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Determining Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Position in the African Literary-Language Debate

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Abstract

This paper intends to address the dichotomy of choosing English as a means of literary expression by writers who belong to the postcolonial domain simply by the virtue of being born in countries where the colonial construct has ceased to exist. It aims to transcend the familiar post-colonial trope of English as the idiom of choice vis-à-vis that of compulsion and tries to locate Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's take on the politics of linguistic choice when it comes to literary creation. Taking active clues from her interviews and public lectures, this paper tries to situate the author's point of view within the nativist and globalist language debate in African writing by comparing her to her literary predecessors Chinua Achebe and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, who have been prolific writers in the English language. It aims to study Adichie's authorial perspective and narrative ideology in terms of language, literature, bilingualism, identity and power.

Keywords: post-colonial, bilingual, linguistic choice, narrative ideology, identity.

Introduction:

Language and linguistic expression remain critically enmeshed with one's individual and communal identity. A sociological construct, language is not only a tool of cultural expression but also a vehicle for the cultural transmission of an entire value system that holds within itself popular norms, societal modalities, customs and simply a way of life for a group of people at a particular period. This attribute of language possibly lends itself to a deep contestation in postcolonial studies due to the very nature of the discipline that studies the impact of colonial and imperial forces on the landscape and mindscape of the colonized. The very premise of language in postcolonial studies plays out on an understanding that the imperial powers sought to gain control of a culture insidiously through linguistic indoctrination and subversion of native language impulses and that the resistance of the hegemonized native comes through an attempt to reclaim identity through pervasive language appropriation of the dominant group. This paper looks at the language debate situated in Anglophone African writing, reviews the predominant scholarly and critical leanings and locates Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's ideology in using English as her authorial medium of choice, as one of the representative third generation Nigerian authors.

Contextualizing the Literary-Language Debate in African Writing in English:

The postcolonial narrative places English as a distinctly political language. Talib (2002:2) demonstrates the complexities associated with the word and its implications:

The word "English" refers to both ethnicity and language. Its double meaning underlines a complication that is still with us. The word English also has a link to nationality, viewed in terms

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of residence, a sense of belonging to a community, or the citizenship of an existing political state.

The code of the imperialists, English was used as an instrument to facilitate access to power and opportunities within the colonial state, as well as to categorize the ruled into a convenient homogeneity. Post-colonized societies continue to use the language mostly as lingua franca of convenience to communicate between different cultural units within a nation state. While English has undoubtedly been introduced and cemented in the erstwhile colonial paradigm, many scholars trace the present ubiquity of English to the American global economy, the boom of consumer culture, technology, films and the ever-expanding spectrum of world politics. The intrinsic argument of this language use debate therefore centres on the hypothetical continuation of the colonial hegemony by the use of the colonizer's language for literary expression. The contention has two evident stances: one of globalism and the other of nativist tendencies. This section will delve into the different arguments placed by both groups in Anglophone African writing.

Before placing ourselves at the centre of the language debate, let us consider how the postcolonial discipline looks at the dynamics of language, textuality and power. Language is not merely an individual enterprise. Taking a language that is not native to one's own would also pre-suppose an understanding of and involvement in another culture. C.L. Innes (2007:97) cites Bakhtin's "Discourse in the Novel" to elucidate a powerful nexus that exists between a text and its cultural context:

To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it also means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization.

The primary means through which linguistic imperialism was sustained in the colonial times was through the codification of a "standard" English that was inherently imposed through a rigid educational framework. As NgugiWaThiong'O believes:

The domination of a people's language by the languages of the colonizing natives was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonized. (*Decolonizing the Mind* 1986:16)

The resistance within this paradigm came from the pre and post-independence literary output, voices from the colonies that have used the Centre's language to talk about the peripheral experiences. Ashcroft et al (2002:8) discuss the 'cultural hegemony' of the Received Standard English of the metropolis as the only acceptable variety, and the process by which this standardization has been subsequently and consistently dismantled by the writers of the New Literatures in English. Ashcroft et al use the terms 'abrogation' and 'appropriation' as conjunctive strategies that help in the de-stabilization of the standard British English. Moreover, the concepts of abrogation and appropriation of the colonizer's tongue are accompanied also by a desire to re-orient the narratives presented in the western discourse. The notions of rewriting a western text or 'writing back' to the metropolitan center are motivated by correctional leanings to historical events and subverting colonial attitudes in the western text.

