

The Language Debate: Thiong'o and Achebe on English in Africa

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Abstract

Thiong'o's groundbreaking book *Decolonising the Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature* is one of the most discussed and critically acclaimed postcolonial works. The book has four essays; "The Quest for Relevance" is the last essay which discusses the importance of prioritizing African literature in the academia. According to Thiong'o, the only way African students can benefit from studying literature is by prioritizing the study of their own literature in their own language. In fact, Thiong'o has taken his view to such an extreme that he has declared this book to be his "farewell to English" as a means of any of his writings (1). In contrast, Chinua Achebe embraced English as a medium of his writings which not only made him famous, but also earned him a permanent place in the pantheon of the greatest postcolonial authors and scholars. Like Thiong'o, Achebe was also a strong proponent of promoting African literature and African experience; but unlike Thiong'o, he did not shun the use of English. This paper examines Achebe in light of Thiong'o's essay "The Quest for Relevance" and explores Achebe's success as an author in *Things Fall Apart*.

Keywords: postcolonial, African languages, afrocentricity, English, decolonization

In order to understand the context of Thiong'o's essay "The Quest for Relevance," it is important to discuss the main issues and ideas that Thiong'o focuses on in the first three essays of his book, *Decolonising the Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature*. In the first three essays, Thiong'o discusses the nature and use of the African languages in creative literature focusing on the language of theater and fiction (Thiong'o 87). He elaborately portrays the richness of African language and culture by presenting the wealth of African literary traditions to the world. He discusses how the African languages are used in different literary genres including orature and fiction. He also brings the age-old African tradition of performance art in his discussion and elaborates on how the Africans use their native languages in their theatrical tradition. In all of the first three essays, what Thiong'o actually tries to point out is the inextricable relation between life and language in Africa. He projects that no matter what the literary tradition is, language plays the most vital role in all of them, and that is, language carries with it the essence and flavor of life in Africa – the African experience. But it is his first essay titled "The Language of African Literature" "for which he has almost become more famous than for his novels" because of his arguments about disavowing English in favor of using native African language (Williams 141).

In his fourth essay, "The Quest for Relevance," Thiong'o discusses how language and culture are interconnected, and why it is important for the educational institutions in Africa to include African literature in the syllabus. He further elaborates on this idea and urges that the use of African languages in the study of literature is the only way to ensure a perfect portrayal of African experience. His logic behind making this point is that there is no better way of depicting life other than by the use of the native language.

But before discussing how the use of native African languages is the best way to uphold African experience, in the essay, Thiong'o first discusses the place of African language and culture in

the study of literature, and why it is of extreme urgency to put African experience at the center of African writing. He points out that the dominance of Western literature in the educational institutions in Africa has jeopardized the growth, perception, and preservation of African literary tradition. As a result, if the African students are only exposed to Western literature, not only will that alienate them from their own history and culture, but also distort their perception of their own identity. He mentions that, “African children who encountered literature in colonial schools and universities were thus experiencing the world as defined and reflected in the European experience of history” (Thiong’o 93).

From the viewpoint of his African identity, Thiong’o perceives the quest for relevance to be a “search for a liberating perspective within which to see ourselves [the Africans] clearly in relationship to ourselves and to other selves of the universe” (Thiong’o 87). Thiong’o thus considers it relevant to prioritize academic study of African literature in order to ensure that the African experience gets the highest priority. In Thiong’o’s view, the quest for relevance is a journey to discover the relationships, interconnectedness, and interdependence among life, language, and culture which will help the Africans uphold their own identity by putting up resistance against the unfounded projection of Africa in Western literary tradition. Thiong’o asserts that the young Africans must be able to define their identity in their own terms which will only be possible if the educational system gives the students necessary exposure to African culture. To put it in a nutshell: the African students must have the ability to see the world from the perspective of an African, and to ensure that, it is absolutely necessary to put African experience at the very center of the academic study of literature in Africa rejecting the dictatorial dominance of the Western literary tradition. This is basically what Thiong’o means by the quest for relevance.

Many other African scholars are in dialogue with Thiong’o, Molefi Kete Asante being one of them. Asante, who started the Afrocentric movement, is on the same page as Thiong’o about prioritizing African identity and experience: “Afrocentricity is the frame of reference wherein phenomena are viewed from the perspective of the African person. The Afrocentric approach seeks in every situation the appropriate centrality of the African person” (Asante 171). Asante maintains that an Afrocentric education gives African students the “opportunity to study the world and its people, concepts, and history from an African world view” (171). Afrocentricity also seeks to find a solution to the problem of “unconscious adoption of the Western worldview” by young Africans which manipulates their “conceptual framework” (Mazama 387). In this regard, both Asante and Mazama are in dialogue with Thiong’o.

