

استخدام اللغة الإنكليزية من قبل الكُتَّاب الأفارقة

تقديم الطالبة: مارييا محمد العتال

إشراف الدكتورة: د. هيفاء قريد

ملخص

لسنوات، اعتمدت بعض نصوص الكُتَّاب الأفارقة خلال فترة ما بعد الاستعمار على استخدام اللغة الإنكليزية للكتابة عن إفريقيا، إذ تُعتَبَر اللغة الإنكليزية لغة قوية، كما أنها استُخدمت بهدف توثيق الثقافة الأفريقية للتأكد من عدم نسيانها أو ضياعها. ومع ذلك فقد أثار استخدام اللغة الإنكليزية للكتابة حول أفريقيا بعض الكُتَّاب الأفارقة الذين يعارضون تبنيها في السياق الأفريقي ويدور النقاش في هذا البحث حول الأسباب التي تدفع الكُتَّاب الأفارقة إما لرفضهم اللغة الإنكليزية أو قبولهم لها، وكما يسلط البحث الضوء على استخدام اللغة الإنكليزية لعكس الوضع السياسي والاجتماعي في نيجيريا. ينتهي هذا المقال بإثبات أن الكُتَّاب الأفارقة الذين يؤيدون استخدام اللغة الإنكليزية في كتاباتهم تمكنوا من إعطاء إفريقيا صوتها بالإضافة إلى تأكيد هويتها.

الكلمات الدالة: الاستعمار، الاستعمار الجديد، الإفريقية، اللغة الأم، اللغة الإنكليزية، علاقات القوة، الكاتب الأفريقي، الرافضون، المطورون.

The Use of English Language by African Writers

Submitted By: **Maria Mohammed Al-Attal**

Supervised by: **Haifa Kurid**

Abstract

For years, some texts of postcolonial African writers have used English language to write about Africa. According to them, English is a powerful language that reflect and record the African heritage and culture, assuring it will not be forgotten or lost. However, this usage of English raises an argument from African writers who stand against adopting English in the African context. The discussion in this research is about the reasons that African writers use in order to reflect their refusal or acceptance of English language. Of course, English sheds light on the political and social situation in Nigeria. This research ends up proving that African writers support the use of English in their writings to give Africa its voice in addition to asserting its identity.

Key Words: Colonialism, neo-colonialism, Africanness, native language, English language, power relation, African writers, rejectionists, evolutionists.

The Use of English Language by African

Writers

There has been a debate of whether or not to use the European languages to portray the African culture. African writers started questioning consciously their usage of English in 1962. That year, there was an African writers' gathering in Kampala under the title of "Conference of African Writers of English Expression". This conference has led to the emergence of two main schools of thought.

The first school wonders what African writers who use English to write about Africa do to their culture. They stick to the use of the African languages and refuse the European ones in their writings, mentioning many reasons and arguments behind their refusal. The Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o in his *Decolonizing the Minds* argues that "African literature can only be written in African languages, that is, the languages

of the African peasantry and working class"(27). The second school supports the use of the European languages in their literature, giving many convincing reasons and justifications. Therefore, the study has something to do with the debate that some African writers support the use of the imperialists' language to write about Africa while others oppose it.

Of course, language is intended to be a mediation between people who speak it and other people from different continents. It is a tool that unifies the individuals who speak it within the same geographical area. As a matter of fact, European languages, specifically English language, seem to dominate literature as a whole. This focus on the European languages rather than any other language is related to Eurocentrism. Eurocentrism as a term has been viewed from a racial perspective. It has been believed that European literature is superior because it is the production of a superior mentality. This superiority is reflected in the Europeans' literary works

and intellectual production. In "Eurocentrism and Orientalism," Ilia Xypolia defines Eurocentrism as "The discourse that places emphasis on European concerns, culture, and values at the expense of those of other cultures" (1).

Moreover, language is a reflection of a certain culture and ideology. All languages are spoken. Some of these languages have a written form while others don't have it. There are multiple African languages like Zulu, Arabic, Yoruba, Amharic, and so on. In addition, English and French have become the main common languages of communication in Africa. Language isn't only the words that are spoken by its readers. The written words are an imitation of the spoken ones. Ngugi asserts this point, saying: "Writing is representation of sounds with visual symbols" (14).

