ON THE LINGUISTIC DILEMMA OF MODERN AFRICAN LITERATURE

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Few issues in literature have polarised African scholars and critics as much as the relative significance of language in the evolution of a national literature. At stake here is the true status of the indigenous language in literary communication in the emergent nations of Africa. Two schools of thought seem to have emerged over the years: the realist school led by Chinua Achebe, which adopts a deferential attitude towards the apparently entrenched language of the coloniser; and the more militant idealist school of Ngugi wa Thiong'O which, fired by nationalistic fervour, adopts a nihilistic attitude towards the colonial language. Chidi Amuta (1989) puts the argument in its proper perspective thus:

> There are those like Achebe and Soyinka who insist that African literature written in European languages is historically legitimate and that the use of these languages to communicate African experiences enriches both the languages in question and the literature itself. These writers also recognise the legitimacy of literature in African languages. Squarely opposed to this accommodationist/assimilationist position are others like Ngugi and Obi Wali who insist on linguistic indigenisation as a minimum condition for the existence of African literature. Ngugi has driven this position to its logical conclusion by advancing the controversial view that African literature in the European languages in fact constitutes Afro-European literature (112).

These apparently irreconcilable positions have each inspired a large army of adherents, perennially engaged in a polemical war in which neither side is ever likely to score an outright victory. This underscores the need for a truce to facilitate a dispassionate review of the various issues in contention, and possibly chart a way out of the linguistic maelstrom in which modern African literature still finds itself, after more than half a century of its inauguration. In this critical exercise, an attempt will be made to distinguish fact from fallacy; to identify what is both plausible and feasible, as against what is merely desirable but impracticable.

I

Ever since Obi Wali fired the first salvo against literary imperialism way back in 1963 (see Maduka, 1994:18), purists have launched a sustained attack on the linguistic pollution of the African literary scene by one colonial language or the other. As far as Ngugi (1985) is concerned,

> African literature can only be written in the African languages of the peasantry and working class, the major alliance of classes in each of our nationalities and the agency for the coming revolutionary break with neo-colonialism (125).

In the same vein, African literature donning the linguistic garb of the European colonizer, is labelled "Afro-European literature" which he defines as 'literature written by Africans in European languages in the era of imperialism.' Ngugi has even gone a step further to match precept with practice by choosing to write his subsequent works in his native Kikuyu, before getting them translated into English. It remains to be seen what substantial difference this has made over his earlier works initially written in English.

Chidi Maduka, a professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria, offers a reasoned apologia for the linguistic indigenisation of African literature, in his Inaugural Lecture delivered on 21 April, 1994. After a passionate consideration of all the salient issues, he concludes as follows:

> The national literature of Nigeria is not the literature written in English, but the aggregate of the elements running through the various literatures in Nigerian languages. The literature in English is a variety of world literature in English, which has English literature as its fountain-head (Maduka, 1994:35-36).

This is a reaffirmation of his earlier proposition in which Nigerian literature is defined as 'the aggregate of the constants running through all the literatures in Nigerian languages' (Maduka, 1992:3). Furthermore, his recognition of the possibility of a national literature in the country represents a significant shift from an even more conservative position in which he considers it 'unreasonable to talk in terms of Nigerian national literature. Rather, geo-culturally speaking, there are several national literatures, represented by the

numerous linguistic communities in the country (Maduka, 1982:14-15).

Although Chidi Amuta fully identifies with Ngugi's endorsement of peasant and working class language, he orientates it towards the promotion of the Marxist ideology in African literature. His distinction between '*African literature* in general, and *literature of the African people*' corresponds to a distinction between 'what imperialist myth-making and scholarship has popularised and advertised as 'African literature' and 'the literatures of the African masses...' (Amuta, 1989:71). Simply put, it is a distinction between the literature of the oppressed and the literature of the oppressors in which language and ideology are complementary critical signposts. This leads Chidi Amuta (1989) to conclude that

> Language *qua* language is...not the issue in African literature. The problem of communication in our literature is directly related to the forces that prevent human communication at the economic and social levels (113-114).

But the problematisation of language in the development of national literatures in Africa remains, for us, the fundamental issue at stake.

