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Rethinking the Alienation of African Indigenous Languages in African literature: A Post-colonial perspective

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Abstract. The emergence of European forces in Africa between the 1870s and 1900 marked the threshold of a new African identity moulded by Western ideologies. This resulted in the shift of identities and instigation of maladies that spread from the colonial period to the post-colonial era. These ills that are inspired by the colonial past, among other things, threaten the social and political emancipation of Africa and her people in the post-colonial dispensation. Therefore, this is qualitative paper aimed to rethink the degree of destruction that the colonial legacies pose to the Post-colonial Africa with a special attention paid to the alienation of African indigenous languages in African literature. The paper is theoretical in nature and employs the post-colonial theory and its strand, Afrocentricity as a grounding to explore the limitation of African indigenous languages in African literature. Western-originated languages such as English, French and Portuguese are still being widely used across the African continent in the post-colonial period and seem to domineer the space of African literature. This is done at the expense of African indigenous languages, which continue to be marginalised by colonial influence. The study concludes that African literature is expressed and embraced in Western-originated languages than African indigenous languages and this engenders identity-crisis.

Keywords. African languages, African literature, Colonialism, Hegemony, Identity

Introduction

The African continent is a multicultural and racial society that had submitted under the colonial administration before attaining independence. The conquest of Africa by the West occasioned the clash between the African and Western cultural identities. These conflicting cultural identities culminated with the odds in favour of the West due to the colonialists being in power. As a result, Africans forcefully adopted many Western identities including languages. Prah (2009: 3) asserts that “in classic colonial relationships, it is mainly the conquered who learns the language of the conqueror.” The coloniser (The West) dismantled the colonised’s (Africa) image and deemed all association with the latter as unsophisticated and lesser to the West. This elucidates one of the West’s mandates to enforce European philosophies, cultures and languages upon Africans. Today, despite Africa’s reclamation of independence, colonial remnants such as the dominance of Western-originated languages over African indigenous languages in African literature are still existent.

Most scholars aver that Western-originated languages prevail over African indigenous languages in the body of African literature. However, this observation has had many researchers

in the field of African literature divided on whether this is a positive or negative outcome. This ensuing argument is “informed by well-known historical and demographic facts about the language ecology of Africa” (Ndlovu, 2008: 138). For instance, scholars such as Ngugi Wa Thiong’o contest the omnipotence of Western languages over African indigenous languages in African literature and conscientises his fellow African writers about the importance of using indigenous languages in their literary works to epitomise African identity.

Equally important, in his literary work, Ngugi relentlessly calls for the decolonisation of African literature through the detachment of Western identity in it, which includes discarding the dominant use of European languages because they raise “questions on the essence of African literature and on being African” (Kapanga, 2005: 20). On the contrary, other African like Chinua Achebe postulate the use of Western-originated language as a practice that can be used to enhance African literature: “The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use. The African Writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience” (Achebe, 1975: 20).

Theoretical lens underpinning the study

The study is underpinned by the Post-colonial theory and its strand, Afrocentricity, by virtue of its focus on the post-colonial period of specifically the African continent. The Post-colonial theory has emerged as a lens to undergird studies that crystallise issues vexing the previously colonised states (Montle, 2021). The issues usually emerge as a result of the colonial history or are shaped by the colonial government notwithstanding its dethronement. Thus, this study singles out and explores the alienation of African indigenous languages in African literature as a problem that is colonially influenced. Moreover, the African society, which is a case in point for this study, is one of the previously colonised civilisations that lost their identities due to the colonisation. Hence, the researcher chooses and employs Afrocentricity as a relevant strand of post-colonial theory to explore the dominance of Western languages in African literature at the expense of African indigenous languages.

Asante (2009: 1) avers that “Afrocentricity is a paradigm based on the idea that African people should re-assert a sense of agency in order to achieve sanity.” The African contact with the West, which resulted in the latter triumphing over the former, instigated a major change in Afrocentric identities. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Helen (1989: 8) states that “place, displacement and a pervasive concern with the myths of identity and authenticity are features common to all English post-colonial literature.” Despite the colonial government being forced out of power, colonial influence and remnants appear to be still domineering in the post-colonial period of Africa. This is evinced by the problem of this study, which is the alienation of African indigenous languages in African literature whereas the Western languages reign supreme in this particular field. Amuta (1989: 16) notes that post-colonial literature is no less powerful a medium for registering the post-colonial condition and the cultural aftermath of the British Empire. This signifies the birth and dominance of Anglophone, Francophone and Lusophone African literature in the post-colonial era due to colonial history.

