

Revisiting the language debate in African literatures

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Abstract: As language is still one of the main concerns of African nations, this paper aims to revisit the debate of the Kenyan Ngugi and the Nigerian Chinua Achebe regarding the use of European languages in African Literatures. Thus, it also comes to terms with the political role of language and literature as a tool of liberation as well as the political role of African writers.

Keywords: European languages, African literatures, power.

Language is one of the most controversial themes in African literature. It can be argued that when Europeans arrived in Africa, the project of colonization was not only through military and political force, but also through their languages and texts. However, Imperialism also acts in the symbolic sphere. It is something that has to do with mind and representation, not only a matter of military, political power or the search of profit.

Nevertheless, European Empires were not only shaped by military conflict, destruction of communities and their economies, displacement of peoples and the quest for profits, but also through a less obvious form, their hegemony was also imposed by various forms of cultural ways. As effective as oral communication, literature created channels for the exchange of colonial ideals. In their various romances, memoirs, adventure tales, and poetry, the metropolis sent its view of the world to be consolidated in the colonies. In this way, “the

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writer is the original and ultimate colonizer, conquering the space of consciousness with the exclusionary and divisive structures of representation” (SPURR, 1993: 92).

Thus, through their written language Europeans formulated a strategy of negation, conceiving the *Other* as absence or emptiness. For them, Africa was an open space to be invented and written languages played the role of creation, exactly as God has done in Genesis. They used their word to efface one’s reality, giving birth to a new place.

Nonetheless, colonization has to do with the making of native’s consciousness using subtle and soft formulas. After all, discourses are not clearly in the sphere of violence. Discourses are gradually and pervasively penetrated in the *Other’s* unconscious. Eleke Bohemer calls attention to the colonial maps and their classifications and codes that were imported from Europe and matched to colonized peoples were often entirely arbitrary.

Colonial maps grew dense with old toponyms applied to new contexts-names like New York, Windsor, Perth, East London, Margate, or the many Newcastles the world over. New places, named after the regions and towns left behind, re-created in some part the symbolic experience of the old world. But at the same time they marked out a new region, where a new life could begin to unfold. Naming set up a synchronous time frame for the colonies: though not Europe, they were declared to be contiguous to Europe, and subject to it (BOHEMER, 1995: 17).

When texts were not sent from the metropolis to the colonies, they were produced in the colonies by the representatives of the imperial power and those texts have the intention of maintaining the privilege of the metropolis, as Ashcroft says:

Their detailed reportage of landscape, custom and language, they inevitably privilege the centre, emphasizing the “home” over the “native”, the “metropolitan” over the “provincial” or “colonial and so forth. (...) can be illustrated by the poems and stories of Rudyard Kipling. For example, in the well-known poem “Christmas in India” the evocative description of a Christmas day in the heat of India is contextualized by invoking its absent English counterpart (ASHCROFT, 1989: 5).

176 Ashcroft is also attentive to another kind of imperial literature, it is the one written by the natives but “under imperial license”. It is the case of African

missionary literature. “The producers signify by the very fact of writing in the language of the dominant culture that they have temporarily or permanently entered a specific and privileged class endowed with the language, education, and leisure necessary to produce such works” (ASHCROFT, 1989: 5).

Colonialist texts generally occlude the effects of empire on colonized peoples, and their responses to invasion. Imperial texts, therefore, mask the suffering of millions of people that were submitted to the cruel system, masking the realities, while inventing a new one. The intention of colonial writing is to reveal a system that represents the state of degradation of the *Other* as natural, an innate part of the natives’ lives. This is the reason it is determined by stereotypes that concur to erase the native’s agency, diversity, resistance, and thinking voices.

On the other side, in their writing, European imperialists constructed a heroic image of themselves as civilizers of the world. Their texts were full of explicit ideologies of moral, cultural, and racial supremacy, functioning as key to legitimize theories of racial and cultural supremacy.

It is worth noting that in every colony they started a new history, relegating the pre-colonial history to a sphere of inexistence. In their histories, they were always the ones who were in charge to give meaning to the African emptiness.