II

That Wole Soyinka belongs to the liberal school of thought, linguistically speaking, is hardly surprising, considering the dominance of the dramatic arts in his literary corpus. For the dramatist, speech or dialogue represents only a fragment – albeit a vibrant and articulate fragment – of the rich tapestry of paralinguistic codes and idioms of communication including mime, movement, gesture, sound, lighting and mise-en-scène, on which one can freely draw in the process of theatrical creativity. This capacity to reach out to a universal audience beyond the immediate circumstances of artistic creation sets drama clearly apart from prose and poetry. Wole Soyinka, for instance, finds a striking example of transcendental art in Duro Ladipo's *Oba Koso* which, according to him, 'straddles the modernist gulf between symbol and expository action and dialogue with the essence of poetry, a perfect unity rarely encountered on the modern African stage.' Soyinka (1976) writes further:

> Written and played in Yoruba, it provides a uniquely apposite reference, as it has enjoyed a variety of linguistic audiences all over the world – German, English, Yiddish, Russian, Polish, French, etc. – and nowhere has it failed to elicit that profound communal catharsis which is one of the acknowledged ends of tragic action. It constitutes a living instance of the universal roots of the tragic pulse and the transcendental nature of *poetry* over the medium of transmission, language, music or movement (55).

The poetry which Soyinka underscores in the above quotation is the poetry of form and feeling, profoundly subtextual and at once paralinguistic and extra-literary in nature. Only oral poetry (as distinct from the literary) evinces this fundamental potential for theatrical communication.

Ola Rotimi, a fellow Nigerian dramatist, adopts an equally liberal stance on the role of the colonial language in African drama. Hence, his definition of "African Dramatic Literature" puts a premium on the experience conveyed rather than on the language employed. In his own words, 'African Dramatic Literature denotes that kind of written drama that treats an African experience' (Rotimi, 1991:1). While recognising the desirability of the indigenous African language in communicating an African experience, he nonetheless endorses the adoption of the colonial language as a matter of literary expediency. He goes further:

> We know that language is the soul of literature. By extension, language it is that, first and foremost, confers any literature with its peculiar, national and cultural selfhood. It follows then that the employment of a European language as handmaiden in the service of communication between an African author and his peoples, is clearly anomalous (Rotimi, 1991:10).

This view confirms Rotimi's inherent sympathy for linguistic purism which caves in under the superior weight of linguistic expediency. He finds a ready compromise in his relentless pursuit of a language-oriented creative experiment, the objective of which is, according to him, 'a conscious effort to TAMPER with the English Language, so as to TEMPER its Englishness' (1991:14), and the fruits of which are all too evident in the peculiar local colour and linguistic texture of the Rotimian theatre.

Even Africa's foremost novelist, Chinua Achebe, maintains a similarly deferential posture towards the employment of the linguistic medium of the colonisers in African literary art, in spite of the even greater centrality of language in prose communication. He makes a fascinating distinction between "national" and "ethnic" literatures by affirming that the former 'takes the whole nation for its province and has a realised or potential audience throughout its territory,' while the latter 'is one which is available only to one ethnic group within the nation.' Accordingly, he identifies the national literature of Nigeria as 'the literature written in English; and the ethnic literatures are in Hausa, Ibo, Yoruba, Efik, Edo, Ijaw, etc., etc.' (Achebe, 1975:56). This bold and forthright assertion, informed by a realistic appraisal of the Nigerian literary landscape, has generated lots of critical ripples among the staunch advocates of the policy of decolonisation of African literature, and the apostles of linguistic indigenisation. But Achebe's position has to do with what is practicable, within the context of existing realities. In an article which came on the heels of Nigeria's political sovereignty, he reflects on the linguistic dilemma of a 'writer in a new nation', and submits that 'those who can do the work of extending the frontiers of English so as to accommodate African thought-patterns must do it through their mastery of English and not out of innocence' (Achebe, 1964:160). Amos Tutuola's quaint linguistic style, which smacks of innocence or plain naivety, is thus excluded from this salutary extension of the frontiers of English, which has been going on now for several decades. These, in sum, are the diametrically opposed viewpoints into which the Nigerian literary scene has polarised over the question of language.

III

The real bone of contention, however, seems to be on the relative weight attached to the role of language in literary communication. While the linguistic purists rigidly advocate the holistic policy of equating the medium entirely with the message, the liberalists are prepared to accommodate language as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. If, as Abiola Irele has argued, 'the relationship between literature and language becomes...somewhat equivalent to that between content and form' (Irele,1981:43), the purists cannot

see any distinction whatsoever between these two related strands of literary composition. To them, content is form as much as literature is the language in which it is being presented. This position is, of course, quite tenable, and can hardly be faulted in the realm of *scripted* poetry, as against the oral. For, how does one attempt to separate the content of a piece of poem from its linguistic essence? That would be an exercise in futility. But this is not equally true of the other literary genres, the prose and drama, particularly drama. Drama translates into theatre, which, as noted earlier, has access to a rich melange of communication codes. As theatre, drama has the proverbial capacity of divesting itself of the conventional language of speech without complete loss in communication. As a fundamentally oral art, poetry shares this theatrical quality with drama, finding expressive meanings in mime, movement and gesture, as well as in the non-verbal aspects of speech such as stress, rhythm and intonation. In such situations, the literary language does not fully approximate to the literary content. Here, written language functions as part of a whole range of communication codes, and a part cannot reasonably approximate to the whole.