In addition, there is a relationship between language and literature. Language can be defined as words that are used for the expression of thoughts. These thoughts are put in the form

of literary works by writers and novelists. The culture and morals of any society are expressed in its literature. Through literature, postcolonial writers, including the African ones, can defend their culture and record its traditions in order not to be lost or even forgotten.

Moreover, in postcolonial period, some of the literary works are used to restore the precolonial dignity and reform the society from the effects of colonization. These works are named as postcolonial literature. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin define postcolonial literature in *The Empire Writes Back*, as the following:

What each of these literatures {from the former European colonies} has in common beyond their special and distinctive regional characteristics is that they emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial

power, and emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial center. It is this which makes them distinctively postcolonial. (2)

Gabriel Okara, an African writer, in his research "Towards the Evolution of an African Language for African Literature" has used the term "Evolutionists" (14) for the post-colonial African writers who use "English language in order to make it an adequate transmitter of the African message"(11). He has also used the "Rejectionists"(14) for African writers who oppose the use of English language in their writings. The rejectionists start questioning what the evolutionists do to African literature. They believe that any African writer who uses the imperialists' language in his/her writings about Africa leads African literature to a dead-end. Ngugi questions the implementation of some African vocabularies to enrich other languages, saying:

Why, we may ask, Should an African writer, or any writer, become so obsessed by taking from his mother tongue to enrich other tongues? Why should he see it as his particular mission? We never asked ourselves: how can we enrich our language? And why not create literary monuments in our own language. (8)

He wonders why there are no great names in the African languages similar to the prominent names that existed in the European languages like Albert Einstein, Galileo, Shakespeare and so on.

Therefore, the rejectionists' duty is to write about their traditions and culture in their own native language rather than in the language of the colonizer. They refuse to write in the colonizer's language. They have many arguments against using English language in their own writings. First, writing in English is considered another kind of colonialism. As a matter

of fact, colonialism can be found in two different forms. The one which involves the direct inclusion of the military armaments, and the other which has something to do with the psychological control over the mentality of the oppressed. This is what Ngugi notices and emphasizes, saying:

Berlin of 1884 was affected through the sword and the bullet. But the night of the sword and the bullet was followed by the morning of the chalk and the blackboard. The physical violence of the battlefield was followed by the psychological violence of the classroom. But where the former was visibly brutal, the latter was visibly gentle...language was the most important vehicle through which that power fascinated and held the soul prisoner. (9)

Second, Ngugi believes that there is an interrelationship between language as a means of communication and language as a carrier of culture. When any country is conquered, the

language of the colonizer is imposed, and it remains a primary instrument of communication even after its independence. Therefore, this imposition of the colonizer's language results that the colonized people's culture and ideology are not pure anymore. The reason is that the colonizer's culture and ideology are transferred to the colonized people. Ngugi states:

Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature; the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world.

(16)

In fact, the relationship between language and culture is determined by people's thoughts, behaviors, and actions. It is known that the basis of any language is the spoken form which

doesn't only include the words that come from the mouth. It has something to do with the gestures such as body language. The spoken form is full of values, morals, and norms that are transmitted from one generation to another, and they determine what is right and wrong in a certain community. Accordingly, any spoken language includes a set of principles that define the identity and morals of the individuals. These principles become a lifestyle. Thus, the development of language throughout history leads to the existence of culture. There is no clear-cut difference between language and culture since language is the reason behind the existence of any culture. Ngugi argues:

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... Culture transmits or imparts those images of the world and reality through the spoken and the written language, that is through a specific language.

(15)

Third, writing in English is considered to be a spiritual submission to the colonizer since English language has been enforced in Africa as the national language since 1952. Ngugi alludes to this point, saying "the bullet was the means of physical subjugation. Language was the means of spiritual subjugation"(9). Since language is a form of mental colonization, the evolutionist, either consciously or unconsciously, create a new kind of colonial power over the Africans .