Nevertheless, the story started to be changed in the middle of twentieth century when nationalists began to reject the European project. The independence of African nations should include the decolonization of culture and the rewriting of history. Literature played a crucial role in this revision of History. The aim of African literature was to deconstruct the history told by the settler, a history that condemned men and women, objects of that history to immobility, and silence, as Fanon remarks:

The settler makes history and is conscious of making it. And because he constantly refers to the history of his mother country, he clearly indicates that he himself is the extension of that mother country. Thus the history which he writes is not the history of the mother country which he plunders but the history of his own nation in regard to all that she skims off, all that she violates and starves. The immobility to which the native is condemned can only be called in question if the native decides to put an end to the history of colonization - the history of pillage - and to bring into existence the history of the nation - the history of decolonization (FANON, 1967: 40).

Thus, one of the main features of this literature was the decolonization of culture through an African literature that aims to refute European assumptions of Africa as the “dark continent,” that needed to be “enlightened” by European civilization, a notion that some European writers helped to disseminate. In an attempt to deconstruct their history of disempowerment which colonialism established, the early African male writers and critics have emphasized in their works the abuses and cruelties of the settler over the native. Fanon historically located the point at which certain psychological formations became possible. He provides an important analysis of how historically bound systems can perpetuate themselves as psychology, using the example of the colonizer/colonized conflict through the image of the settler and the native village. According to him, although there is a physical reality of habitation, there is also psychological reality between the two, and when we see this physical and mental connection, there is an understanding of the constructed identities. He proposes that the colonial world is really a Manichean world. As he states,

Fanon writes that the settler town is opposed to the colonized town forming a polarized world, of “two zones opposed”. He describes the settler town as a “strongly-built town; all made of stone and steel (...) the streets are covered with asphalt ... The settler’s town is a well-fed town, an easygoing town; its belly is always full of things. The settler’s town is a town of white people, of foreigners” (FANON, 1967: 30).

On the other hand, the native’s town constitutes the opposition, the negation of the settler’s one: It is “the Negro village, the medina, the reservation is a place of ill fame, peopled by men of evil repute. It is a world without spaciousness; men live there, top of each other (...) The native town is a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light” (FANON, 1967: 30).

For Fanon binary oppositions governed the colonized world. In a world created by the colonists white is opposed to black as evil to good, colonizer to colonized and civilized to primitive. In this Manichean world, the white is instilled with superiority while the black represents the savage.

African writers main goal was to deconstruct this ideological discourse, which was implanted during the colonialism, but unfortunately, the project of African dignity restoration was not extended to women. African males were in charge to bring about women’s need speaking from them, effacing their voices.

Nationalists rewriting of history had searched the deconstruction of colonizer's discourse, imposing their own as barriers to African women.

Language and culture were one of the mainsprings of African nationalist project of decolonization. The colonization of culture was one of the key aspects that were widely discussed by nationalists who claimed that a true decolonization was not only political independence, but also a decolonization of culture, asserting African identity through their values, cultures and languages. As far as language and texts were recognized as an important tool in the project colonization, texts were also used as a strategy to decolonize culture. For African writers, literary texts and arts in general were vehicles to be used to as part of the struggle, as a medium to inform and educate people, as well as rewrite African's history, giving a response to the Empire. At this time, natives' creative practice could be seen as weapon of transformation, a way of forging a new reality thus, "great many men and women who up till then would never have thought producing a literary work, now that they find themselves in exceptional circumstances, (...) feel the need to speak to their nation, to compose the sentence which expresses the heart of the people and to become the mouthpiece of a new reality in action" (FANON, 1963: 180).

