

Language and Culture in African Postcolonial Literature

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"Language and Culture in African Postcolonial Literature"

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Abstract: In his article, "Language and Culture in African Postcolonial Literature," Kwaku Asante-Darko offers both conceptual basis and empirical evidence in support of the fact that critical issues concerning protest, authenticity, and hybridity in African post-colonial literature have often been heavily laden with nationalist and leftist ideological encumbrances, which tended to advocate the rejection of Western standards of aesthetics. One of the literary ramifications of nationalist/anti-colonial mobilization was a racially based aesthetics which saw even the new product of literary hybridity born of cultural exchange as a mark of Western imposition and servile imitation by Africa in their literary endeavour. Asante-Darko exposes the hollowness of the hostile racial militancy of the works of Frantz Fanon and Ngugi by assessing their salient arguments from the point of view of the themes, the methodology, the language choice, and the stratagem of African literary discourse. He explains that all these aspects contain a duality born of the reconcilability of African literary aspirations on one-hand, and Western standards on the other. Last, Asante-Darko demonstrates that the African literary and cultural past cannot be reconstituted but only reclaimed and that the linguistic, thematic, and aesthetic hybridity this presupposes must be embraced to give African literature the freedom it needs to contribute its full quota to the universality of literature.

Kwaku ASANTE-DARKO

Language and Culture in African Postcolonial Literature

Post-colonial literature is a synthesis of protest and imitation. It blends revolt and conciliation. This duality permeates its stratagem, its style, and its themes in a manner that is not always readily perceptible to critics. This has practical didactic implications for the contemporary literary endeavor in Africa. The central concern of this article is to assess the extent to which African protest literature seems to have imitated European and colonial literary discourse in matters such as thematic concerns, aesthetics, and methodology. The relationship of imitation, exchange, and hybridity is presented with the view to highlighting the thematic, methodological, and aesthetic differences between some aspects of African literature on one hand and the Western literary tradition on the other.

The African colonial experience has dominated the origin and nature of contemporary African protest literature and rendered it opposed to Western standards of aesthetics. This Manichean perception must have been a reaction to Horace's position, "O imitatores, servum pecus!" Imitators are a servile race. The rejection was reinforced by the general impression that Africa needed to evolve a literature that will not be an imitation of the literary norms of Europe. It is therefore not surprising that authors of protest literature advocated a literary endeavor, whose style, language, aesthetic standards and concerns were required to be different from those of the colonizing powers who were seen as having subjugated them and undervalued every aspect of their lives. The desire for originality was thus to become the prerequisite for authentic African literature, which would explore Africa's past, buttress its present, and advocate a hopeful future. Wauthier observed that: "The hero of the African novel is nearly always black, and if by chance he is white as in *Le Regard du roi* by Camara Laye, the action at least is situated in Africa and the story deals with African mentality. The poet, for his part, sings of the African woman and the land of Africa, or denounces colonialism" (Wauthier 1966, 24). It is from this perspective that Negritude came to be seen as an aggressive anti-racist condemnation of white supremacy. A closer look at the strands that went into weaving the fabric of this Negritude protest literature, however, reveals that in executing its work of protest, Negritude imitated some of the objectives and methods of the very racism it kicked against. It is worthy of note that in doing this, there is a move to the imitation of some of the salient methods of the colonial enterprise: The written word which colonialism had introduced to many parts of hitherto unlettered corners of the continent of Africa. The wide range of transformation occasioned by this attests not only to the necessity of literacy but also to the flexibility and pragmatism of African peoples when it comes to adapting to new exigencies. Jacques Chevrier explains the nature and impact of this novelty when he notes that: "A une civilisation de l'oralité se substitue donc progressivement une civilisation de l'écriture dont l'émergence est attestée par l'apparition d'une littérature négro-africaine en langue française. Cette littérature, dont les premières manifestations remontent à 1921, s'est affirmée dans les années qui ont précédé l'accession à l'indépendance des États africains et elle s'est déployée dans plusieurs directions" (Chevrier 1984, 25).

