Colonial Languages, Indigenous Languages and the Question of Development in the Fourth world: a Nigerian Literary Perspective

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Abstract

Language is central to a peoples’ definition of themselves. Indigenous languages are means of improving educational quality by building and developing knowledge and experience gained from the immediate cultural environment of the learner. Language therefore becomes not only a tool for communication and knowledge, but also a fundamental attribute of cultural identity and empowerment both for an individual and the community he belongs. This paper seeks to prove that the literature of a people can best be expressed in their indigenous languages. This is principally so, if the literature is to have relevance to the vast majority it represents. The paper seeks to expand the notion that indigenous languages symbolize a deep, Lord-like connection between speakers of a language and their cultural identity. It also seek to further bring forward the argument that, maintaining first language abilities and enhancing them through the development of literacy and academic language skills actually leads to better academic outcomes. This by extension naturally brings about the much needed developments in the fourth world nations. From a Nigerian literary perspective, the paper attempts to show the ‘disconnect’ between the body of colonial and post-colonial literatures in English and the actual need of the peasantry. The mis-representation, mis-interpretation of the yearnings of the common man through European languages’ deliberate misadventure in Africa, is also to be elucidated in this paper as illegitimate and accidents of history. This misrepresentation and misinterpretation of peoples’ need is what compound the catastrophe of the fourth world people in Nigeria and Africa in general.

Keywords: post colonial literature, Indigenous languages, Fourth World.
The Post-Colonial Literature in Nigeria and European Languages

Undoubtedly, intellectual activity is culture bound and conditioned by the social and physical environment in which the culture is based. No developed nation in the world today uses a foreign language for education, administration, commerce and literary interaction. Linguistic homogeneity correlates with higher Gross National Product. Also, no language in the world can be regarded as primitive or inferior to another – structurally, or as unable to serve the communicative needs of its users if given ‘the chance to do so’. This lack of ‘chance to do so’ – to exercise intellectually the capacity of the indigenous colonized Nigerian peoples’ languages to express themselves in the domain of literature, was a deliberate colonial project. The project was set in motion right from the colonial days and in post-colonial Nigeria, it persists to the detriment of our intellectual and academic growth both locally and internationally. The English language in the case of the common wealth nation states becomes a tool for masking lies; extortion, exploitation, and theft of our natural resources, human capital, and intellectual/technological abilities. Foreign languages therefore, ensure ‘intellectual Dependency’.

There is no getting away from the conclusion reached by the African educationist, Abdou Moumini that ‘Colonial Education corrupted the thinking and sensibilities of the African and filled him with abnormal complexes’. These abnormal complexes have pushed the Nigerian literary artist in the post-colonial era to miss-prioritize the needs of his people; the need to look at the structure from within using a language the peasantry understand. This is because he is also a product of that cultural dilemma which creates the inferiority complex in him should he venture to communicate in his mother tongue!

In literary discourse, one’s language must match ones – intended audience. Thus, according to Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, (1991) ‘the language issue is the key, not the only one, but definitely a very-very important key to the decolonization process’. The colonial project, derailed and marginalized African languages with the sole aim of not only under-developing, but ensuring our domination and subjugation.

Unfortunately, the post-colonial African writer and Nigerian writer in particular who inhabits the birth place of African literature together with South Africa is yet to be brave enough to come face to face with the realities of this colonial project. Writers like Achebe have consistently maintained that ‘if the white man is not ashamed of colonizing us, we should not be ashamed of colonizing his language’ but the issue is, our supposed colonization of his language is further colonizing our culture, history as a people, way of thinking and viewing things and most importantly the root cause of our permanent under-development. For as pointed out by Ngugi (1991), this European language, is ‘a cultural bomb’ used by the colonial masters in annihilating a society’s belief in themselves; their origin, their past, their languages, so that someone somehow will determine their future”.