From this logical perspective, it is fallacious reasoning to suggest that African literature invariably loses its Africanness by the sheer fact of being cast in a foreign linguistic mould. Apart from functioning as a vehicle for cultural propagation, language is also a medium of social communication, and is capable of dynamic code-switching with minimal impact on content or message. As seen earlier, Ola Rotimi makes *experience* rather than language the true point of reference in the determination of a literature that is authentically African. In the same vein, Chidi Maduka's explication on the definition of the Nigerian national literature is presented as an aggregation of all the *constant* elements 'running through all the literatures in Nigerian languages.' Implied in this statement is the recognition of other literary elements apart from language, which is a variable factor in this regard. Those 'constant elements', the elements of form, message and meaning, constitute the true literary content which can readily be communicated in any language, foreign or indigenous.

Central to the concept of a national literature is the implied concept of nationhood, which can only be taken for granted at the peril of one's argument. There can be no national literature without

an identifiable nation. So, what is a nation? One dictionary attempts to define it as a 'large community of people, usually sharing a common history, language, etc., and living in a particular territory under one government.' Four elements of nationhood are implicit in this definition: common history or ancestry, common language, common geographical location and common governance. Most countries in Africa, Nigeria inclusive, abysmally fall short of these vital imperatives of nationhood as they are merely artificial colonial creations. They are essentially multi-lingual polities trapped within artificial geographical boundaries, parading different pre-colonial historical antecedents, and groaning under imposed administrative structures and systems of governance. The only history common to them is the bitter colonial past, which destabilised their stable and well-ordered traditional societies. Thus, going by this definition, a single and united Nigerian nation is still in the realm of abstract speculation. In reality, what we have are pockets of ethnic-based nation states, which, through a series of historical accidents, have been welded into one massive political unit by the English Language. In the circumstances, Nigeria's only claim to nationhood is paradoxically rooted in the much-traduced colonial language for which no replacement is yet to appear on the horizon. Until an acceptable lingua franca emerges (and this could take more than a century to evolve), the colonial language – English, French or Portuguese as the case may be – will invariably remain the official medium of communication in the nation states of Africa. This may well become a perpetual situation, because by the time the larger majority of the citizens acquire linguistic competence in English through formal education, and with the ever growing status of English as the number one language in the world, the desire to replace it with an indigenous language is likely to wane progressively and possibly diminish altogether, in the course of time. At the very worst, Nigeria may end up as a bilingual nation, with English remaining the senior linguistic partner.

The African experience readily attests to the conceptual duality of nationhood, perceivable at both the micro and macro levels: the micro nation defined by the indigenous language, and the macro nation defined by the colonial language. Literary discourse naturally bows to this principle of duality, while recognising the specialised role of language in each realm. Hence, what Chinua

Achebe identifies as 'ethnic literature' (1975:56) is, in reality, the "national literature" of a linguistically homogeneous people. At that micro level, language becomes inextricably bound up with literary content, functioning as the veritable vehicle of cultural transmission in line with the concept of linguistic purism. However, the resultant literature remains inaccessible to the wider national audience at the macro level, until it goes through the delicate process of linguistic transmutation. At the macro level, therefore, language functions more as a means than as an end; as a medium rather than the full embodiment of the artistic message. This fine distinction between the micro and macro levels of nationhood and literary communication is very crucial to the full appreciation of the linguistic dilemma of national literatures in African countries. Indeed, in any multilingual polity, the national literature is more realistically defined in terms of the peculiar worldview expressed rather than the artist's choice of linguistic medium. Since the authentic national literature of Nigeria cannot, for now, be linguistically determined, our focus should be on the salient extra-linguistic elements, those unifying socio-cultural "constants" which harbour the nebulous national spirit, and find expression through literary communication. This, rather than the barren debate on language, should be the principal concern of scholars and critics in the persistent search for the true Nigerian national literature.