The dominance of Western languages in African literature at the expense African of indigenous languages

The dispensation of colonialism resulted in the advent and use of Western languages in the African continent. These Western languages became predominant in the African context and trounced African indigenous languages because the “colonisers usually imposed their

language onto the people they colonised, forbidding natives to speak their mother tongues” (Margulus & Nowakowski, 1996: 1). The colonialists sought to conventionalise Western languages in the African setting and seem to have thrived in finding a place of power for these languages, which have manifested themselves as the supreme bearers of African literature. Moreover, the enforcement of Western languages upon African natives was one of the colonial tactics to clutch the Africans under Western influence. Stanely (2002: 2) avers that “at other times, the teaching of English was seen as a tool to propagate the economic, cultural or religious values of dominant world powers.”

Zezeza (2006: 14) states that Africa has become intensely difficult if not impossible to define and this makes “many academic and popular discourses of African identities and languages quite problematic.” Notably, one of the Western languages, English, has been active in England for many years and later became supreme outside the country. Hickey (2008: 25) states that “it is common to divide England into four dialect areas for the Old English period. The dialect areas of England can be traced back quite clearly to the Germanic tribes which came and settled in Britain from the middle of the 5th century onwards.” This evinces that English is a Western-originated language that warmed its way to dominance across the globe through colonial measures. This noted, amongst the visions of the colonial empire was the desire to establish the legacy of Western languages in the colonies. Hence, some of the previously colonised states upon reclaiming independence set out to restore and champion their aboriginal identities, which include indigenous language. Perdiagao (2018: i) avers that:

The dominance of colonial languages in the African continent has created barriers between neighbours. So much time is spent perfecting the English language in Ghana that one does not learn Kwa languages or even French to communicate with French-speaking neighbours in the Ivory Coast. These barriers have extended to the literary market. Furthermore, African writers are still more interested in being published in Europe and the U.S. rather than across Africa. A Senegalese writer will not think of publishing in South Africa; Paris will be the first thing on his mind. A Kenyan does not seek literary agents in Angola; he will go to London before anywhere else. A Mozambican will prefer to go to Lisbon’s Book Fair instead of the Lagos Book Fair.

According to Ojaide (1992: 43), “there is the Eurocentric temptation to see modern African literature written in these European (Western) languages (English, French and Portuguese) as an extension of European literature.” Equally important, the supremacy of Western languages in African literature could be traced through the manifestation of Anglophone (English), Francophone (French) and Lusophone (Portuguese) African literatures:

The Anglophone African literature

The term, Anglophone, has come to be used to refer to an English speaker. Therefore, Anglophone African literature becomes a field of study that centres on African literary works penned and expressed in the English language. This means that the English language has become the medium to instruct scholars to assert and re-assert African literature. Many literary texts that are penned by prominent African writers exude an Anglophone approach as they express the standard features of African literature in English. Cloete (1996: 27) states that “English-speaking writers (Anglophone) started coming into the picture in the late fifties with the Nigerian writers such as Achebe and Soyinka featuring prominently.” Both Achebe and Soyinka are some of the African writers that embraced African literature in English. Most writers institutionalised as the carrier of the message that African writers sought to relay and it has kept these writers within bounds to an extent that it is only through it to have a message distributed to a variety of ears in the world. Prah (2009: 3) notes that “in so-called Anglophone

Africa, yesterday and today, in the sub-culture of the elite one could more or less get by with monolingualism based on English.” The Anglophone African literature is dominantly notable in the regions that were formerly under the British authority such as the Northern, Southern, Central, Eastern and Western regions of Africa.

The Francophone African literature

According to Kapanga (2005: 19), Francophone African literature is generally used to specify the sub-Saharan African literature penned in the French language by African or international authors. This scholar further postulates that Francophone is derived from the term Francophonie, which is a neologism devised by Onesine Redus. As European powers shared and disseminated control in Africa, in the mid-19th century, the French empire colonised these African states: Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania, Tunisia, Mali, Côte d’Ivoire, Niger, Senegal and Chad, of which, Bokamba (1991) notes that they have sustained the legacies and policies of colonial languages introduced by the French in their educational system that comprises a level of illiteracy higher than that of other counterparts. Kapanga (2005:19) affirms that “since independence, Francophone African literature has evolved along a trajectory similar to its English counterpart. In the 1960s, many writers dealt with the clash of cultures, disillusionment with the native elites, and the latter's gross mismanagement of public affairs.” This emphasises the influence that colonial past still upholds upon African literature despite the dispensation of independence in the African continent.

