

## **African Literature: Place, Language or Experience**

Lencer Achieng' Ndede<sup>1\*</sup>

---

1. Dept. of Literature, The University of Nairobi, Kenya.

\* Corresponding Author's Email: lencerochieng@yahoo.com

---

**Abstract** – This paper, from an Afro-centric point of view and post-colonial literary criticism, attempts a definition of African Literature with a view to interrogate “African Literature and the Language Question”. It further critiques scholars who have raised concerns on the language of African literature. The question guiding the study is “What is African literature? Is it literature produced in Africa or about Africa or in African Languages? And what is the effect of using European languages in expressing this literature. It concludes by suggesting the language which can marry the communicative and cultural characters of African literature.

**Keywords:** Africa, African Literature, Language, translation, transliteration, experiences

---

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

African Literature has for quite some time aroused controversial debates. One of the earliest debates concerned the definition of African literature. Writers and critics who gathered in Uganda in 1963 in a conference entitled "A Conference of African Writers of English Expression." faced the fundamental question of determining who qualified as an African writer, what qualified as African writing and in what language it should be written. The high point of the ensuing debate was the famous essay by Obi Wali, "The Dead End of African Literature" (1963), in which he declared that the literature written in European languages did not qualify as African literature. This marked the beginning of the long language debate that has continued to date, with many critics foregrounding their views on the same. Although some like Achebe countered Wali's position, Ngugi embraced it, transforming the call for a return to African languages into a critical crusade that has lasted for quite some time with Abiola Irele bemoaning the continuous dependence of African literature on European languages.

#### **1.1. Statement of the Problem**

Language is the medium through which literature is advanced. Over time some scholars have attempted to define literature in terms of the material language they are advanced in raising questions of what really defines literature. African literature has continued to raise questions over what it is and in which language it should be written. Whether is it literature produced in Africa or about Africa, on any subject or African theme? And whether it should embrace the whole continent or south of Sahara or just Black Africa?

This paper defines African literature while also voicing the concern of the language question as far as African literature is concerned.

## **1.2. Objectives of the Study**

This study sought to achieve the following objectives:

- i) To define African literature.
- ii) To interrogate the language of African literature.
- iii) To critique scholars who have advanced their arguments on the language of African literature.

## **1.3. Theoretical Framework**

The study was guided by post-colonial criticism. Post-colonial theory looks at the experience of the colonized peoples of the world and how the colonial experience re-defines human identity. It also discusses colonial ideology to understand the process of colonial subjugation as well as what constitutes post-colonial writings, themes in post-colonial literature and the debates about what constitutes post-coloniality.

Post-colonial criticism guided this study in analyzing the language used in African literature as a bi-product of the inversion of the imperial culture on to the African culture leaving them with no option but to write their literatures in European languages. It further guides the study in analyzing the colonial experiences thereby enabling the study to define African literature putting into consideration the fact that colonialism and its impacts are part of the African experiences.

## **2. MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This study involves library research as its methodology. It involved reading books, journals and papers that have been written concerning the definition of African literature and the language question. The question guiding the methodology is ‘What is African literature, what should it constitute and in what language should it be advanced in.

## **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The term African literature has presented a lot of problems especially what is to be considered African literature, in which language it should be written, what it should be about, and who should be considered an African writer. Most Afrocentric critics’ definition attribute to “nativism”- the claim that true African independence requires a literature of its own with the thematic nativists arguing that African literature is that which addresses the everyday material concerns of the African reading public in readily accessible forms. Structuralist nativists think of African literature as that which has as its sources conventions and philosophies of presentations derived from recognizable indigenous practices. Linguistic nativists argue that literature is defined and described by the material languages in which they are written. For these linguistic nativists, a body of literary works must be written in languages that are native to Africa.

This debate on African literature and the language question was kick started by Obi Wali in his article “Dead end of African literature” where he posited that ““The whole 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....(and) until these writers and their western midwives accept the fact that any true African literature must be written in African languages, they would be merely pursuing a dead end, which can only lead to sterility, uncreativity, and frustrations”. Abiola says in his paper ‘African Literature and the Language Question’ a paper presented at the Conference on ‘Le Critique African et son people comme producteurs de civilisation’, April 1973, that “We cannot feel that we are in full possession of this literature so long as it is elaborated in a language that does not belong to us in an immediate and original way.”(Abiola, African experience 45). Wright (1973) sees African literature in English as part of English literature because to him African literature “presents a particular problem within the broad field of literature in English (12). Ngugi wa Thiongo sees the language as the means of spiritual subjugation and in 1977 condemned as un-African all writing including his own written in European languages and says that people should be writing in their native languages.