Though, at that moment, language played a very controversial role. Would African intellectuals try to decolonize History and culture using the language of former masters? Or would they switch to another code? But in a country with a large variety of ethnic communities with their different languages, which language could be used? But, if people did not master European languages and nationalist discourses could not target common people, Could they really be considered discourses of decolonization? Who is the decolonization for? For whom is African literature directed to? This essay aims to access those questions, not to providing final answers but to create a room to some reflection bringing to light the positions of the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, the Kenyan Ngugi Wa Thiong'O and the Martinique Frantz Fanon concerning the role of language in the African creative processes as well as in the African postcolonial societies as a whole.

Ngugi Wa Thiong'O assumes that due to its character of a carrier of culture, the imposition of a foreign language means to be colonized by the other customs and values. Thus, European Empires were not only shaped by military conflict, destruction of communities and their economies, displacement

of peoples and the quest for profits, but also through a less obvious form, their hegemony also through language and culture, through symbolic violence which had as its main goal the colonization of minds, an invisible, acute and effective way to shape the *Other*. In addition, European languages were not imposed only as a means of communication but also as a tool of civilization, through them the natives had to learn how to speak a foreign idiom but above of all to imitate the master's behaviour, the colonial culture. But for the author "culture embodies those moral, ethical and aesthetic values, the set of spiritual eyeglasses, through which they come to view themselves and their place in the universe. Values are the basis of people's identity, their sense of particularity as members of the human race" (NGUGI, 1993: 441). Nevertheless acquiring the masters' culture had an ultimate goal to interfere in the natives' perception of themselves, effacing the own identity, gradually replacing by the colonial one, thus, transforming Africans into Europeans or Kenyans into British people. And according to Ngugi, language had a very special role in this scenario because:

all this is carried by language. Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history. Culture is almost indistinguishable from the language that makes possible its genesis, growth, banking, articulation and indeed its transmission from one generation to the next (NGUGI, 1993: 441).

Therefore, Ngugi defends that what British people really transmitted through their language was the Anglo-Saxon civilization and this was done to the detriment of African civilization. And in this process texts and literature played a very significant role because apparently naive texts with the purpose of entertainment were actually transmitters of British perceptions of life as for example their racial arrogance and a profound disdain for African values. Poems, novels and plays that disseminated life in Great Britain as the paradise on earth and the colonies and their natives as "The White Man's Burden" had the implication of taking natives to start devaluing their own culture, assuming a foreign behaviour. For Ngugi, this invisible colonization is much more difficult to fight because it is internal and pervasive. And political independence without decolonization of the mind will not lead to freedom, this could be only a palliative but the real illness would not be cured. This means that the project of colonization continues but Europeans would not have to lead it, natives who had mastered colonial language and culture would play the role.

However, if African writers' main goal was to reassert African identity, retell African History, decolonizing culture there was no meaning in continuing to use English. For Ngugi, the use of the European language was a kind of cultural neo-slavery, as he poses:

The question is this: we as African writers have always complained about neo-colonial economic and political relationship to Euro-America. Right. But by our continuing to write in foreign languages, playing homage to them, are we not on the cultural level continuing that neo-slavish and cringing spirit? What is the difference between a politician who says Africa cannot do without imperialism and the writer who says Africa cannot do without European languages? (NGUGI, 1993: 449-450).

For that reason, the author has vehemently proposed the abandonment of European languages and a return to the African languages as a way to restore which had been dismantled by the presence of the colonizer. This could be one way to the true reconstruction of African identities, and language should play a crucial role in this process. Also, the African writer could take the opportunity to really challenge linguistic imperialism and patterns of production based on readership.

Thus, Ngugi himself ceased to write in English and started writing in kikuyu, his mother tongue. Proposing that if the west wanted to approach African literary works it should be via translations. Ngugi attitude was not simply an individual act, "it may be seen as part of a strategy of resistance which the sensitive points at the periphery are bound to put up against the manipulation by the centre, and against the possibility of eventual absorption by it" (MUKHERJEE, 1989: 48).

Though his act may arise out many questions, one of them is related to the audiences. Writing in their mother tongues, African writers have access to a smaller audience and certainly had not reached the West as those authors who had chosen English as a medium of their creative process, however their literary works would be confined to some specific groups. But of course reach the West was not the Ngugi's goal. At that moment the writer's main preoccupation was creating a discourse of resistance that was able to challenge both the West and African writers.