Apart from emphasizing the relevance between the African experience and the study of literature in Africa, Thiong’o discusses another type of relevance which deals with the study of literature and the language used in this purpose. According to Thiong’o, there is an important connection among the study of literature, the medium of instruction, and the language in which the literary works have been produced. In his view, the use of native African languages as the language of literary production is the only way to meaningfully capture African experience in literature. In fact, Thiong’o has taken his view to such an extreme that he labels *Decolonizing the Mind* as his farewell to English (1). Even though Thiong’o’s idea of putting Africa at the center of experience shows a great deal of conformity with the ideas of other African scholars about prioritizing Africa, his view of using African language in literature as the only reliable way to project true African experience seems to be an entirely different approach which often contradicts the ways in which an author like Chinua Achebe projected Africa in his literary and scholarly works.



The most important meeting point between Thiong'o and Achebe is that both want to put Africa at the center of experience. But their approaches are different. Thiong'o stops writing in English and chooses to use his native language instead. In contrast, not only does Achebe use English in his writings to glorify the image of Africa, but also to challenge the dominant Western colonial discourse. Achebe uses English – the language of the British colonizers – to create a new wave of change. His novel *Things Fall Apart* is arguably his most notable work which has earned him a permanent place among the most influential postcolonial authors. Through this groundbreaking novel, not only does Achebe challenge the misrepresentation of Africa by the West, he also upholds the image of Africa to the world by using English.

Things Fall Apart is lauded for being a successful counter-narrative to the European colonial discourse. In this novel, Achebe projects an entirely new image of Africa. According to many critics, this novel is a response to Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* where Africa is presented as an uncivilized dark continent. In his famous article "An Image of Africa" Achebe repudiates such a racially prejudiced projection of Africa and excoriates Conrad by calling him a "bloody racist" (Achebe 788). Since *Things Fall Apart* is an extremely important postcolonial literary work, it is no wonder that the novel has been studied from a postcolonial perspective for decades. The novel is also a great repository of knowledge about African cultural history. With *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe reconstructs the image of Africa, shows the negative projection of Africa by the West to be unfounded, and proves to readers that Africa as a dark continent is untenable. Unlike Thiong'o, Achebe achieves this remarkable feat by using English – the colonizers' language.

Achebe aims at fulfilling three objectives in *Things Fall Apart*. His first objective is to portray the true image of Africa – to portray Africa as a civilized continent rich with unique culture, language, and social customs. In the dominant Western literary tradition, Africa had previously been projected as a dark continent with "primitive" and "uncivilized" people. Their representation of the African people made it clear that in their mind, the Africans are mere "symbols of qualities which, however important, are nevertheless subordinate elements in the total complex of the European psyche" (Innes 22). Going against the tide, Achebe's *Thing Fall Apart* challenges such misrepresentations of Africa with great austerity. This novel is a "[p]ower-packed, multi faceted work of literary revision that seeks to correct misconceptions, challenge the misrepresentations of the political history and culture of African peoples, and rearrange other established notions on who the African is" (Mezu 16). Achebe's Umuofia "becomes a prototype of traditional Africa before the advent of the Europeans" and proves that Africa has always been civilized in its own unique way which "speaks of values, moral issues, truth, wisdom and an appreciation of human respect and dignity" (Mezu 16-17). Such elevated portrayal of the Igbo society in this novel is not a product of imagination at all; rather, it is based on factual evidence as Rhoads claims that the Igbo society in Africa developed sophisticated socio-cultural systems including "democratic system of government" (Rhoads 63). Their social structure was organized, and they valued valor, courage, honesty, leadership, and responsibility. The so-called civilized West could never understand and appreciate African culture, and regarded Africa as a landmass inhabited by barbarous indigenes. In his much-discussed essay "An Image of Africa", Achebe points out that the Westerners had always projected Africa as a place subordinate to Europe; Africa was nothing but "a place of negation at once remote and vaguely familiar in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest" (Achebe 783). When the Western colonial discourse utterly failed

to recognize Africa for what it actually was, Achebe presents the true picture of Africa in front of the world through *Things Fall Apart*. He spends more than half of the novel to portray the socio-cultural structure of the Igbo society in Africa, and to show how culturally rich Africa was. Achebe illustrates the point that Africa had a glorious past unique on its own, that the idea of Africa being a dark continent is abhorrently misleading, and that judging the African civilization according to the standards of the West would be a wrong approach to evaluate Africa.