These arguments imply that ‘Literature exists within a language’. This seeing literature as defined and described by the material languages in which they are written is quite limiting since human experience form the basis of written expression and language is just a vehicle used to carry the experiences home. Literature is a compound product of lived experience – linguistic and non-linguistic, thus what makes up the totality of African literature goes beyond its language of expression. An African writer therefore can be said to be one writing about Africa from an African point of view with an African audience in mind, making works like Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* not African since it is about Africa from a European point of view and with a European audience in mind. African literature is a product of lived experiences that constitute themselves as the raw materials for its producer; content, form and setting thus informs literature, not language. Literature is from the people, about the people, and for the people with meaning-oriented intentions.

Some scholars have argued that using foreign languages to express African literature distorts the African values. One such scholar is Abiola Irele who argues that ‘African situation in regard to the relationship between literature and language is marked by anomalies.’ He mentions these anomalies as “distortion of critical values .....because of the distance placed between this literature and the generality of Africans by the language factor” He says:

“This particular anomaly carries with it a whole host of implications and consequences, the most notable of which are, to my mind, the distortion of the critical values which it entails, and the difficulty of determining its true direction- because of the distance placed between this literature and the generality of Africans by the language factor”(Abiola, African experience, 44)

This argument implies that the foreign languages cannot carry fully well the reality of African experiences as it exists today and as such destroy the very critical values they are supposed to express leading to a devaluation of those literatures that are original to the people of the

African continent. Contrary to this argument works by some African writers in European languages have proved far from distorting the African critical values. They have successfully shown that the language of writing does not in any way devalue these literatures and neither does it interfere with the 'Africanness' of the literature. The writers have employed a rich blend of folklore, myth, taboos and proverbs which are typically African without the language distorting the African image and experience. Achebe's, "Proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten", for example is an experience which is distinctively and authentically Ibo (African). It is typically Nigerian experience to eat a piece of roasted yam with palm oil and salt. This distinctly Nigerian experience has been wrapped and carried to the audience in English language without any distortion or devaluation of the 'Nigerianness' of the experience. Reading works by African writers such as Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Camara Laye's, *The African Child*; which was originally written in French under the title '*L'Enfant Noir*' and Ngugi Wa Thiongo's *The River Between*, one almost forgets that the works are written in English, one feels like it is a reading of the Ibo, Malinke and a Gikuyu cultures and practices, respectively without the English or French language interfering with the 'Africanness' of the experiences.

Some of these works are very rich and typically African with experiences which are immediately African, creatively wrapped and conveyed in European languages without a feeling of sterility. Okigbo in *Heavens-gate*, for example, successfully rejects European domination using the English and makes a strong statement seeking to return to his ancestral way of worship without a feeling of sterility or losing his African tone to his African Audience. He invokes the oil-bean, sacred groove, and the pantheon of his people. He makes this declaration in "Heavens-gate" as he surrenders himself to mother Idoto a goddess of his traditional religion:

Before you mother Idoto  
Naked I stand  
Before your watery presence,  
A prodigal

Leaning on an oilbean,  
Lost in your legend

The experience of leaning on an oilbean is typically African. His 'Lustra' further brings out the 'Africanness' of the sacrifice in a European Language. The protagonist offers a sacrifice which is quite African in spirit. Okigbo writes:

Fingers of penitence bring/To a palm groove/Vegetable offering with five/Fingers of chalk.... (pg 140) This, without a doubt proves that English language can express African experiences without devaluing them. These illustrations are far from leading to sterility, instead they are full of the most exciting possibilities and the images used arrive home for an African audience.

Achebe's *Arrow of God* too proves that the European languages can carry the weight of African experiences without distorting it. For Achebe it has to be "another English", as he says, 'Africanised' to bear the weight of the experiences. This example from *Arrow of God*, (borrowed from Achebe) shows how Achebe 'Africanizes' English to make it bear his African experiences. The Chief Priest in *Arrow of God* is telling one of his sons why it is necessary to send him to church. Achebe writes:

I want one of my sons to join these people and be my eyes there. If there is nothing in it you will come back. But if there is something there you will bring home my share. The world is like a Mask, dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place. My spirit tells me that those who do not befriend the white man today will be saying *had we known* tomorrow.