However, this post-colonial discourse on writing back and appropriating a master's tongue to reclaim power can sometimes be simplistic, problematic and limiting in its scope to understand the entire nature of the language debate. Postcolonial narratives thrive on the creation of oppositional binaries between the centre and the periphery, the ruler and the ruled, the powerful and the marginalized, the global and the local. This binary often overlooks the problems endemic to a specific locality or the several ramifications in the linguistic choices that a group of people makes. Many critics like Karin Barber (1995:3) and Sen (2009:115) have pointed out the injustice in the postcolonial narratives of the 1980s and 1990s, asserting that it is a trenchant means of limiting the freedom of the writers and continuing the colonial control in a subtle manner. A closer inspection of the problem, Sen (2009:115) claims

...reveals a more striated topography than is accounted for in discourses prioritizing oppositional categories such as West and East, global and local, hegemony and subservience, or the clash of cultures.

The problem with the notion of appropriation, thus, is that the very nature of the argument subsumes the condition that an African writer must write in English in order to respond to the imperial centre. The authorial choice to write in a particular language is completely diminished.

The idiom of choice, in these discussions, is oddly blended with the idiom of compulsion: the African writer chooses to write in English because he has to.

(Barber 1995:4)

Let us try to understand the complex striations that drive the narrative of Anglophone African writing. The argument for and against using English to identify African literature began at the language conference at the Makerere University College in Kampala, Uganda in 1962. On the one hand, the nativist voices like ObiajunwaWali specified that the 'misdirected' use of English and French as the language of educated African writing could lead to the sterility, what he called the 'dead end of African Literature'(1997:333) and considered Anglophone African Literature a mere appendage of the British literature. The most famous voice from the nativist camp is perhaps that of NgugiWaThiong'O, a Kenyan writer who renounced writing in English after having a successful career, and started writing in his native Giryaku and Kiswahili languages. His point of view has particularly Marxist leanings. In his farewell treatise to English writing *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986), Ngugi holds a particularly Marxist view of the formal education system in Kenya. The use of English to grant opportunities to students, especially economic, is typically reminiscent of a Marxist base and superstructure model:

In Kenya, English became more than a language; it was *the* language, and all the others had to bow before it in deference...thus the most coveted place in the pyramid and in the system was only available to the holder of an English language credit card. English was the official vehicle and the magic formula to colonial elitedom. (1986: 11)

Speaking of the unmistakable correlation between language and culture, Ngugi focuses on the communal role of language in his consideration of an audience while writing:

The choice of language actually predetermines the answer to the most important question for the producers of imaginative literature: "For whom do I write? Who is my audience?"

(Quoted in C.L Innes)

Ngugi's belief is located in the societal duty of an author to his culture, in writing for the mass in a language that is intelligible to the common people who are not privileged enough to receive an English medium instruction. He advocates the cultural preservation through literary efforts in native African languages, which he feels if not done, will lead to the endangerment of native African language and culture by the dominant English tongue.

On the other side of the language debate is the pro-Anglophone writing, whose biggest advocate is the Nigerian Chinua Achebe. Achebe's vision is more global in his understanding of the use of English and the interconnectedness of his audience. Achebe argues that writing in English enables him to operate within the regional dialects in Nigeria and invite a strong readership both within and outside Nigeria. He invokes the bilingual situation in his country, which is a result of colonial history and which remains undeniable:

Those African writers who have chosen to write in English and French...are bi-products of the same processes that made the new nation-states of Africa....Those of us who might have inherited the English language may not be in a position to appreciate the value of the inheritance. Or we may go on resenting it, because it came as a part of a package deal that included many other items of doubtful value, especially the atrocities of racial arrogance and prejudice which may yet set the world on fire. But let us not, in rejecting the evil, throw out the good with it.