To determine our future simply means perpetration of our backwardness, by ensuring a separation between us and our psychosocial growth – a creation of a confused class of
intellectuals, trapped in complexes, uprooted from the society’s needs, and boxed in perpetual debate of expressing his culture through a medium that nature itself did not saddle with that responsibility. In other words, attempting the impossible – trying to make the language of the colonizer carry his burden of neo-colonization. For, as observed by Albert Memmi (1965),

‘by what else is the heritage of people handed down? by the education which it gives to its children and by language, that wonderful reservoir constantly enriched with new experiences., tradition and acquirements, habits and conquests, deeds and acts of previous generations are thus bequezed and recorded in history.

The questions here are: whose language? The European language? The African languages? Which literature? The European literature? the African literature in English or the African literature in African languages? Which literature is best suited to carry this heritage? The answer is simple that literature written in the language of the people since language is central to peoples’ definition of themselves.

Literature is therefore a most indispensable discipline to humanity, considering its objectives. Austine Amanze Akpanda explain that the relationship between literature and society is such that while literature is used to ensure and aspire to order in the society, it is what happen in the society that provides art with the materials to exist. Art can therefore not be separated from the society because it is the society that has its supreme obligation. According to Akpuda:

Such an inseparable relationship between literature and society can be explained in two ways. The first is that art is a product of a given society. Similarly, it is an imaginative recreation of certain aspects of a particular society’s life. Thus, we have such forms as literature, music, painting, sculpture, film and other varieties of art which imaginatively recreates life as lived in specific or probable societies (2002:90).

This product and imaginative recreation can best be presented using the language of the people. This is because creative writing as an imaginative act is dependent of the imagination can best describe those experiences of the writer better than borrowed ones from an alien culture.

A literary artist is like a seer, a Prophet, the conscience of the society. He should be able to guide the society towards certain directions through aesthetic means. The guide should be for improving the audience awareness in themselves, believing in their strength, identifying their weaknesses for the purpose of improvement and strategic planning. It is through exercising this responsibility that the African writer will be viewed as a savior of the black race using his natural talents and God-given tool – his language as a device for initiating a natural growth and sustainable development. For as rightly observed by Fafunwa, (1990), ‘there seems to be a correlation between underdevelopment and the use of a foreign language as the official language of a given country’.

What is the use of painting the truth? At the start colonization was not an act of civilization, nor was it a desire to civilize. It was an act of force motivated by interests. An episode in the vital competition which, from man to man, from group to group, has gone on ever increasing; the people who set out to seize colonies in distant lands were thinking primarily of themselves, and were working for their own profits, and conquering for their own power. The origin of colonization is nothing than enterprise of individual interests, a one-sided and egotistical imposition of the strong upon the weak.

- Albert Sarrant (1923:46).

An egotistical imposition indeed! But why should the African writer (supposedly the conscience of the fourth world) continue to talk in the language of the colonizer? The colonizer who without mincing words states unequivocally that his mission was never to civilize, but an act of force motivated by interest?

The way in which the early Nigerian writers like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and a host of others responsible to the linguistic and literary challenges of their time shows that they were either ignorant of those ‘egotistical imposition’ to serve the colonial masters’ interest, or they felt they were too good for their tribes and indigenous languages. Here lies part of the major set backs and the complexes imposed by colonization. The colonial exercise was not just about conquering territory and economic development of Europe, but also about conquering minds. During the transition from the colonial to the post-colonial era, the British government saw the advantage of promoting English to a world class language.

Unfortunately by pursuing the policy of attempting to reach an international audience, the Nigerian writer has lost touch with the realities – the reality of his cultural growth, intellectual growth via his mother tongue and by extension his physical environment. The latter is supposed to be the basis for his aesthetic, academic and economic growth. The population inhabiting the fourth world would have been more enlightened; would have felt more incorporated, cared for, if they had been offered literature in their languages with themes that directly deal with their plights as people marginalized. This would have not only eased some tension in them, but would have given them hope that one day there will be a better tomorrow. This would have also given the people in the fourth republic some sense of pride, of involvement, of intellectual exercise through the medium of literature in their tongue.

