THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Redefining African Literature: The Language Dilemma

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to address the perennial question of: which language should African literature be written in? Over the decades, scholars in literature have weighed on the debate of the language of African literature (Mazrui, 1986, Adebisi 2010, Achebe 2000, Tanure 1992, Ngugi 1986, 2018, Mugane 2018) among a host of others. The major point of departure has been on whether African issues can be well expressed in a foreign language and whether writing in African languages does limit access to the audience on issues raised or provides the writer with enough resources to articulate his ideas within a multiplicity of languages characteristic of the African continent and beyond.

The main objective of this paper is therefore to analyze the possibilities available in the process of "Africanizing" Africa literature and whether language can exhibit or promote the process of writing African literature for a global audience. A coalesced analysis of various scholars on the issue of language will be highlighted as well as my views on the middle ground if any on the way forward.

Several pertinent areas on the language of African literature will be explored. This will include what is distinctively African literature, who qualifies to be called an African writer and to what extent does the medium of expression affect African literature in terms of it expressing the African agenda.

The paper will draw from scholarly papers, journals, texts and readings from various academic repositories both online and in libraries across Kenya utilizing a library based approach where data will be gathered from secondary sources outlined above.

Keywords: African, language, literature, colonialism

1. Introduction

Over the decades the question of language choice in Africa literature has caused significant debates in the literary circles within and outside the African continent. This discourse started in 1963 through the publication of an article entitled "*The Dead End of African Literature*" by Obiajunwa Wali after the first African conference of African Writers of English Expression held in Makerere University College, Kampala, Uganda in 1962. In his article he postulates that unless African writers write in African languages then they will be pursuing a dead end. That their acceptance and continued use of English and French as the medium of African writing has no chance of advancing the African agenda. He foresaw that if no literature is produced in African languages then they face extinction. He says:

The purpose of this article is not to discredit these writers, who have achieved much within an extremely difficult and illogical situation. It is to point out that 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 are merely pursuing a dead end, which can only lead to sterility, uncreativity, and frustration.

He asserts the African agenda and indeed the whole process of writing about Africa and African concerns and experiences can only be achieved through the use of African languages. This assertion led to contentions debates and discourses on the choice of language for what to be termed as African literature. Some of the questions raised being what is African Literature? Does the medium of writing tag literature as either European or African? Can a writer use a foreign language to express the African agenda? Most importantly was the issue of extinction of African languages since most of the literary outputs were being written in European languages. This paper attempts to examine various scholars and their views on the issue of language choice for the African writer and later derive a conclusion on what is the future of African literature written in foreign languages against a backdrop of growth of African Literature and the contentious issue of death of African languages.

This paper attempts to enrich the conversations on the medium of written African literature. The resurgence of calls to reAfricanize literature began way back in the 1960's and various scholars have contributed. My paper traces their views and attempts an intersection and finally proposes a middle ground. This stems from the renewed interest in writing in African languages spearheaded by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, a leading crusader of writing in African languages.

2. Debate on the Language of African Literature

Throughout the pre-colonial, colonial and post independent Africa, writers from the African continent have been involved in churning out literary works. Thematically, they have addressed themselves to a variety of issues that affected them individually and collectively as a society. Ranging from the debilitating effects of colonialism, culture shock, identity, urbanization and racial segregation almost all writers have utilized all forms of written literature to add their voice. In writing against the African background, African writers do not only write for the African continent or specifically to African readers but to an audience that is spread to all corners of the globe. In as much as the experiences, themes, messages, the ideas expressed are uniquely African the same should pass to non-African readers and audience sought. The question that arises then is which language should an African writer use to tell his story.

The debate on which language should African writers use has caused significant ripples on the pools of literary criticism (Adebisi, 2010). This implies that it's both an issue that demands constant debate and a problem that need urgent measures/strategies to be addressed and eventually solved. Ngugi (1986) has been a constant voice on the question of language of African literature. He states:

"Literature written by Africans in European languages can only be termed as Afro-American literature, that is, the literature written by Africans in European languages."

For Ngugi African literature can only be qualified as African if it is written in African languages for example Zulu, Xhosa, Gikuyu, Luo, Luganda. Thus reading a work of art by an African writer written in English, Spanish, French or any other non- African language should be read as Afro-European literature.