The Lusophone African literature

Lusophone is widely used to refer to Portuguese speaking people. Keaya (2009: i) notes that “Lusophone is a word that means Portuguese-Speaking and *Luso* refers to a tribe of people present in the western part of the Iberian Peninsula, Lusitani, during the centuries preceding the Common era.” Furthermore, one of the legacies of colonial rule led by the Portuguese empire could be traced from the birth of Lusophone African literature that today, has become a “fashionable cultural commodity in Portugal, markedly in music, literature, and cuisine, while Portuguese-speaking Africans express a great deal of esteem and fondness for Brazilians, who possess significant influence in Lusophone Africa through the dissemination of media (particularly soap operas), music, and soccer” (Weeks, 2012: 209). During the scramble for Africa, amongst the European powers that took part in the colonising of African states, Portugal was furnished with several states to govern and as a result, the “Pardue’s *Ideologies of Marginality* and Arenas’ *Lusophone Africa*, succeed in exploring this interplay as found in the contemporary popular culture of the São Paulo periphery and the palop (Portuguese-speaking African countries: Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, and São Tomé and Príncipe)” (Weeks, 2012: 210).

The Language debate amongst African scholars

The predominance of Western languages in African literatures engendered spirited debates amongst African scholars. Notably, scholars such as Achebe and Ngugi held clashing views when it comes to the status and position of Western languages in the African context. It is Ngugi who postulates that “language in literature as in politics it spoke as if its identity or the crisis of its own identity was that of a society as a whole and the literature produced in European languages was given the identity of African literature as if there had never been literature in African languages” (Ngugi, 1986: 22). This scholar interrogated these languages through an African voice and concerned himself with post-colonial ways of decolonisation. His literary work presented new ways of postcolonial writing and epitomised the authenticity of African

literature. For instance, most scholars in the literature aver that Ngugi's post-colonial narration, *Devil on the cross*, is a literary representation of resistance to the supremacy of Western languages in African literature. It was penned in the African language, Gikuyu, with the title, *Caitani Hultharaba Ini* but later translated to English. Helland (2013: 1) notes that "Writing in Gikuyu can be seen as one of several counter-discursive strategies he employs to achieve the goal of 'decolonization of the mind'." Gikuyu is an African-rooted language that is "spoken primarily by the Kikuyu people (*Agĩkũyũ*) of Kenya. Numbering about 7 million which is 22% of Kenya's population" (Benson, 1964: i).

The novel cultural imagery through idioms, ironies and folkish language that denote African culture throughout the novel. It opens up with a testament from the narrator: "This story is an account of what I, Prophet of Justice, saw with these eyes and heard with these ears when I was borne to the rooftop of the house..." (p. 8). Odu (1988: 89) states that "The pages of the novel literally overflow with these traditional modes of Gikuyu common speech which, being a common property of the people, is generously used by both positive and negative characters alike, including the narrator." Abis (2011: 1) asserts, "*Devil on the cross* contains many issues and concerns that are central to Ngugi's views of post-colonial African politics and literature." Kenya was formerly colonised by the British forces and this birthed that the Anglophone African literature in the post-colonial Kenya. However, the Kenyan writer, Ngugi, among others, took a different angle in expressing post-colonial African literature. He believes that "with the death of colonialism, a new society is being born. And, with it new literature" (Ngugi, 1993: 7).

Other African scholars take a different perspective regarding the use of Western languages in African literature and argue that Western languages can be used to advance African literature. This includes scholars such as Soyinka and Achebe. Moreover, Soyinka (1988: 10) states that "and when we borrow an alien language to sculpt or paint in, we must begin by co-opting the entire properties in our matrix of thought and expression. We must stress such a language, stretch it, impact and compact it, fragment and reassemble it with no apology, as required to bear the burden of experiencing and of experiences, be such experiences formulated or not in the conceptual idioms of that language." The scholar above advocate the use of the European language to their advantage. His notable literary works that were expressed in the Western language, English, can buttress this. Correspondingly, Achebe (1975: 62) maintains that the English language will be able to bear the weight of the African experience, but it will be an adjusted English, still in full rapport with its ancestral Europe but refined to integrate with the new African surroundings.

Conclusion

This paper sought to navigate through the complexities of the language question in African literature subsequent to the reclamation of independence. It has scrutinised the authenticity of Western languages in the body of African literature. The advent of colonialists in Africa altered the landscape of the continent to the extent of posing a menace to African indigenous languages. The supremacy of Western languages at the expense of African indigenous languages is a vexing malady that needs to be examined and re-examined. Further research to uplift African indigenous languages while maintaining an effective mode of communication amidst a variety of states, races and tribes is needed to attempt to remedy the alienation of indigenous languages in African literature.

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