Furthermore, literature in the fourth world’s people language would have bridged some gaps, narrow down the clear divide between the so called academia and the masses. The dichotomy that exists between the literates and the illiterates would have naturally disappeared with the result of better understanding, unity and a feeling of common destiny. That literature in indigenous language, in the language and culture of the people inhabiting the fourth-world will
raise peoples’ consciousness so that they understand the root of their oppression, and the need to first develop themselves through advancing their culture and feeling of togetherness which will consequently breed a yearning for natural growth and economic development. For what is the essence of literature if it does not attempt to mirror a society’s socio-economic problem and proffer solutions through the medium those most affected can understand? Anything short of this, signify that our literature is pursuing nothing but a dead end and moving towards cultural genocide.

According to Nkrumah, ‘one of the worst legacies of colonialism has been the absence of a trained body of African technicians and administrators as at the time of independence’. But one may ask what of today? After more than five decades of Nigeria’s independence, the story is the same. The same answer to be expected from notifying a literary artist when asked why you are expressing your cultural experience through the colonial Language. Because I am not a local man, I am an international scholar, targeting international audience! Mr. Scholar, to the detriment of your culture? your experience, your people, even to your own detriment. Because that International audience will always rate you fourth world, trying to play the first or second world with very little success or esteem in their eyes. ‘The African writer’, as noted by a Guyanese scholar, O. R.Dathorne, has become ‘…in the twentieth century,…a cultural entrepreneur who manipulates the apparatus of culture for export,’.

What is clear from the forgoing is that the colonial/language weakens the colonized Languages; thereby further distancing the fourth world nations from the centre and ensuring that they remain in the periphery. This has adverse effects on their mental perception and their socio-economic status. To uplift them mentally, socio-economically, their literature should address them in the language they understand so that they will have a relief and get the foundation for an effective economic growth. Non-industrialization and the absence of technical development in the fourth world lead to a slow economic collapse of the hidden nation. This collapse threatens the standard of living of the hidden nation in Nigeria, keeping the technicians from existing and the artist from perfecting himself and his creations. The system works within a vicious circle with the neglect of indigenous languages to express themselves as the root cause of that quandary.

In practical terms, just like the Europeans weaken industrial growth, so that the raw materials must constantly be exported, so also is the case of literature, the raw material is the indigenous language which the African writer is supposed to mould for his needs and eventual literary growth in the international scene. Rather than that to happen the complexes were set in motion and we battle with our culture, our nationhood, our customs, beliefs and entrenched long traditional values in the European language looking for an international market that is imaginary and elusive. This is because the market is not a free market. It is a linguistic market with foreign languages dominating and given excess breathing space if they have white coloration. And the more freely the English language breathes, the more the indigenous languages are choked.
Conclusion

There is no sense in pondering over the function of literature without relating it to the actual society that uses it, to the centers of power within the society, and to the institutions that mediate between literature and the people. No man or woman can choose their biological nationality. A people united can never be defeated. But united by what? Foreign Languages? Foreign cultures? Or foreign values? The forces of unity for permanent development must come from within.

Principally, it should come from a collective conscious effort to forge a lasting unity by speaking a language the members of the fourth world understand – the language of the ordinary farmer, the language of the local fisherman, the language of the taxi and bus drivers, the language of the Nomadic Fulani women in the bush, and the language of million children who roam the streets of the fourth world without access to education. The neo-colonial engine turns in a circle; the onerous engine suspends between life and death; the excluded fourth world nationals will affirm their exclusivity in national selfhood. Having been kept at the level of talking beasts for long, by an oppressive system, the fourth world nationals are given no right, not even the right to live. Their condition worsens daily. When a people have received from its oppressors only the gift of despair, what does it have to lose? A peoples misfortune will become its courage to use the only available tool at its disposal – its language – indigenous language and re-trace its steps with its intelligentsia carrying the torch to where it got lost and find a new bearing; a new direction; a new international outlook, this can be self-development through conscious efforts. This will ultimately pave way for scientific, technological, cultural and literary development. For; the secret of the Proletariat, Marx said, is that ‘it bears within it the destruction of the bourgeois society.’
References