IV

Perhaps the strongest argument of the proponents of the indigenous language as a basic literary medium is the indispensable role of literature in sustainable language development. Literature is language in action, and a people's language flourishes best on an indigenous literary soil. Not even the ultimate emergence of an indigenous national language can deny the myriads of ethnic languages the right to growth through literary expression, at least at the micro level. Apart from the basic objective of lubricating and promoting the indigenous language, literary creativity demands that a people's collective experience and worldviews are recorded in a language closest to their thoughts and feelings. But it is not always the case that a writer finds it feasible or expedient to create *initially* in the language of his or her people. The politics and economics of

publishing, as well as the relative linguistic proficiency of the individual writer come into play in determining the initial choice of linguistic medium. If a work of art is truly rooted in the life of the people, it will ultimately come home to roost in the linguistic nest of its own society. Whether this linguistic indigenisation is achieved sooner, as with the later Ngugi, or later, as with the earlier Ngugi, should not be considered a violation of this creative principle. Who says that *Devil on the Cross* has a greater claim to being an authentic Kenyan novel than *Weep Not, Child* or *The River Between*, by the sheer fact of being first recorded in the indigenous language? By the same logic, Ngugi and Mugo's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* is no less an authentic celebration of nationalistic struggles than Ebrahim Hussein's *Kinjeketile*, simply because the latter was first set down in Kiswahili. In literature, particularly in prose and drama, form and content are just as important as language in the overall evaluation of meaning and message. This runs contrary to the dogmatic principles of the purists who insist on the linguistic factor as the sole criterion in the determination of a national literature.

In creative writing, language is employed, not just as a means of social communication, but as a medium of self-expression. In that regard, the prerogative of choice, the right to determine the language in which to reach out most effectively to others, is ultimately vested in the writers themselves. Confronted with similar socio-linguistic circumstances, D. O. Fagunwa and Amos Tutuola – two interesting parallels in Nigerian literature – made personal choices, which have had important consequences on the reach and impact of their writings. The following observation, earlier made elsewhere, puts the matter in proper perspective:

> With both artists, popular mythology provides material for romantic and epic narratives heavily dyed in local colour, and capable of dramatic realisation. The important difference between them, therefore, is their choice of linguistic medium. However, while Amos Tutuola finds considerable acceptance outside Nigeria because of his use of English (the brand notwithstanding), Fagunwa is hardly accessible outside the Yoruba-speaking group with whom he directly communicates (Umukoro, 2002:122).

Wole Soyinka has, of course, widened Fagunwa's linguistic base through a skilful translation of the latter's most successful work, *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale*, under the title of *The Forest of a*

Thousand Daemons. Wale Ogunyemi, the prolific Nigerian playwright, has transformed this novel into something of a national epic by way of a brilliant stage adaptation of Soyinka's translation into *Langbodo*, the Nigerian show-piece at the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) held in Lagos in 1977. At a Theatre Workshop in the University of Leeds in 1989, the playwright himself provided an insight into his dramaturgical technique in the creation of this theatrical *tour de force*, an important landmark in the history of the Nigerian theatre. His explanation runs as follows:

> Instead of the hunters going from one forest to the other as...in Fagunwa's novel, I exposed them to the diverse cultures of Nigeria by making them travel from one State of the Federation to the other (Ogunyemi, 1989, Unpublished manuscript).

The result is an exciting theatrical experiment, a cultural trip through drama across the length and breadth of Nigeria. The play remains an important reference point in the development of the true Nigerian national theatre.

Conversely, Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, originally written in English, has traced its way back to its cultural roots through the widely acclaimed Yoruba stage adaptation, *Omuti*, by Kola Ogunmola in the 1960s. The play has ever since witnessed several popular revivals, and has gone down in history as one of the most significant contributions to the development of the indigenous theatre in Nigeria. These two illustrations amply testify to the linguistic flexibility of dramatic literature, transcendent of the initial language of creation.

V

In this concluding segment, we can now make some definite pronouncements on an African writer's choice of linguistic medium, between the imposed colonial language and any of the myriads of indigenous languages in a typical multi-ethnic and multi-lingual nation. This choice is unavoidably predicated on the twin factors of *proficiency* and *expediency*. As Charles Larson (1971) rightly points out,

> The African writer who writes in a European language has chosen to do so out of expediency rather than from any real desire to communicate in a non-African tongue (11).