The question here is: What is the significance of a language used as a medium of expressing African content? Ngugi answers this pertinent question by stating:

.....African writers should write in a language that will allow him to communicate effectively with peasants and workers in Africa; in other words, he should write in an African language..... Literature published in African languages will have to be meaningful to the masses and therefore which closer to the realities of their situation ("On writing" pg. 151).

This statement throws the weight on the need to communicate to an audience in a language they understand, a language that causes meaning and reflects the realities of the situation: a language that presents the African realities affecting the masses; the peasants and workers. Ngugi's advocacy of this implies that an African audience can rightfully and meaningfully be engaged through literature in a language they understand: an African language.

For Ngugi therefore in analysis of his sentiments poses a critical view here that literature is for the masses. That when a writer writes he should do so for the masses to read him and address their issues. For any meaningful interaction between the two sides (writer/reader) the medium of expression must be accessible meaning the language used must be that of the masses. African masses can meaningfully be addresses in an African language as per Ngugi's views.

Moreover, Ngugi believes that presenting literature in foreign languages is an element of alienation: He states:

The language of an African child's formal education was foreign. The language of the books he read was foreign. Thought in him took the visible form of foreign language.....(The) colonial child was made to see the world and where he stands in it as seen and defined by or reflected in the culture of the language of imposition (pg 17).

Ngugi therefore asserts that language is a carrier of culture. A people's world view, their philosophies, their ideals and norms are expressed through a language. Consequently imposing a foreign language in African communities is displacing them from their cultural roots. For Ngugi therefore foreign language imposition on Africa needs to change. He calls for liberation from this colonial and post-colonial linguistic confines by writing and teaching in African languages. As a prolific crusader of the return to African language writing he has taken a lead by writing in his native Gikuyu language. He notes the following on the reception of *Caiaani Muthara-ba-ini*, a novel written in Gikuyu language (A translation of the Devil on the Cross)

The novel had an interesting kind of reception. At first it was read in families. When families gathered together in the evening, they would get one of their literate members to read for them. In this way the novel was appropriated and became part of the community's oral tradition. It was also read in buses and matatus. People would read for passengers between stops. Another example of the community's collective appropriator of the novel was the emergence of professional readers in bars. Someone would start reading the novel aloud while drinking his beer and when beer was finished, he would first put the novel down. And of course the other customers would have to offer him another round to get him another round to get him started again. So he would read and drink, read and drink, until the glass was empty and again refilled, and so on, through the evening "writing" 154).

Ngugi's view therefore is the peasants and workers were able to identify with the novel and appropriate it as one of its oral literature artefacts since it was written in a language they could understand. Mbele (1992) refutes this by noting that the audience/readers of literature are not socially stratified in a similar way. He says:

African society is also comprised of other social groups, including intellectuals. Quoting Mao Tung who stressed that literature and the arts must be for the masses he pointed out that literature and the arts are needed by the cadres being the advanced elements of the masses and have generally received more education; literature and art of a higher level are entirely necessary for them. (83).

Critics have at this point criticized Ngugi's insistence of writing, reading, and publishing in one language: Gikuyu as this could be a limiting factor in the accessibility of literature to other groups. As Karl Marx: quoted by Paul Lafaraugue points out:

Marx could read all European languages and write in three: German, French and English, to the admiration of language experts. He liked to repeat the saying "A foreign language is a weapon in the struggle of life." (439). For Karl Max then knowing and using a foreign language is not a sign of subjugation and alienation but a weapon that enables you know your enemy better and thus strategize on how to win freedom from the yokes of subjugation. Thus, writing in foreign languages gives a writer a wider audience to interact with his thematic concerns and in the process raising awareness. The struggles against apartheid in South Africa and the Mau Mau liberation moments documented in novels and other works of art gained international recognition primarily due to their publication in non-African languages. Tanure (1992) writes on this debate of language and African literature. He posits that there is absolutely no problem in one writing in a foreign language for example English. His view is premised on the fact that as much as the language is not African the content is peculiarly African. He states:

The language of modern African literature whether written in English, French or Portuguese is peculiarly African. (pg 54).