It must be noted, however that the social change introduced by this literary change was not completely imbibed as Chevrier seems to suggest here. To the rejection of the European literary style was added a measure of mistrust, however sullen, the mistrust of the entire European way of life. Michael Dei-Anang in a poem entitled "Whither Bound Africa" disputed the adoption or imitation of European civilization in the following words: "Forward! To what? / To the reeking round Of medieval crimes, / Where the greedy hawks/ O Aryan stock / Prey with bombs and guns / On men of lesser breed?" (Dei-Anang 18-19). The ravages of the Second World War thus becomes a symbol of European cultural indecency, and a justification for the rejection of Western values. Nonetheless, the universal nature of these European problems, and their implicit relevance to the Africa situation is reflected in the transposition of some European themes into the Africa environment. For instance, Sophocles' *King Oedipus* is transposed as *The Gods are not to Be Blamed* by Ola Rotimi, *Antigone* is transposed as *The Island* by Athol Fugard, Kani, and Ntshona, while Euripide's *The Bacchae* is transposed as *The Bacchae of Euripides* by Wole Soyinka. Such a

critical approach to foreign values indicates that the acceptance of those Western values some of which have become the center of protest was partly as a result of a conscious selection and free choice by the colonized. Again, it is in this context that Senghor could elaborate his literary dicta such as "Assimilate, don't be Assimilated," and "Cultural Cross-breeding." When all is said and done it will be realized that the introduction to Africa of new ways of doing things is essentially an offer of an opportunity to choose between different options, at least the old and the new, the Western and the indigenous.

The hybrid nature of literary expression of African resistance to the colonial experience and its consequences as mirrored in the pioneering written literary works validates this position. For instance, in his assessment of the nature and origin of the Negritude Movement, Hymans notes that: "There are many *negritudes*: the aggressive *Negritude* clamouring for recognition of African values; the conciliatory *Negritude* advocating cultural miscegenation or cross-breeding; and an inventive *Negritude* tending toward a new humanism. These three major currents have been present from 1931 onwards; but according to the period and the 'militant', one of these aspects has taken precedence over the other" (Hymans 1977, 23). These three "Negritudes" contain elements which can be considered legitimate reactions to the type of negation to which colonialists subjected their territories. It is not surprising that in clamoring for recognition Negritude counted on the method of confrontation and demystification. Sartre notes concerning the negritude writer that: "pour construire sa Vérité, il faut qu'il ruine celle des autres" (Sartre 1948, xxiii). The aggressiveness of Negritude is thus explicable in the logic of vengeance which is essentially an imitation in so far as it is one's reaction to another's action. When we avenge or retaliate we simply imitate. The adversary who argues that: "My (exaggerated) action is a reaction to the enemy's action" is only indicating that he has followed the precedent of the aggressor. The imitation embodied in the retaliation or vituperative vengeance of the negritude writer was not wantonly destructive. It was not meant to question the humanity and intelligence of any race. It was constructive in that it sought the restoration of the truth of racial equality. One of the means of doing this was to imitate the culture of the written word to complement that of the oral. That same language and method used to denigrate him becomes his instrument of revalorization and pride, and restitution. The inferiority attributed to him by imposition is thus rejected by imitation. This imitation then seems imposed in a way since he is obliged by circumstances to address the colonizer in a language and logic that the colonizer can understand, hence the use of European languages and literary forms as instruments of post-colonial literary expression.

The distinction between imitation and imposition in the evolution of modern African literary discourse is pertinent to the question of responsibility for the contemporary crisis of post-colonial Africa -- a continent which is believed to have taken its destiny into its own hands. This is because imitation presupposes choice, and choice implies responsibility for the consequences thereof. Two opinions have been expressed on this issue. The first tends to presume the virtuous innocence of pre-colonial African culture and society. This, by implication makes the African the lethargic entity in a world of so-called foreign evils. Ademola in the following poem expresses this position thus: "Here we stand / infants overblown / poised between two civilizations / finding the balancing irksome, / itching for something to happen, / to tip us one way or the other, / groping in the dark for a helping hand / and finding none...." (Ademola 1962, 65).

The imagery of the African as an "infant overblown" who is finding it difficult to balance the effects of two civilizations is essentially a facile one. The impression is further created that the persona (the African) lacks initiative and is simply "itching for something to happen,." Such notions have been propagated by the erroneous idea that it is unacceptable for an African to imitate practices and values which were originally European even when such imitation is realistic and pragmatic. The rejection of such imitation is flawed on at least two grounds: First, the African of today cannot in any significant or participatory sense claim membership of the erstwhile pre-colonial culture to which the personas of some poets are so idyllically attached. This is because the contemporary African has been born into a cultural setting which is a blend of the pre-colonial traditional past and the introduction of 'foreign' notions. Second, the pre-colonial past can only be claimed but never reconstituted. The failure to distinguish between what can be recovered in its

purity and what is irremediably lost to hybridization can lead to a literal misinterpretation of the ideas expressed in the works such as this poem of Guy Tirolien entitled: "Je ne veux plus aller à leur école" in which the persona advocates the rejection of European values and education in favor of the traditional African way of life: "Je veux suivre mon père dans les ravines fraîches / Quand la nuit flotte encore dans le mystère des bois / Où glissent les esprits que l'aube vient chasser./ Je veux aller pieds nus par les rouges sentiers / Que cuisent les flammes de midi...." (Tirolien 1981, 137-38). The essence of the standard and models of these societies, like those of other pre-industrial ones elsewhere (Greek, Roman, Chinese) is a construct which is not static. Such pre-colonial nostalgia among African writers can be appreciated only when they evoke history as guide for the future.