In the final analysis, this choice cannot be imposed; it has to be made at the level of the individual writer, whose primary obligation is self-expression. Every writer is obliged to express himself or herself first and foremost in the language in which he or she is demonstrably most proficient, regardless of whether it is a colonial language or not. The principle of linguistic proficiency overrides every other consideration. Ngugi switches code to the indigenous language from a position of personal confidence in his literary competence in that medium. The ability to use the oral language for social communication does not guarantee literary competence in the same language. That Wole Soyinka successfully translates Fagunwa's Yoruba novel into English does not necessarily confirm his literary prowess in the indigenous medium. Although quite steeped in the Yoruba mythology and folklore, Soyinka's educational orientation clearly stands him in better stead to use the English language for literary communication. To do otherwise might imply sacrificing profundity of thought and communication on the altar of linguistic niceties. Yet, no one can deny that Soyinka's art, although created in a foreign linguistic medium, captures the spirit and essence of the traditional Yoruba world with all the sacred mysteries and popular folklore of his people. Any such art so deeply rooted in a people's mythology and fully expressive of their collective vision, belongs to them as of right, and cannot be appropriated by the owners of the foreign language in which it may have been cast. Here is one clear instance in which the medium does *not* approximate to the message.

The issue of personal proficiency in the use of language leads us to a crucial psycho-linguistic consideration. Every linguistic statement made, every idea that is communicated, begins as an inner *thought-process*, before finding external expression in either a spoken or a written form. This cerebral language of thought is deeply rooted in the human psyche under the direct control of the intellect. Thought begets an idea which finds an outlet, in verbal or written form, in the very language in which the thought initially occurs, which, under normal circumstances, is the person's first language. Domestic upbringing combines with educational background to

determine an individual's primary language, which also happens to be the language in which he or she *thinks*. A writer can most profoundly express himself or herself in this language, irrespective of whether it is foreign or indigenous. To attempt to write in a language different from the language of thought implies a complex process of concurrent translation of that initial language of thought into the literary form of another language, which is quite capable of interfering with the creative process. The writer will find himself or herself simultaneously coping with two parallel tasks: the primary task of literary creativity, and the secondary task of concurrent translation of the initial language in which the creative idea occurs. Thus, from the psycho-linguistic perspective, the primary language of thought, regardless of other extraneous considerations, predetermines a writer's choice of language in creative self-expression.

This leaves us with only one way out of the linguistic dilemma for African literature: translation. In the immediate future, a sustainable policy of cross-linguistic translation should be embarked upon to retrieve all African texts – past and present – initially written in one colonial language or the other, into their respective indigenous languages. This would bring the message closer home and help, at the same time, to develop the languages concerned. In the same spirit, the successful works of writers who feel more at home in indigenous languages should similarly be translated into English without any further delay, to make them available to international audiences. Once this translation policy is firmly in place, it would no longer matter in which language an African author chooses to set down his or her thoughts. English has become something of an international language today, largely because of the sheer volume of works initially written in, or translated into, it. The great works of Brecht, Moliere, Chekhov, Ibsen and Strindberg are all accessible to speakers of English, while Shakespeare, Shaw and other English classical writers have been translated into other major languages of the world. Even Chinua Achebe's Nigerian classic, *Things Fall Apart*, initially written in English in 1958, has been translated into numerous European languages, but paradoxically still waiting to be retrieved into the language of its Igbo socio-cultural background, simply because of the absence of a deliberate translation policy in African creativity. Its first indigenous

translation was into Yoruba, courtesy Wale Ogunyemi's translation a few years ago, but there are positive indications that the belated Igbo version may well be in the offing.

In a globalised world, no linguistic grouping, large or small, can afford to remain an island onto itself. A people's language is nurtured to maturity, not only by the volume of works originally created in it, but also by the volume of works translated into it, an intricate interactive process mutually beneficial to the languages concerned. The expanding field of comparative literature will also continue to be nourished by an effective network of literary translation at the global level, such that works written in one language are made available to international readers. Similarly, the United Nations Organisation, the World's Parliament for conflict resolution to forestall another global warfare, will continue to depend on a vibrant translation and interpretation programme for global communication.

The proposed massive programme of translation and interpretation requires an equally massive training programme for experts in linguistics and comparative literature. Translation is a creative and sensitive process that goes beyond literal word-by-word substitution, but takes into consideration subtle differences in morphological and lexical patterns, as well as socio-linguistic factors in effective text transmutation. Thus, a translator must possess a minimum working competence in the two languages involved. African writers and critics should, therefore, concentrate their attention on the planning and implementation of a vibrant translation policy so as to reclaim all successful African works initially written in colonial languages, into the socio-cultural milieux which inspired their creation in the first instance. This, rather than the barren polemics on language choice, should constitute the main literary agenda of the twenty-first century.

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