Fourth, writing in English will empower the idea that the African languages will remain minor. Ngugi asserts that the use of the African language instead of the imperialist language is important since it is a necessary step towards cultural

identity and independence from the Europeans' exploitation. In order to achieve liberation from the Europeans' grip and to regain the African dignity, African writers should only write in African languages. Their writings have to depict the sufferings of the Africans in their struggle against the domination of the Europeans over their culture. Furthermore, there should be unity among the Africans of all classes in order to regain their aimed liberation. Ngugi argues:

But writing in our languages per se - although a necessary first step in the correct direction - will not itself bring about the renaissance in African cultures if that literature does not carry the content of our people's anti-imperialist struggles to liberate their productive forces from foreign control; the content of the need for unity among the workers and peasants of all the nationalities in their struggle to

control the wealth they produce and to free it from internal and external parasites. (29)

On the other hand, it should be known that people manipulate the language they deal with to serve what they want, not the other way round. Many writers oppose the rejectionists' views because they believe that the way the colonizer uses English language is different from the way the African writer uses it. The evolutionists have used many techniques to make use of English language in the African context. "The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best,"(Achebe 100). Thus, they tend to Africanize English language by inserting African values, thoughts, and experiences into it. Thus, English becomes a valid medium for African literature. Gabriel Okara asserts that African literature won't have its voice if African writers only use the African languages in their writings, saying:

The problem with writing in African languages is that such works are only known and appreciated in the localities where the languages are spoken. They become localised in a few pockets of the continent. This obviously falls short of the pan-Africanist vision of continental literature written in a continental language. (15)

It should be taken into consideration the role of "discourse" in the process of colonization, and its close relationship with language. "Discourse" is defined by Foucault in *The Order of Discourse* as it is "a violence which we do to things" (p.67). "Discourse," for instance, has determined that a certain language is considered to be a universal one while others are just dialects. Another example is that discourse may also determine that certain authors will have a realized audience along the territories while others will be only known in their local surroundings. (p.67). In "Monuments of Empire:

Allegory/Counter-Discourse/ Post-Colonial Writing," Stephen Slemon, has identified discourse as:

The name for that language by which dominant groups within society constitute the field of 'truth' through the imposition of specific knowledges, disciplines, and values. Discourse, in other words, is a complex of signs and practices which organizes social existence and social reproduction. (6)

Accordingly, discourse transcends the use of language to involve everything in society including power relations and people's ideologies, values, viewpoints, and ways of speaking or writing. This control comes at the expense of others that are considered inferior. During the colonial period, the colonized people's ways of thinking, speaking, and experiencing the world are replaced by those of the European ones. The colonizers' discourse determines that the African languages are minor while others are superior. By using English language as

the imperialist discourse, the colonizer can enforce his power and authority over the Africans.

However, the situation differs in Africa after its independence because the colonized start perceiving what is imposed on them through rereading and rewriting the colonial discourse. They recreate their own independent identities through the insertion of new discourses into the dominant European one. For example, Afro-American literature has become known and recognized not in Europe only but all over the world. It has prominent figures who prove themselves to have their own voice, never allowing the Europeans to suppress their rights. They have fought against the European domination over literature as a whole.

Furthermore, although English language serves as the imperialist discourse, this doesn't mean that it should be rejected by postcolonial writers. In fact, English is a very powerful language that is used as a means of communication

all over the world. The evolutionists use the imperialist language to reflect the changes that the African society has passed through. Africa has been a tribal community that has its own traditions and values. With the interference of the colonizer, the African society has collapsed because all the traditions, values, morals, education, and aspects of life have been mixed with that of the colonizer. Even after the independence which happened in 1960, Africa has suffered from the effects of colonialism. As a result, the African society has begun to lose its Africanness. Thus, post-colonial writers' mission is to restore the pre-colonial dignity by showing the coherent fabric of the African society in their writings and how the interference of the colonial forces affects their culture.

The evolutionists have many arguments for their usage of English language in their writings. First of all, they want to recruit the flexible English to serve their culture. Achebe, in an interview with The Atlantic, states:

In the logic of colonization and decolonization it is actually a very powerful weapon in the fight to regain what was yours English was the language of colonization itself. it is something which you can actively claim to use as an effective weapon, as a counterargument to colonization. (1)

Second, the evolutionists employ their language to suit the historical periods they focus on in their novels. They portray the situation in Africa in a post-colonial period. In his "English and the African Writer," Achebe justifies his deliberate usage of English that he has received his early education in it. He also believes that he has inherited English and that is why he uses it, saying:

the real question is not whether Africans could write in English but whether they ought to. It is right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else's? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces

a guilty feeling. But for me there is no other choice.