The same expression in Standard English would read:

I am sending you as my representative among these people—just to be on the safe side in case the new religion develops. One has to move with the times or else one is left behind. I have a hunch that those who fail to come to terms with the white man may well regret their lack of foresight.

The material is the same but the form is different showing a specialized and Africanised use of English without losing the African tone in it. I am sending you 'to be my eyes there' arrives home well for an African audience from an elderly African man. 'The world is like a mask, dancing' is an imagery which intimately carries the Nigerian world view; a distinctly Nigerian experience. In Nigeria, during the festival of 'egugu' when the egugu's are dancing they wear masks. Therefore the image of a dancing mask that Achebe uses retains the Nigerian world view and arrives home well to a Nigerian Audience, who is the primary audience for Achebe's novels.

Not only poets and novelists, playwrights too have proved that European languages can carry African experiences without a feeling of distortion or sterility. Francis Imbuga's *Aminata* is written with a blend of proverbs which shows the wisdom of the elderly in the society. He distinguishes the educated from the uneducated by the particular kinds of imagery which he gives them. The language of *Aminata* and her husband Mulembi is quite refined showing that they are educated and when it comes to the old uneducated villagers, he gives them a language deeply rooted in proverbs, sayings, folk wisdom and imagery rooted in their African surrounding. His works together with others render untrue Abiola's argument that "African dramatists who put European languages in the mouths of his characters is thus at a greater disadvantage than the novelist" (Abiola 51) Abiola argues that a play requires 'realistic' presentation and it is far from 'real' to have African peasants, laborers, and fishermen speaking European languages in an African social context. In reality these Africans are speaking their own African languages and the playwright has merely translated what they would have said in their language in to the European Languages.

Foreign language cannot distort the African culture in fact, any language can express any culture, since all languages are systems whose references to reality are arbitrary. This means that there is no relation of any kind between the sound-structure of the word and its

meaning i.e. Language is a convention and the nature of the sign that is agreed upon does not matter. Because the sign follows no law other than that of tradition, and because it is based upon tradition, there is no inherent phonaesthetic value in any speech sounds, it is all a matter of habit. The fact that words are invented means no language lacks vocabulary which fits a given experience. Words have meaning only as parts of a system, with each word deriving its meaning solely from its difference from the other words in the system. Though languages reference to reality is arbitrary there is a certain ‘naturalisation’ of particular languages to specific environments. However ‘naturalisation’ is something that can be achieved with continuous use. For African writers and audience the mastery and naturalization of the foreign languages came with colonialism and colonial education which the African writers received in the colonizers language and currently post-colonial education which still follows the western systems and languages. This naturalization comes easy since the said Education start at a tender age, and each normal child is born equipped with a special apparatus for apprehending phonemes, for compounding them into morphemes, and for segmenting the stream of speech according to some syntax. The corresponding apparatus in children’s nervous system is plastic enough to acquire any language, during the critical period, and to acquire any of the possible languages with essentially equal ease. Thus any language can be ‘naturalised’ and can express any culture.

There has been an argument that though the African writer can write in foreign languages, the works they produce in these languages are lost to their African audience. Abiola says “The point at issue is not whether an African can successfully write in English or French-we have enough evidence that that particular issue is resolved-but whether in the present circumstances, the work that he produces can have a meaning for his African audience” (Abiola African experience 55). This argument forces one to ask who this African audience is. The fact that it is a ‘written literature’ itself limits the audience to those who can read, which imply those who are educated- colonial and post-colonial Education itself being one which follows the European system and done in European languages. As such whether this literature is written in European languages or African indigenous languages, it addresses a literate audience. Works by African writers in European languages have proved that though written in European languages, they are not lost to the African Audience. Take this example from Christopher Okigbo's limits:

**Suddenly becoming talkative**

**like a weaver bird**

**Between sleep and waking**

I hand up my egg-shells  
To you of palm grove,  
Upon whose bamboo towers hang  
Dripping with yesterupwine  
A tiger mask and nude spear....  
Queen of the damp half light,

I have had my cleansing.  
Emigrant with air-borne nose,  
The he-goat-on-heat.

