).

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