Here, Achebe is perfectly in dialogue with Thiong'o as both deal with the distorted projection of Africa in Western colonial discourse and address the importance of liberating Africa from Western perspective by rejecting the Western attitude towards Africa, and most importantly, by recreating the history of Africa on their own. In this issue, they find a stalwart like Edward Said on their side who, in his famous book *Orientalism*, expresses almost the same idea in the context of Asia. Said argues that "early scholarship by Westerners" was "biased and projected a false and stereotyped vision of otherness" on the colonized that "facilitated and supported Western colonial policy" ("Edward Said"). This implies that both Achebe and Thiong'o are dealing with a common and universal colonial experience found in almost every region in the globe that went under colonial rule. Both Thiong'o and Achebe address the importance of liberating the image of Africa from the Western perspective, and even in this issue, they find an intellectual like Frantz Fanon on their side. According to Fairchild's analysis of Frantz Fanon's famous essay "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness," Fanon voices deep concern over the split-identity of middleclass African people who are inadequately prepared to free themselves from the confines of the colonial system because of their acceptance of the ideologies and values established by their colonial rulers (196). In his essay "The Quest for Relevance," Thiong'o illustrates almost the exact same point as he argues that because of the colonial education, the African students' "entire way of looking at the world, even the world of the immediate environment" became Eurocentric (Thiong'o 93). According to Thiong'o, the quest for relevance involves the quest for being free from the colonial gaze, and this is exactly what Achebe has achieved in *Things Fall Apart* – all by using the English language as a means of challenge. His masterful rendition of African proverbs and riddles in English made it possible for readers from all across the globe to appreciate the wisdom and the universal appeal of African proverbs and riddles which were integral parts of African culture. This is how in *Things Fall Apart* Achebe uses English successfully to dismantle the misrepresentation of Africa, and to uphold the true image of Africa to the world.

Achebe's second objective is to reveal the true picture of colonization. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe portrays the "systematic emasculation" of the entire African culture at the hands of the British colonizers (Emenyonu and Nnolim 62). *Things Fall Apart* is a study of the consequences "when a belligerent culture or civilization, out of sheer arrogance and ethnocentrism, takes it upon itself to invade another culture, another civilization" (Emenyonu and Nnolim 62). Achebe illustrates how the European colonizers exploited the limitation and weakness of the native Africans to subjugate them. Achebe reveals the virulent intentions of the colonizers to exploit Africa and the concomitant atrocities resulting from the forceful subjugation of the indigenes. In this novel, he also exposes the tactics and strategies adopted by the colonizers to complete the scramble for Africa. Igbo religion and the associated rituals receive the first blow with the initiation of Christianity into Igboland. The novel reveals how the Christian missionaries converted the natives "not through persuasion, but by sheer force of an obtrusive dogma" (Emenyonu and Nnolim 63). According to Mulwafu, the Christian missionaries acted "as a precursor to colonial rule" who



actively encouraged their respective governments to colonize Africa (Mulwafu 305). As Christianity permeates across Igboland, Igbo religion and rituals gradually lose their appeal among the natives – a phenomenon that marks the beginning of the disintegration of Igbo society itself. After that, the colonizers took economic control of Igboland by grabbing land, establishing trading posts, and forcing the natives to work in farms. In order to make their path smooth, the colonizers invented, employed, and empowered native agents like tribal chiefs despite the fact that in Igbo society, there had never been such a concept in tribal chiefs before. According to Williams, ruling Africa through the tribal chiefs was “the colonialists’ preferred model of leadership” (26). All these actions destabilized the very sociocultural fabric of Igbo society, paving the way for the colonizers to establish their exploitative dominance over Igboland and the Igbo people. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe masterfully exposes the dark side of European colonial enterprise in Africa. Thus far exceeding its fictional domain, Achebe’s Umoufia becomes the microcosm of Africa itself mirroring the reality of what happened in almost every corner of the continent during the scramble to colonize it. This is how Achebe debunks the Western propaganda that the European colonial enterprise was based on humanitarian grounds.