Another question regarding Ngugi proposal of African languages exclusivity is that perhaps the changing of language does not reverse the

colonization process due to the deeply internalization of the Western thought by the writer. Certainly changing the language is a great strategy of resistance, but the author himself was schooled in the western tradition and it seems an irreversible process, the repetition of Western logic might be present if the writer changes the language. Though the process could be much more complex than it seems because deconstruct Western thought is to revise the structures in which African intellectuals own theoretical foundations are based on.

Nevertheless, another author that engages the debate regarding the use of English in African creative process with a very different perspective is Chinua Achebe. As Ngugi, Achebe also recognizes that English language was imposed as tool of colonial expansion. Colonizers have promoted the spread of their language based on a cultural and racial supremacy, and that are the “doubtful item” that comes with the language (ACHEBE, 1993: 431). But, at the end, Achebe defends that African writers should take the advantage of using English as a medium to their creative process.

But the author’s defense of English language presents some ambiguities that deserve some analysis. On one side Achebe defends that the English language should be appropriated by the African writers, transforming it in a way that could dismantle colonial tradition, aggregating African experience. It has “to be new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings” (ACHEBE, 1993: 434). This African English is certainly produced as a way to target African people, a form of asserting African identity in a way that could dislodge European point of view and dismantle colonial authority. That is what Bill Ashcroft denominates appropriation, “the process by which the language is taken and made to “bear the burden” of one’s own cultural experience” (ASHCROFT, 1989: 39). But, on the other side Achebe has also the preoccupation to target the West or international audiences which has to do with prestige and status, and, it is clear when he proposes that “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” (ACHEBE, 1993: 433). This Pidgin English capable to carry Achebe’s experiences is very well mastered in his works and could be one possible answer to the question of the writing of African Anglophone literature, though this medium had to be disentangled from colonial standard. However it does not seem to be the author’s

ideal as he proposes a connection to the centre through a non alteration of the English status as an international language. Thus, the author is very pragmatic and has a profound interest in targeting the audiences outside the continent. It appears that his main focus is really to take advantage of using English as a global language spoken in almost every corner of the world, which could give the African writer the audience and a notoriety that he would not have if he had chosen to write in Yoruba or Hausa. Additionally, it is relevant to notice that Achebe's defense could have a strong connection with the publishing market, the chance of controlling an international medium seems very comfortable due to an affluent marked at sight.

Also, it seems that regarding the role of English in African creative practice and the role of African literature itself, Achebe proposes a hybrid English, a language in between Africa and West, but perhaps there is a lack of balance in all of this because Achebe works written in English would have much more impact internationally than in Africa. Nevertheless, African writers who choose English would face a different barrier, while those who write in kikuyu or Yoruba would have access to specific groups, those who write in English runs the risk of only having access to a small educated group in Africa and the international audiences.

But, for Achebe the use of English is justifiable because the European language is capable to aggregate several ethnic groups that constitute Nigeria and while an ethnic language would target only one ethnic group, the literatures written in English could target several groups in the territory and in the whole continent what gives English the character of a national language. The author adds that English gives the opportunity of many people within the borders of Nigeria to communicate, which would be impossible without a language in common. Here, the author recognizes Nigeria as an artificial construction invented by the Europeans that promoted the enforced unity of several ethnic groups within the borders of an imaginary community. Though, Achebe does not deconstruct or challenge the artificiality of the European construction, on contrary, he recognizes and legitimizes it proposing that the English language could be the cement to promote the unity of different ethnic groups within the borders of the emerging nation.

Nonetheless, it is worth noting that Achebe as many nationalist and political leaders continue the ideological project of enforced unity that has

entrapped the continent in a series of conflicts. It is obvious that there is a great paradox in the use of English as a national language as proposed by the author, that regards to the fact that the English languages is really capable of uniting a small parcel of certain people from privileged groups across the continent, therefore it is also a factor of severe exclusion of all those uneducated people who did not have the opportunity to attend colonial schools. Among those groups of excluded of Achebe's artificial project of nation are most of the women who were excluded from educational systems.