Another issue of imitation and hybridization in pos-colonial African literature is that of language. Frantz Fanon had already indicated that "The use of language as a tool of assimilation and subsequent rebellion against linguistic integration and alienation have become familiar aspects of colonial life" (qtd. in Gendzier 1973, 47). It was clear that some advocates of African authenticity have been swift to brand foreign languages as instruments of colonial domination whose public practices must be discontinued at least in post-colonial African literature. Basing their arguments on the debatable premise that the imitation or introduction of a foreign language presupposes the inferiority of the imitator, Ngugi, for instance, has argued that: "The bullet was the means of the physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation" (Ngugi 1972, 282) and "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" (Ngugi 1972, 290). This idea falls in with the disputable opinion according to which the possession of a particular language indicates that the possessor shares or even approves of the ideological and cultural world view of the society in which the language is born and practiced. Frantz Fanon puts this as follows: "Tout peuple colonisé c'est-à-dire tout peuple au sein duquel a pris naissance un complexe d'infériorité du fait de la mise au tombeau de l'originalité culturelle locale se situe vis-à-vis du langage de la nation civilisatrice c'est-à-dire de la culture métropolitaine" (Fanon 1963, 209).

The very premise of such contentions begin to falter upon little deliberation and interrogation. When we understand that political decolonization was achieved through a combination of the very same instruments of colonial oppression -- the intelligentsia, the armed forces, and a colonial middle-class, among others. Will it be awkward to expect that the freedom from "the spiritual subjugation" about which Ngugi speaks can be achieved through the subversive influence of this same foreign language? In fact this is what happened. The legitimacy or appropriateness of this question resides in the fact that these same foreign languages have been the cementing factor for communication and the spread of ideas among countless African societies, which were hitherto separated and linguistically inconsonant entities lacking any form of inter-comprehensibility. Again, different sections of African communities differ as to what constitutes spiritual "subjugation" in the final analysis. While some advocate a return to pre-colonial values others have not hesitated to indicate that: "we do not intend to revive the past as it was.... We want to integrate into modern life only what seems valuable from the past. Our goal is neither the traditional African nor the Black European, but the modern African" ("Ntu Editorial" 1964, 79).

It follows from these opposing perspectives that while some may see a reconstitution of pre-colonial culture as redemptive others may not only see it as impossible but also undesirable. To the latter the post-colonial reality is not a physical mixture but a chemical compound which cannot be separated into its initial constituents. Imitation of language, like that of cultural value, then becomes not only positive but also a means of inevitable hybridization. Paul Ansah has observed concerning pioneering African poets that: "But the virtually total rejection of western civilization never constituted a major theme in the writing of the pioneer poets of Anglophone West Africa, and this is sharp contrast to the violence with which western culture is rejected, even if only symbolically or as a mere poetic attitude, by the francophone black poets of Negritude persuasion both West Indian and African" (Ansah 1974, 48). The position of Fanon and Ngugi can be summed up in the contention that foreign languages in Africa are imposition which must be rejected on the

grounds that they are vehicles of a foreign culture whose continuing imitation or acceptance in the literature of post-colonial society is indicative of persisting subjugation. Ngugi notes in 'Towards a National Culture' that: "by acquiring the thought-process and values of his adopted tongue ... becomes alienated from the values of his mother tongue, or from the language of the masses" (Ngugi 1972, 16). It must, however, be pointed out that any language is capable of carrying any culture just as any culture can carry any language: Witness the transformation of diverse ancient cultures and societies when they fell under Greek and Roman sway). Languages and cultures have demonstrated a capacity to adapt to "foreign" cultures and novelties in science, philosophy and art by the introduction of new words and borrowing from other languages to express the new notions. Such borrowing underscores the phenomenon of linguistic exchange which is essentially a process of imitation and hybridization. A careful study of the etymology of words like "bank," "police," and "association" and their introduction into various European languages indicates how language, rather than being static, is a medium of imitating new realities. Language can be deemed capable of supporting the mutable and dangling weight of such a dynamic a thing as culture. The adoption of foreign words like "taboo" and "kwashiorkor" into the English language, for instance, as well as the existence of structurally ethnographic sentences in novel written by Anglophone and Francophone African writers is equally indicative of the rich exchange which already exists and can be developed to foster understanding.