I have been given this language and I intend to use

it. (30)

After all, the evolutionists contact with the European language, people, and mentality has affected their way of thinking and their writings as well. For example, Chinua Achebe has stated in an interview with The Atlantic, saying "English is something you spend your lifetime acquiring, so it would be foolish not to use it. It is simply something you use because you have it anyway"(1).

Third, the evolutionists choose to use English language due to political reasons. They deliberately spoil the colonial language and culture. They assure that the African writer must adapt English language to the native experience, thereby establishing a new language that can carry the weight of the African culture. New language means that kind of English that is full of African elements derived from their African

communal society into the narrative, thereby recording their traditions. The readers can infer the meaning of African vocabularies in their context. The evolutionists' inclusion of African expressions guards their native language from regression and breaks up the co-existence of colonial language.

Fourth, the evolutionists choose English language due to social reasons. Before the colonial period, Nigeria used to be a tribal community which has hundreds of societies within the same geographical area. Whereas now Nigeria is one unit and one country. The British unify these tribes together and create what is called Nigeria today. Okara mentions that Achebe in a televised discussion has stated: "The linguistic situation is quite complex in Africa. In Nigeria you couldn't talk about Nigeria one minute longer as the country is today if you were to remove English language" (13). In the present day, there are 22 countries in Africa where English is the national language

and without its existence the African society won't function. In other words, what is called colonizer unifies Africa.

Fifth, the Nigerians used to speak more than 450 different languages. English has been imposed as the national language all over Nigeria. Either English or French is the official language of education, science, technology, and most fields of life. There is no other choice for the Africans but to use the flexible English since it is dominant and easier to grasp much more than any other language. As a result, vernacular languages exist alongside European ones. Even after the independence of Africa, English remains the national language. Thus, the use of English seems to unify the African people in Nigeria. In "the African Writer and English Language," Achebe says:

[colonialism] did bring together many peoples that had hitherto gone their several ways. And it gave them a language with which to talk to one another. If

it failed to give them a song, it at least gave them a tongue, for sighing. There are not many countries in Africa today where you could abolish the language of the erstwhile colonial powers and still retain the facility for mutual communication. (95)

Sixth, the evolutionists use English to have access to all the Nigerians. This idea has something to do with Achebe's views about the definition of African literature; he says "I do not see African literature as one unit but as associated units in fact, the sum total of all the *national* and *ethnic* literatures of Africa" (92). Thus, African literature refers to literature of and from Africa, and is classified as both the national and ethnic. The national literature can be defined as the literature that is written in the national language and has a realized audience along its territory. The national language which unifies the Nigerians together is English and accordingly, the national literature is written in the same very language. The ethnic

literature is the literature of the smallest ethnic groups such as the Ibo, Edo, Hausa, Yoruba, and so on, and it is available only to them. Ethnic literature should be written in their vernacular ethnic languages. If Okri or Achebe writes his novels in a specific vernacular ethnic language, such as Yoruba; then, only the Yoruba people will read them. As a result, his novels won't be read by the other ethnic groups because they won't understand them. Therefore, the evolutionists make use of English to let their novels be read and understood by all the Nigerians. Achebe says a very witty sentence "Let us not in rejecting of the evil {English language} throw out the good with it"(96).

Seventh, by writing in a worldwide language, African literature transcends the national borders and access the global ones. In fact, after gaining its independence, Africa starts to appear as an individual national-state. However, the vernacular ethnic languages are still considered to be minor, so their

literature isn't read by others. Therefore, the evolutionists take the responsibility to give Africa its voice by using English language. Their novels become possible to be read not only by the Africans, but also by the West and non-African audiences as well. As a result, African literature becomes defined and understood everywhere. Achebe describes the African texts written in English as "a new voice coming out of Africa, speaking of African experience in a world-wide language" (100).