Perhaps, one way of integrating people within the national borders would not be through the imposition of a language that effaces pluralism and diversity. And, the imposition of one European language as cement to close fissures of an African nation is a kind of oppression that certainly would exclude minorities. Thus, there is another trap involved in a choice like this, African languages would reflect anti-progress, backwardness and poverty and the mastering of the colonial language, on the side, reflecting progress, social recognition and development. In the end, this could mean the death of several languages.

In spite of Ngugi and Achebe present different perspectives, there is a convergent point between the two. Both authors have a divergent perspective regarding the role of English for the African writer, on the one side Ngugi believes that African creative process should be in African languages as a means to reassert identity, on the other side, Achebe seems to defend that it is very possible to bring into light African experience through a creative appropriation of English, bringing it to African writers own terms. However, in both approaches the people seem to assume a passive role. For that reason a literature that does not include people's experiences is also an imposition, irrespective of the way the artist decides to take, it is also part of production and consumption of a privileged part of the population.

Furthermore, the writer cannot forge any kind of freedom or liberation, being part of a process that continues silencing the other. While African nationalists used their works to discuss the racial question and the imposition of white's man authority, the question of diversity and the fragmentation within the nations was put aside. For that reason, African nationalists ran the risk of suffocating the *Others*, imposing their intellectual voices that generally resonate the ideals of an westernized small portion of the population that do not represent people's will.

That is the reason Frantz Fanon stated that the real goal of native's writing should be a revolutionary one. A national literature had to be a fighting literature forged within the people and to the people. But before coming to terms with this fighting literature, the writer has to pass some phases. During the first phase the native writer proves he has assimilated the culture of the occupying power. The literature produced in this phase shows that the writer has a European inspiration and it is possible to listen to the voices of the former masters through the mouth of the natives. In the assimilation phase writers despise African cultures, celebrating western culture. During the second phase, African writers celebrates freedom and is conscious of their role of asserting African values and customs, the literature is a perfect channel to achieve this goal, but African writers realize they are not part of the people, thus, the culture that is being celebrated is external, it is not part of the artists' reality. African values and customs are part of the people's lives but writers themselves have exterior relation with their own culture. Therefore, it is in the third phase African artists realise they have to go the people, being fully integrated in the people's lives. Fanon asserts that people from the masses should be part of the reconstruction of history and reassertion of African identities. The writer should learn from the people and their agency should be present in this literature. For that reason when African writers go to the people, those voices will resonate in their works. In this third phase, the fighting phase, the native writer will shake the people he will be an awakener of the people, "a fighting literature, a revolutionary literature, and a national literature" (FANON, 1963: 179).

Additionally, the national literature proposed by Fanon is divergent from Achebe because the unity did not come from the fallacy of utilizing a European language as an instrument of national unity, on the contrary, the national literature comes from the peoples' experiences and the peoples' participation in the act. Here culture is not a means of celebration and a weapon against the colonizer, it has become an intrinsic part of the artists' self that learnt from the people. Though, for Fanon that is the only form to produce a decolonizing discourse, a discourse that function as weapon against the colonial atrocities.

Furthermore, when African writers decide to listen to the languages of the people, certainly not only a single unison voice will come out, but the plurality of voices that constitute the nations. And only forging a place to accommodate

those several voices and respecting pluralism that is possible to proffer discourses of decolonization of mind as well as forging national literatures.

Resumo: Considerando a questão linguística uma das principais preocupações no continente africano, neste ensaio pretende-se reconsiderar o debate promovido por Chinua Achebe e Ngugi Wa Thiong'O acerca do uso das línguas europeias na escritura das literaturas africanas. Posto assim, também consideraremos o papel político do escritor, bem como o lugar da literatura como instrumento de transformação social.

Palavras-chave: línguas europeias, literaturas africanas, poder.

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