The stylistic resources that the writer employs for example proverbs, idioms, rhythms and oratorical structures are drawn from the African literary repertoire. Tenure believes that these resources are African and transplanting them into English does not affect in any way the content which remains African. He says:

African literature carries proverbs, symbols and folkloric connotations that are peculiar to the land. Thus the writer may be writing English, but the words have different symbolic meaning than they have in mainstream English (pg 54).

Tenure, then, believes English can only be used as a medium of expressing the African content. The enrichment with African literary symbols grounds the content as African despite being rendered in English. Tanure raises a very pertinent issue at this point: the relationship between content and language in expressing the African agenda. He believes that content overrides language in the process of qualifying what is to be labelled African literature. He argues that as long as the thematic concerns raised are African in origin and nature then a writer is at liberty to use any language at his disposal to articulate the ideas and concerns.

This view is also shared by Chinua Achebe one of the most prolific African writers in the English idiom. He sees no issue in writing in English. He believes that writer can use the language in his own way to express the African experience through the choice of words, the infusion of proverbs and idioms, characterization, speech and folklore. This he aptly does in his masterpieces *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease*, *Arrow of God*, *Antihills of Savannah* and *A Man of the People*. He is quoted as saying that he knew of:

".....no serious weight if the opinion today against the continual presence of English on the Nigerian scene. This is fortunate for our peace of mind for it means we can believe in the value of English to the very survival of the Nigerian nation without feeling like deserters. Thus we can use our energies constructively in the important task of extending our frontiers of the language to cover the whole area of our Nigerian nation." He had spoken of the need for..... new English store in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings."

Achebe creatively uses a foreign language to capture the Igbo imagination and sensitivity. As he says: The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use. According to Achebe therefore the medium of expression of the African Agenda need not necessarily be an African language. He asserts that what is important is to be aware of what an African writer is supposed to write on and use whatever language at his disposal to creatively express it. Therefore any content still remains African regardless of the language used in expressing it

The sampled scholars above offer diverse opinions on the debate on the language of African literature. It is clear that the diversity arises on three fronts: content, language and audience. Indeed it is true that language is a carrier of culture and to some extent language is culture is culture itself. Therefore for a writer to write about African experiences he should do so in African language that will be understood by the Africans themselves. When one writes in a foreign language he thus alienates those who cannot understand that language. On the converse the writer alienates himself from his linguistically similar audience.

On the other hand, other scholars assert that as long as the content is African then the African writer is at liberty to use any medium (language) to express it. They believe that using a foreign language does provide a bigger audience to ones work and reduces dangers of one being alienated to one's linguistic community. Moreover in the world of publishing it is easier to get work published in languages with a wider geographical reach than in localized languages as the case is in Africa.

Proponents of writing in African languages do offer translation as a way out of making works originally written in African languages available to a wider audience. The limitations of this lie in the fact that during translation a lot is lost since new words are added, others dropped and others used in a completely new way since its not possible to get a word for word translation in most languages,

3. Limitations of African languages

Works of art are written to be accessed and consumed by an audience. This implies that one objective of writing is for one's work to be accessed and read by as many readers as possible. One way of achieving this is using a language that has the highest possible currency. In the African set up foreign languages are the only means a work of art can cut across the region and globally and be read and accepted. Canonical works of art from Europe, Asia, America, Africa and other literary factories of the world have been made canonical since they were written in languages with high currency for

example English, French, Spanish from William Shakespeare, Bertolt Brecht, William Wordsworth, Rudyard Kipling, Virginia Woolf and Henrik Ibsen. Limiting African literature to African languages will create a problem of inaccessibility since the continent has a multiplicity of languages. A writer in Kenya writing in Gikuyu or Luhya will only appeal to two to three million readers out of a population of forty million.

Secondly, publishing in African languages will lead to alienation. This will be precipitated by the fact that non-speakers of the language will not be able to read the works. Alienation here will be internally within the continent and externally. Publishing in languages that have few users has been slow in uptake by most publishers. In Africa, most publishers are ready to publish mainstream school curriculum texts that are available in the national languages which in most cases are the official languages of instruction and they are not local African languages. It is important to note here that with such a scenario the element of a writer alienating himself is bound to arise. No writer will want his text to be read by a marginal population yet there is a language that if used will offer him a higher level of readership in terms of numbers.