The real problem arises when we classify literature into realms of linguistic expression rather than into representations of cultural experience; when we consider the works of Joseph Conrad as English literature, those of Ionesco and Beckett as French literature rather than a classification that will emphasis content rather than medium. It will therefore be more realistic to refer to a classification such as "Commonwealth Literature" to be more realistic than say "Francophone Literature" or "Lusophone Literature." The reference here is made to a common (cultural) colonial/imperial experience that unites Great Britain and its former colonies; and these experiences can be expressed in African languages as well. Such a definition of Commonwealth goes beyond mere linguistic expression. As it is, the rejection of foreign languages as mediums of African literature will logically devour every idea of African Literature. There will rather be ethnic literatures of all types. In this degeneration, language rather than a common experience will be the determinant of literary classification.

African literature will dissolve and polarize into a situation akin to what Achebe seemed to be hinting at when he said: "I'm an Igbo writer, because this is my basic culture; Nigerian, African and writer ... no, black first, then a writer. Each of these identities does call for a certain commitment on my part" (qtd. in Appiah et al. 1991, 19). Here culture and experience rather than language becomes the essence of literature. Ngugi's claim to linguistic rejection on the grounds that the linguistic indigenization of African literature will rid Africans of so-called corrupt foreign "thought-processes and values of [their] adopted tongue" is equally enfeebled by the fact that there are countless instances in history where people of one and the same language and culture have been divided over everyday issues of central importance, and have even gone to war over them. The legitimate question then arises: If ideology is a derivative of linguistic structure (the adoption of which, it is believed, will corrupt African minds) how do Fanon and Ngugi explain such fratricidal wars? More important, their contention dangerously undermines the very effort at peaceful multiethnic nation-building in Africa since the linguistic diversity of the various states would imply -- following the logic of Ngugi and Fanon and those who share their opinion -- the existence of opposing ideologies, conflicting and irreconcilable values, and world views. In fact, to purport that a given language possesses any measure of intrinsic oppressive, imperial domineering tendencies and must therefore be rejected as a medium of the emancipatory account of post-coloniality is not only objectionable but also patently idealistic and superstitious, especially when the cultures of such languages are the cradles of *The Magna Charta* and *The Rights of Man*. Contrary to the claims of the proponents of the rejection of foreign languages as a medium of African literature, the stylistic legacy bequeathed to post-colonial writers found meaningful expression in the works of Negritude writers. Sartre, for instance notes that: "le surréalisme, mouvement poétique européen, est dérobé aux Européens par un Noir qui le tourne contre eux et

lui assigne une fonction rigoureusement définie" (Sartre 1948, xxviii). This assertion made in connection with the work of Aimé Césaire attests to the efficacy of imitation in matters of artistic expression (see, for example, *Présence Africaine*).

Another area in which post-colonial literature imitates colonial discourse is myth-making. This mythical dimension consists of opposing myth with myth. To the idea of African inferiority the post-colonial writer opposed that of African intrinsic goodness and incorruptibility. The rejection of a supposedly foreign tainted present by Negritude naturally led to the desire to reclaim and imitate the past. This was attractive for several reasons among which is the natural psychological desire to be part not only of a distinct and exclusive and glorious past but also to acquire a sense of an appurtenance which links one to an indissoluble group that stretches across eternity. It is, therefore, clear that far from constituting an expression of freedom, the rejection of European values as advocated by post-colonial African critics and writer has meant the imposition of prohibitions and inhibitions which tend to coerce individuals into sticking to limited choices in matters of cultural values and language. It therefore has implications for marriage, profession, migration, food, and dress. It might close the door to profitable hybridization and universalism. Again, Mphahlele, for instance, has indicated the inevitability of imitation and hybridization in these terms: "I personally cannot think of the future of my people in South Africa as something in which the white man does not feature. Whether he likes it or not, our destinies are inseparable. I have seen too much that is good in western culture -- for example, its music, literature and theater -- to want to repudiate it" (Mphahlele 1962, 40).

In concluding this brief discussion I would like to reiterate that the ubiquity (or even dominance) of "imperial" culture and language may provoke reactions of nationalism but it does not constitute subjugation *per se*. The modern concept and role of African literature must be founded on the solid rock of universal patrimony so that we can begin to see its linguistic medium and themes as part of a global heritage. This will belong to a humanism which eschews the Manichean perception that whatever language or culture is introduced into Africa by the "oppressive institution of colonialism" must be opposed and rejected in favor of pre-colonial ones. Such advocacy is patently misleading because it divides the partners of cultural exchange in Africa into makers and imitators rather than parties engaged in an exchange in which all are both makers and imitators, drawing vision and change from a common source that belongs to humanity as a whole. The choice to imitate foreign languages and cultures in African literature will continue to provide a unifying center for the myriad of African languages and cultures for which the political and legal implications of a return to pre-colonial multilingualism and culture diversity are neither desirable nor possible.

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