When it comes to countering such propaganda, not only are Thiong’o and Achebe in dialogue with each other, but also with Aimé Césaire, who is considered to be one of the most prominent postcolonial scholars. According to him, the European colonial enterprise was nothing but a “collective hypocrisy” which was “neither evangelization, nor a philanthropic enterprise, nor a desire to push back the frontiers of ignorance, disease, and tyranny, nor a project undertaken for the greater glory of God, nor an attempt to extend the rule of law” (Césaire 32). In the essay “The Quest for Relevance,” Thiong’o illustrates the point that the Western colonial enterprise was not a benevolent project, but an imperialist assault. He argues that the “quest for relevance and for a correct perspective can only be understood and be meaningfully resolved within the context of the general struggle against imperialism” (88). This is exactly what Achebe does in *Things Fall Apart*, but unlike Thiong’o, he does not move away from using English. Rather, Achebe’s use of English helps him earn a wide range of readership and makes him more successful.

Achebe’s third objective in *Things Fall Apart* is to point out the flaws within Igbo society, and also within Africa in general, which paved the way for the colonizers to conquer Africa and subjugate its people. Throughout this novel, Achebe has been incredibly dispassionate about exposing the problems deeply rooted in the Igbo community which made them vulnerable to foreign intervention. *Things Fall Apart* reconstructs how the “inherent flaws” within the Igbo society eventually becomes “the nuclei of its destabilization” (Mezu 17). The novel exposes the abysmal malpractices that pervaded the Igbo society in the form of religion and rituals. Disabled people were excommunicated, twins were considered evil, horrific exorcism rituals were practiced (for example, the dismembering of the stillborn child in the first part), and human sacrifice was also a ritual (for example, the slaughter of Ikemefuna). Along with all these malpractices, subjugation of women was another major weakness in the Igbo society which was taken advantage of by the missionaries. *Things Fall Apart* clearly portrays that the Igbo women, along with the disabled, the outcasts, and the discontented people, were the first ones to instantiate the disintegration of the Igbo society by embracing Christianity. It is never a point of contention that in order to colonize Africa, the colonizers used force to such an extent that the legacy of colonization is forever stained as one of the darkest periods in the history of modern human civilization. *Things Fall Apart* comes as an unabated criticism of colonialism, but in so doing, the novel does not hide

the flaws within the Igbo community that also contributed to their downfall. Such dispassionate evaluation is necessary in order for a community to move forward. With *Things Fall Apart*, not only does Achebe make Africans feel proud of their rich past, but he also makes them aware of their flaws. With *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe inaugurates the “tradition of novels of cultural nationalism which promotes consciousness of what is great in African culture,” and “rehabilitates the dignity of the black world so badly bruised by colonial subjugation” (Mezu 18). Like Thiong’o, Achebe did not have to renounce English in order to establish and communicate such sense of pan-African cultural nationalism through his writings. Rather, Achebe achieves this remarkable feat by using English – the language of the British colonizers – as a means of pointing out Europe’s tenuous grasp of Africa’s rich past. Achebe uses English as weapon to challenge and dismantle the distorted projection of Africa in the dominant Western colonial discourse, and to create a powerful counter-narrative to the colonial discourse.

In his Nobel speech, Gabriel García Márquez pointed out the bitter colonial experience of Latin America. He vehemently rejects any kind of dominance from the former colonizers saying that “Latin America neither wants, nor has any reason, to be a pawn without a will of its own; nor is it merely wishful thinking that its quest for independence and originality should become a Western aspiration” (“Gabriel García Márquez”). However, he ends with a positive note saying that:

In spite of all these, to oppression, plundering, and abandonment, we respond with life. Neither floods nor plagues, famines nor cataclysms, nor even the eternal wars of century upon century, have been able to subdue the persistent advantage of life over death. (“Gabriel García Márquez”)

The same indomitable spirit can be seen in Okonkwo. Even though he finally kills himself, he chooses to die as a free spirit, as a man who would rather accept death than live a life of slavery in his own land. Through the story of Okonkwo – the true tragic hero of Africa – Achebe urges Africans to rise up and reestablish their true identity as Africans. In William Shakespeare’s famous play *The Tempest*, Prospero teaches Caliban the art of language, but he takes away his freedom. So Caliban protests his lack of freedom by using the same language to curse Prospero. In *Things Fall Apart*, not only does Achebe reveal the evil of colonialism, he also paints the true image of Africa to shatter the Western idea of it as a dark continent. Achebe’s greatest success is his use of nothing but the colonizers’ own language to challenge them; and this is what makes him different from Nguji wa Thiong’o.

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