(*English and the African Writer* 1965, 1997: 345)

Achebe highlights the representational value of writing in a world language. He identifies himself as a political writer and uses his writing openly to engage with the politics of his country and his history on a world stage. He carefully avoids the standardization of English by claiming that it is not the prerogative of the third world to speak the standardized dialect, having himself used Nigerian English in his writing, an English that will be familiar on a global stage, yet contain traces of African nativity. He calls his literary vision local and problematizes the expectations of universality in the textual narratives of the West. Debating on the length of time before a language is considered local; Achebe points out that Arabic and Swahili are considered local African languages of expression, although their origin is Non-African:

A language spoken by Africans on African soil, a language in which Africans write, justifies itself. (*Thoughts on the African Novel* 1973)

The chief contention of this paper therefore is in the negation of the postcolonial constructs of binaries that sustain the nativist and globalist debate when it comes to literary expression in English. These oppositional arguments are losing their relevance in the current world scenario where transnationalism is the new form of global connectedness. The next section will present a particular point of view when it comes to the Anglophone African language debate, the voice of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a prolific Nigerian author who divides her time between Nigeria and America, writing in both continents.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Literary Praxis:

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has been a productive and well-published writer since 2003, who has dealt with important issues of humanizing Igbo history, personalizing stories especially from a gendered perspective, elaborating on issues of race, class and gender politics, both on the national and international stage. She has been often described in flattering correlation with Chinua Achebe both in terms of style and literary content, and she has herself admitted to pervasive influences, paying homage to his novel *Things Fall Apart* in the opening lines to her very first novel *Purple Hibiscus* (2003). However, as Tunca (2018: 111) argues:

Adichie's position as an African writer in the twenty-first century differs from Achebe's in the second part of the twentieth. Whereas, Achebe mostly denounced what had been written about Africa by white European writers...and went on to redress the balance by crafting his own stories about the continent, Adichie, while continuing to condemn the policing of literary discourses about Africa by the west, also finds herself in a context where many African stories have already been written but have not yet properly been read. Both writers, in sum, are battling very similar reductive stereotypes from different temporal vantage points, a fact that in turn largely conditions their responses.

Adichie talks about this comparison with an older generation of writers and the present writing situation in a lecture at the University of Nigeria, November 29, 2013. She talks about the complexities of a "literary loneliness" and the problem of storytelling and its ambient expectations:

We want to tell the true story. We want to tell our stories in all its complexity and we do not want to tell our story with apology...It's different for us today. Our anxieties about identity are less fraught and, in many ways, we have the luxury of not only easier travel and easier communication, we also have the luxury of ambivalence.

This statement is key to understanding the literary climate in which Adichie writes. She lives in a more globalized world, having access to education in both Nigeria and America, subsequently publishing primarily in America and then in her country of origin. She does not battle the same issues of having to set the history straight as did the writers before her, although she does represent history in her second novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), as a tribute to the history of her nation, especially her tribe. Engaging with an audience of an international stage, Adichie is motivated more in the ideological choice of a linguistic medium by the aesthetic and socio-political representation of Africa. In a Chatham House Address on June 25, 2018 Adichie communicates her point of view on storytelling and the importance of representation. Adichie says that her initial attempts at storytelling were entirely conditioned by her western reading. This did not reflect the reality of her world, a world of hot suns and mangoes and here she says lies the power of representation:

What this demonstrates I think is the power of stories and how impressionable and vulnerable we are at the face of stories. Because I had read books in which characters were white and foreign, I had become convinced that the stories that were worthy of books had characters that were white and foreign...but the unintended consequence was that I did not consciously, actively know that people like me...could also exist in literature.

Representation matters, if we only see one kind of person doing a certain job over and over, we begin to think that only that kind of person can do that job, which is of course not true. (Emphasis added)

Adichie speaks of the profound effect that reading CamaraLaye's *The Dark Child* (1953) had on her as a child, for it portrayed familiar characters and landscape in English and inspired her to write about things that she was familiar with, that she gleaned from regular, realistic observation.

If representation, perception, changing the dominant stereotypical Western African narrative and talking about complex issues of transnationalism, immigration, gender, race and class form the primary objective of her narrative ideology, then the global language English comes as the most natural choice. There is also the environmental and educational influence that propelled the choice of English. Having grown up in the university town of Nssuka, where both her parents were engaged in academia, exposure to English came naturally:

I grew up bilingual. I grew up speaking Igbo and English at the same time and I consider both to be my first languages. (Inbound Keynote speech 2018)

Adichie addresses the pressures of expectation that attends the event of writing as a Nigerian on a world stage. She has variously described herself as a realist storyteller but the act of storytelling does not start with a specific audience in mind. She writes because she wants to be read and the politics of representation and authenticity while writing and publishing in the West she feels is an inescapable African construct. Writing in English not only gives her a wider international audience but also a domestic one because many of her generation and those after are losing contact with Igbo, which is undoubtedly a cause for concern but also one which is inevitable. She finds it constricting that it should fall upon a writer to perpetuate a language, in her case, Igbo, when parents of her generation do not culturally transmit it to their children. As a conscientious parent, she speaks to her young daughter in Igbo

being fluent in the language, but does not believe that “people should be excluded from a cultural identity to which they have been born just because they do not speak the language.” (Igbo Conference, 2018). English terms and extensive use of the language has become the norm for her generation due to the bilingual and bicultural influences that are an ineluctable fallout of the state sanctioned education in English. About Ngugi’s nativist views on the responsibilities of a writer, she says:

I am very sympathetic to Ngugi’s argument, but I think it’s impractical. And I think it’s limiting. The idea that only Giyuku, for example, can capture the Kenyan experience is just no longer true. (Believer Magazine, 2009)

She speaks of her native tongue Igbo as the language of emotion and warmth but not one in which she feels that she can convey profound matters that interest her. But unlike BuchiEmcheta or Achebe before her, she does not feel the compulsion to write in English merely to reach a wider African audience. English for Adichie comes more naturally as a tool of expression. She posits bilingualism as a reality in her country, something she feels finds reflection in the linguistic devices in her work. She writes in an English that is not the standard British English, but of her country and her people.

In a discussion at the University of Fribourg (2019), Adichie expounds on her written idiom. She talks of the bilingual condition in her country that has led her to become ‘a mongrel of Englishes’. She is fascinated by the phenomenon of ‘living in two languages, the negotiating back and forth’ (Believer interview, 2009), which is the reality of her native condition in Urban Lagos, an English “that is deeply flavoured by Igbo, the other language I speak”. (University of Fribourg discussion, 2019)

Adichie’s literary language reflects the realities of a personal English variance from a Pidgin English in the markets of Lagos to formal English in a university setting and she uses this mixed language to convey the reality of a society where a multiple variety of Englishes has exist. So it can be postulated here that unlike Ashcroft et al’s claim that code-switching is a linguistic strategy of language appropriation, of ‘writing back’, code-switching as represented by Adichie is a cultural and historical reality of the present Nigerian society.

Adichie feels that the term “African writer” brings with itself an incumbent implicature of loyalty to the continent, of inevitable positive representation, which may not be true. The pressures of citizenship, the proud avowal of African nationhood she feels reinforces the centre-periphery binary, one that she rejects completely:

The idea by the way of being proudly anything, linking pride and identity is a preoccupation of people who are inhabitants of the periphery. If you are in the centre you have automatically the privilege of not needing to declare your pride because your place in the world has never been in question...I have increasingly been troubled by the subtle and not so subtle constraints that this question (Are you an African writer?) implies. (“Shut Up and Write” 2018)

This statement not only addresses the constrictions in the postcolonial discourse that Adichie dismisses but also interrogates the debate of the choice of linguistic idiom after the state sanctioned existence of English language education for sixty years of independence. It can be argued that her strategy for ‘writing back’ is not as much of a corrective response to the centre as that of her predecessors but based on the reality of her experiences. She dismisses the label of a ‘political writer’ in an act that is in itself political but opines that reading human and humane stories from Africa as political commentary on the continent is oversimplifying the complex terrain of cultural and historical representation. She accepts the fact that a lot of Anglophone African writing began in the anti-colonial struggle, but the time is ripe to

move the conversation away from colonial underpinnings to a more realistic, cosmopolitan narrative. In a statement which is reminiscent of Achebe's "Don't fence me in" (1973), Adichie remarks:

I belong (to Africa)... but you must let me belong on my own terms, on multiple terms, for that is the essence of art. ("Shut up and Write", 2018)

Conclusion:

This paper is aimed at locating Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's position on the English literary-language debate within the African Anglophone postcolonial paradigm. A careful observation of the canonical postcolonial writings and attitudes towards the use of English has revealed the Foucauldian correlation of a discourse and its inherent cultural power. The choice of a language for literary expression, especially for representation is of course an ideological decision. However, as Adichie attests, the discourse about language use needs to move from the notion of English as a foreign entity, a colonial baggage in the postcolonial times to a naturalized and normative presence in an increasingly globalized world. English needs to be conceived as a language that is not a stagnating and fixed colonial enterprise, but an ever-expanding, responsive, flexible medium of representation in African writing. There needs to be greater authorial freedom of literary expression without the obligatory maxims of universality of cultural experiences in the portrayal of Africa, the dominant desire of the West for a political statement and the domestic expectation of cultural fidelity.

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