The final reason behind using English in an African context is to remind the Africans, especially children, of their history, culture, and traditions since there have been organized practices to separate children from their African history. They have been able to do so because English is the language of communication between the Africans themselves. Nevertheless, during colonization, the colonial administrators have controlled publishing houses and the educational contents

of all publications, including novels. This means that only texts with Christian messages or carefully selected euro-centric stories are allowed to be published. The Africans grasp these texts since they are the only permitted and available ones. Moreover, the African colonies force the natives to speak English. These practices have made a gap between the Africans and their own history and culture because their own heritage has been only shared at home through orally transmitted messages. The situation at schools is not better, children have been taught the colonizer language. Ngugi describes the situation at schools after introducing English language, and the methods that have been used to enforce English in the children's minds, saying:

Any achievement in spoken or written English was highly rewarded; prizes, prestige, applause; the ticket to higher realms. English became the measure of intelligence and ability in the arts, the sciences,

and all the other branches of learning. English became *the* main determinant of a child's progress up the ladder of formal education. (12)

The practices mentioned above have made the African children lose their Africanness step by step, especially they have targeted the children's subconscious minds. At that time, children are convinced that everything related to English brought elevation while using the African languages would reflect backwardness and disgrace. Ngugi discusses the European ideology to enforce English subconsciously, saying:

The colonial child was exposed to images of his world as mirrored in the written languages of his coloniser. Where his own native languages were associated in his impressionable mind with low status, humiliation, corporal punishment, slow-footed intelligence and ability or downright

stupidity, non-intelligibility and barbarism, this was reinforced by the world he met. (18)

For Ngugi, the solution is to bring the child into his environment by letting him use the African languages instead of English language. He states:

I would like to contribute towards the restoration of the harmony between all the aspects and divisions of language so as to restore the Kenyan child to his environment, understand it fully so as to be in a position to change it for his collective good. I would like to see Kenya peoples' mother-tongues (our national languages!). (28)

The situation for the evolutionists is quite different. The practices are imposed on the Africans and they are there, thus they will not vanish if the Africans stop using English language since the effects of these practices are embedded in

the Africans' subconscious. Achebe says "All I have done has been to look at the reality of present-day Africa. At present it may be more profitable to look at the scene as it is"(94). The revolutionists, attempt to transcend colonial alienation through the insertion of elements that are full of morals and values. These elements are derived from the pure essence of the African society such as the communal storytelling, folktales, and stories in their novels. Achebe says "English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings" (103). By doing so, they remind the Africans of their history and bring the children into their correct environment.

In brief, the debate on which language should be used to write about Africa is the central discussion of this research. The two schools' arguments are discussed in detail. On the one

hand, Ngugi, a prominent figure of the first school, stands against the use of English in an African context and emphasizes the role of language as a means of communication and a carrier of culture. On the other hand, the evolutionists, including Achebe, adapt English language to the African experience and give many reasons behind their choice of English language. Of course, English is a powerful language that is used skillfully by the evolutionists to emphasize their African identity in addition to giving a high profile to their literature.

Work Cited

- Xypolia, Iliia. "Eurocentrism and Orientalism." *The Encyclopedia of Postcolonial Studies*. Ed. Sangeeta Ray, Henry Schwarz and José Luis. Blackwell Publishing, 2016. Blackwell Reference Online.
- Achebe, Chinua. "English and the African Writer." *Transition* 18 (1965): p.27-30.
- Achebe, Chinua. "The African Writer and the English Language." *Morning Yet on Creation Day*. London: Heinemann, 1975. p.91-103.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. New York: Routledge, 1989.
- Bacon, Katie. "An African Voice." *The Atlantic* (2000): 1.
- Bloomfield, Leonard. *Language*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1935.
- Foucault, Michel. "The Order of Discours." *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*. Ed. Robert Young. Trans. Ian McLeod. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981.
- Gikandi, Simon. *Reading Chinua Achebe: Language & Ideology in Fiction*. London: James Currey, 1991.
- Hughes, Glyn. "Brilliance in the Darkness." *The Guardian* (1991): 1.
- Moyers, Bill D. *A World of Ideas: Conversations with Thoughtful Men and Women about American Life Today and the Ideas Shaping Our Future*. National Park: New York, 1989.

Ngũgĩ, Wa Thiong'o. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Portsmouth NH: Heinemann, 1981.

Okara, Gabriel. "Towards the Evolution of an African Language for African Literature." *Chinua Achebe: A Celebration*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1991. p.11-18.

Slemon, Stephen. "Monuments of Empire: Allegory/Counter-Discourse/ Post-Colonial Writing." *Kunapipi* (1987): p.1-16.