Thirdly most African languages haven't had a documented system of writing this applies to both majority and minority tribes that will require books to be published on the language to be taught in schools before they are able to write in their first languages. I would like to note that this does not to the whole African continent, there are some countries like South Africa that have 15 official languages with some being used to teach in schools. In such a scenario a writer in any of these languages can write and be accessible to many South Africans but still there are many other groups that will be left out. African languages therefore have a limiting factor in terms of accessibility both within the continent and outside.

4. Conclusion

As the debate on language of African literature rages on, it is imperative to find a common standpoint. A number of scholars have weighed in by postulating that English and other foreign language don't hinder the expression of the African experiences. (Achebe, Okarni, Tanure, Adebisi et al).

Ngugi, however, has been on the forefront advocating for the use of African languages in documenting of the African agenda. He feels that the continued use of English is an extension of the imperialism in post-colonial Africa and a sure way of alienation from the African background with the failure of literature not reaching the intended audience: the masses. For other scholars whichever foreign language an African writer chooses to use as long as the content remains African then it still qualifies as African literature since the African agenda will have been expressed.

I believe that it is important for the African writer to express the African agenda, he as the voice of the society has a herculean task of observing, documenting and informing the audience of the African experience. He is the politician, the activist, the moralist. All these tasks are to be accomplished by the writer who has an audience waiting for a truthful image of the society painted by the writer.

A pragmatic accomplishment of this task requires language as it is language that provides the resources to pass across the intended message. This message is not only directed to the fellow Africans but to the entire world. The social strife in African countries, corruption, hunger, disease, failed democracy, poverty have made their way in literary productions from Africa over the years. Granted, these thematic concerns have caught international attention. Literary artists can thus contribute to providing solutions to these endemic issues by writing about them in their works of art. Attracting international attention can well be achieved through use of languages of international currency: English, French, German, and Spanish. Writing in African languages will have an effect of diminishing readership leading to reduced access to works that reach a small population.

Writing in as many languages as possible is the way to go. For those works that are in languages that a certain part of the readership can't understand there lies a solution in translation. Master pieces of African literature for example *Things Fall Apart* has been read in over 23 languages of the world. However as not earlier it is not completely possible to get a word for word translation as during the process of translation some words are dropped, new ones added and others used in a completely new way. As Obi Wali points out:

African writer who thinks and feels in his own language must write in that language. The question of translation, whatever that means, is as unwise as it is unacceptable, for the "original" which is spoken of here is the real stuff of literature and the imagination and must not be discarded in favor of a copy, which, as the passage admits, is merely an approximation.

African literature will remain distinctly African as long as the content remains African. There is quite a lot of literary material that is still coming out of Africa written in European languages. One can still lay a claim to the fact that such material isn't African literature at all and in essence it's a death sentence to African languages. My standpoint as explicated above is that writing from Africa will continue to be done to a larger extent in foreign languages. How this doesn't mean that there is no room for budding writers to experiment with African languages.

Indeed, this paper does take cognizance of efforts of some writers producing plays, short stories and poetry in African languages and notes that this is an integral area of research to establish the challenges and successes of such endeavors. As noted earlier for African literary productions to take their rightful position on the international literary arena then the medium of expression should be European and other foreign languages.

On the contentious issue of the death of African languages as raised by Obi Wali, I think it's a bit farfetched to blame literary writers. In some countries in Africa there has been an increase in advocacy of teaching local languages in lower primary schools. In Kenya, this has gone a step further with curriculum content in lower primary schools being translated into vernacular languages for example Giriama dialect of the Mijikenda community in Coast Region. As Mugane (2018) asserts that: it's a fact that there is a dark side to English which is used to deny the vast majority of Africans access

to justice in the law courts, access to education and to jobs and which is used to incarcerate and stunt indigenous languages robbing them of credit due to them in intellectual production.

The current efforts in Kenya to reintroduce the teaching of local languages in schools and translating subjects in lower classes to be taught in those languages is an effort to reclaim the lost glory of African languages generally and Kenyan dialects specifically.

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