The image of, a weaverbird, tiger mask, nude spear and a he-goat on heat does arrives home for an African audience since these are their experiences in their surroundings. Or take the poem *Night Rain*, in which J. P. Clark captures so well the fear and wonder felt by a child as rain clamors on the thatch roof at night, and his mother, walking about in the dark, moves her simple belongings:

Out of the run of water  
That like ants filing out of the wood  
Will scatter and gain possession  
Of the floor.

The picture of water spreading on the floor "like ants filing out of the wood" is not only beautiful but also has meaning for an African who has made fire with faggots and seen ants filing out of ant-ridden wood and 'gaining possession of the floor'. This proves that these literatures written in the European languages have meaning for the African audience; they possess an African voice speaking of African experience in a worldwide language.

These arguments prompt one to ask what African Literature is? what Most scholars seem to overlook is the fact that any attempt to define African literature in terms which overlook the complexities of the African scene in terms of, the African experiences is doomed to failure. It is important to note that colonialism together with its bi-products such as the acquisition of foreign languages is part of the African experiences. Denying the foreign language is tantamount to denying the colonial experience; a denial and distortion of the African history. The acquisition of the foreign languages is thus part of the African experiences and part of what defines African literature. One wonders why the African seems satisfied with having taken over other bi-products of colonial interference such as schooling, using vehicles, the radio, the refrigerator and all other articles of modern-day living but chose to reject the European language. Scholars who advocate for going back to our African Languages do not give concrete reasons as to why they think African languages can bear African experiences better than European ones, neither do they prove that the European languages cannot carry the weight of the experiences or are lost to African audience other than just plainly rejecting the European languages because they belong to the imperialists and that they came as part of a package deal of colonialism which included, atrocities, racial arrogance and prejudice, and in rejecting colonialism they reject everything associated with it including the language. Writing under the title 'Imperialism of Language: English, a Language for the world? Ngugi comments that:

Needless to say, the encounter between English and most so-called Third World languages did not occur under conditions of independence and equality. English, French and Portuguese came to the Third World to announce the arrival of the Bible and the sword. They came clamouring for gold, black gold in chains, or

gold that shines as sweat in factories and plantations. If it was the gun which made possible the mining of this gold and which effected the political captivity of their owners, it was language which held captive their cultures, their values, and hence their minds (Ngugi, 1993, 3).

Literature belongs to a people if it embodies their experiences within their space from their own point of view. Thus if a literature bears the spirit of Africa then it belongs to Africa regardless of the language in which it is expressed in. Writing African Literature in English or French does not make it less African. The language is a bi-product of same process that brought the writing (that writers are arguing about) and the same process that made the new nation-states of Africa (which they are trying to define). It is a wonder that the African 'Writer' accepts writing which was brought by the foreigner but denies the language brought by the same foreigner, accept change of lifestyle as part of their history yet deny acquisition of language as part of their history.

The argument that African literature should be written in African indigenous languages is a desire which is almost impossible to put to practice. Writing, to begin with, has to do with having some education, complicating the scene further is the fact that the education system in the post-colonial African countries follow European system and is done in European languages making those Educated competent to write in the European Languages and less competent to write in their own languages. Though most people even the uneducated know how to speak their languages well, speaking a language is one thing and writing creatively in it is another. Writing is taught and learned in the very schools that follow the European system. Odaga says that when Europeans wanted to effectively take control of Africans they made the children learn their language and Literature and forget their 'backward primitive' old legend like stories, which was why one would have easily found an African child singing 'God save the queen' or 'London is burning' long before they could pronounce their names (Odaga, 1985, p.12). This situation that Odaga speaks about haunts Africa to date; most people know European languages better than their own mother tongues. Abiola Irele confesses that "our Education itself was Eurocentric which left the African with no choice but to adopt the European languages. In fact most Africans were left incompetent in their own languages". ("Literature, Culture, and Thought in Africa: A Conversation with Abiola Irele). The question then is 'How can these Africans who have been Educated in the European languages leaving them incompetent in their own native languages write in these very indigenous languages in which they are alienated from. Chimamanda Adichie too, who writes in English, candidly admits that she is illiterate in Ibo, and thus cannot write in it, she recalls how children were punished at school for 'speaking in the vernacular'. This has happened not only to Chimamanda but also to scores of Africans who have been forced in their post-colonial schools to discard their African Languages and adopt European ones which are associated with success and power as opposed to indigenous languages associated with failure and low class; the result being that these children grow up being very good in the foreign languages and poor in the languages which only exclude one from wealth and power, hence they cannot write creatively in these indigenous languages. In fact in most African countries writing in indigenous languages is abolishing mutual communication. Achebe narrates his encounter with two writers he says:

“The other day I had a visit from Joseph Kariuki of Kenya. Although I had read some of his poems and he had read my novels, we had not met before. But it didn't seem to matter. In fact I had met him through his poems,” By contrast, when in 1960 I was traveling in East Africa and went to the home of the late Shabaan Robert, the Swahili poet of Tanganyika, things had been different. We spent some time talking about writing, but there was no real contact. I knew from all accounts that I was talking to an important writer, but of the nature of his work I had no idea. He gave me two books of his poems, which I treasure but cannot read—until I have learned Swahili.

Some scholars have argued that using European Languages in writing enriches those languages and hamper the development of our indigenous languages. Using European languages in writing does not in any way hamper the development of other African languages since they are still used in day to day interactions. Soviet Union is a very good example to support this, the position of Russia as an official language of the state has not hampered the development of the other various languages that make up the union. On the same note the use of European languages as official languages cannot hamper the development of African Indigenous languages. English, for example developed amidst other languages. In fact, the language we now call English is actually a blend of many languages. Even the original Anglo-Saxon itself was already a blend of the dialects of West Germanic tribes living along the North Sea coast. Thus even the European languages were affected by colonialism. During the Anglo-Saxon invasion, the Germanic language displaced the indigenous Brythonic languages and Latin in most of the areas of Great Britain that later became England. The original Celtic languages remained in parts of Scotland, Wales and Cornwall. English emerged over time out of the many dialects and languages of the colonizing tribes.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The problem of African literature is not that of language or definition, rather it is more of a problem of ‘misidentity and misdefinition’ which is what makes it a victim of Eurocentric criticism that are most often mis-contextually and discriminately applied. The only connection between the African Literature in English and the English Literature is the language deployed in their formation. African literature goes beyond the boundaries of English language since it also encapsulates the literatures written in French, Portuguese and the indigenous African languages. The question therefore should not be what language African literature should be written in but how best the borrowed tongues can be used to carry the weight of the African experience.

African is ‘a child of two worlds’; African parentage and western or Islamic/Arabic colonization. Since a writer is a product of the society, an African writer therefore draws upon his dual heritage; his oral tradition- and his colonial experiences. Transposition, transliteration or, translation thus assumes therefore is what answers the question of ‘which language should African literature be written in’ since it is the only way to marry the

communicative and cultural characters of African literature. Thus the African writer has to, first and foremost, create the story from his African experience and then mediate his experience in the European language maneuvering it to reflect the African traditions. It is thus right to argue that translation and transliteration, which is indicative of linguistic and cultural differences which exist between the medium (language) and the experience (thought) being expressed, is the best way to bridge the gap between the African experience and the foreign medium used in writing. African literature is thus defined by the experiences of African people not the language of expression.

### REFERENCES

- Achebe, C. (1963). "English and the African Writer" *Transition*, No.75/76. The Anniversary Issue: Selection from *Transition*, 1961-1976. 342 - 349.
- Achebe, C. (1958). *Things Fall Apart*. London: Heinemann.
- Achebe, C. (1975). 'The Africa Writer and the English Language', in *Morning Yet On Creation Day*. London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd.
- Irele, A. (1981). *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology*. London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd.
- Ngugi, W.N. (1986). *Decolonizing the mind: the politics of language in African Literature*. London: Heinemann.
- Odaga, A. (1985). *Literature for Children and Young People in Kenya*. Kenya Literature Bureau.

### BIO-DATA

Lencer Achieng' Ndede holds a Bachelor of Education (Arts) from Moi University, Masters of Arts in Literature from The University of Nairobi and Currently a PhD Student in Literature at The University of Nairobi. She is an Adjudicator in Music and Drama. She is passionate about development of Literature and has written and presented a number of papers at various Literature, Drama, Film and Music conferences. She teaches Literature at Egerton and Kenyatta University.