

Power Shifts in the English Language in Postcolonial African Poetry

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Abstract

Colonialism has been used as a negative term for its brutal, cruel, and merciless history of oppression. In the process of colonization, the English language has been used as a tool of subjugation. However, postcolonial writers have formed a resistance against European superpowers by writing their own stories in the colonizer's language. Although critics like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Chinua Achebe have given contradictory views on using the English language to write African fiction, most of the postcolonial African writers have remarkably written about their own African experiences in English. By analyzing four postcolonial African poems by Leopold Sedar Senghor, David Diop, Wole Soyinka and Gabriel Okara, this paper aims to explicate how the colonizer's weapon – the English language – actually turns into a blessing for postcolonials.

Keywords: Postcolonial Poetry, Africa, Nigeria, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe

Colonialism is a process of European settlement in a non-European land to impose political power on the dependent area and its people by subjugating them through the implementation of both “repressive” and “ideological” apparatuses. Ania Loomba writes in her book *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, “Colonialism can be defined as the conquest and control of other people's land and goods” (8). The history of colonialism is the history of oppression, suppression, individual and collective alienation, physical and psychological subjugation, political deprivation, economic exploitation, linguistic and cultural hegemonization, and so on. According to Azfar Hussain, colonizers targeted four areas while colonizing an area: land, labor, language, and body. The British Empire forcefully occupied the lands of Asia, Africa, and Latin America by focusing on these four areas. The European superpowers dominated these lands mostly from the sixteenth to twentieth centuries. In the process of colonization, the colonizers aimed to omit the remaining culture and language by imposing their own language and culture. Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, in *Decolonising the Mind*, writes, “In my view language was the most important vehicle through which that power fascinated and held to soul prisoner. The bullet was the means of physical subjugation. Language was the means of spiritual subjugation” (9).

English, as a language, played a crucial role in determining the power and its position between the colonizers and the colonized. Thiong'o writes about the “dual character” of a language. He mentions that a language is both “a means of communication and a carrier of culture” (13). The loss of a language causes the loss of its culture. In a precolonial country, the native language would serve both to communicate and carry the native culture. As soon as the British started colonizing, they first turned English into the language of formal education in institutions. Everyone in schools, colleges, and offices was bound to learn and use English. They could use their native language at home, but in their institutions, they were exposed to English only. As a result, they suffered from duality and alienation which turned them into “hybrids.” Language was used to control and oppress the natives mentally. Without mental control, the colonizers would not have gained political and economic control. So, English was made mandatory for the indigenous. Learning English, then, became “a cerebral activity and not an emotionally felt experience” (Thiong'o 17).

Thiong'o further explains how the colonial classroom becomes a medium of "psychological conquest in Africa" (qtd. in Wade). In his childhood, Thiong'o attended one of the top-ranked Kenyan schools named The Alliance High School, established in the 1920s. The indigenous students spoke in Gikuyu language at home, but in school, the medium of instruction and communication was English. Those who spoke Gikuyu were beaten and punished. English, in this way, became a language of power, rationality, knowledge, and intelligence. Thiong'o shows how a language can be operated to manipulate and mold the ideologies of indigenous people.

Furthermore, knowledge was stored and restored in the form of books written in English, and also supplied to the indigenous people by the British. The books contained little information about the Africans and almost obliterated their history. The power of English could normalize all the absurdities and anomalies of colonialism and make people think and accept that English was the language of the superior class. The knowledge which was provided by the English in English was not supposed to be denied or even questioned. Thus, the locals began to internalize English.

In *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, Ania Loomba rightly states, "Knowledge is not innocent but profoundly connected with the operations of power" (42). She goes on to add that "the knowledge about the 'Orient' as it was produced and circulated in Europe was an ideological accompaniment of colonial power" (42). The British, being the powerful masters, shaped the consciousness of the Orient by spreading knowledge which included the concept of binary opposition – Master and Slave in this case. They divided the world into two parts, the West or the Occident, and the East or the Orient. The Occident represents the "Self" which is the educated, civilized, powerful, intelligent, and well-mannered master. On the other hand, the Orient represents the "Other" which is the uncivilized, uneducated, ill-mannered, and foolish savages. The West interpellated Occidental ideology in the Orient so that the oppressed also could accept their lowliness and savagery. The Orient was brainwashed to become sophisticated and educated by devouring the Occidental language and culture.

Francis Wade, in his essay "Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and the Tyranny of Language," considers language as "a less easily discernible weapon of divide and rule; wielded quietly, it helped create hierarchies within oppressed groups." However, the oppressed had to learn and master English. They were forced to use English both to communicate and carry their culture. They were counselled to understand and believe that English is the only superior language. The glorification of English turned out to be an atrocious humiliation of the native languages. When the natives started writing in English on the basis of the European knowledge they were exposed to, they failed to secure a respectable place in world literature. Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, in his essay "The African Writer and the English Language," says, "The real question is not whether Africans could write in English but whether they ought to. Is it right that a man should abandon his mother language for someone else's? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling."

However, when a language or culture is given to non-native speakers by implementing power in order to "abandon" what they culturally have and what they are forced to adapt, it automatically forms a resistance. Where there is power, there is resistance. On the basis of this power-resistance concept, Achebe assures that, "the English language will be able to carry the weight of (my)

African culture” (“The African Writer and the English Language”). So, English language, in time, changed its power position. Once a tool of domination, it is now a weapon of resistance.

William Shakespeare foreshadowed this colonial-postcolonial tension more than four hundred years ago. He portrayed Caliban, the antagonist who turned out to be a postcolonial hero, a rebellious personality. He showcased his resistance against his master Prospero. After mastering the language Prospero taught him, Caliban revolted by saying,

You taught me language, and my profit on't
Is I know how to curse. (*The Tempest*, Act I, Scene II)

After reviewing Caliban’s speech from a postcolonial perspective, we see that the paradigm of his position has shifted from a colonial slave to a postcolonial rebellious hero. Caliban learned to use his master’s language to express his experience. Similarly, by “learning to curse” in English, colonized people started showing their resistance (Bhattacharjee 51). They owned English and then started creating their own literature. In this way, English is now in the process of emerging as “a major language and medium of communication for fiction writing” worldwide (Aijaj 76).

In the African continent, writers had to go through the cruel, brutal, and indescribably oppressive process of colonization. When Africans started writing about their problems in their languages, very few readers could connect and understand their suffering. Writing in their native languages provided them a comfort zone, but it restricted them to a specific audience. As they started writing in English, they got an international readership. They owned English and made it their “Africanized” English. The African writers started writing about their peaceful precolonial Africa. They wrote about the barbarous journey of European colonization. They narrated how the colonizers broke their peace into pieces and distorted their national glory. They wrote about their expectations to revive the golden and glorified history of Africa.

However, before using English as a medium of writing fiction, the African writers had to go through a massive psychological turmoil. The basic issue was whether Africans should write in English or stick to their own native language. On this matter, Achebe and Thiong’o share contradictory views. According to Thiong’o, “language is a way of spiritual subjugation” (9). He argues that Africans should create their literature in their own language, because language acts as the “carrier of culture” (13). African culture cannot be carried by a non-African language like English. He further comments that colonized minds should be decolonized. Otherwise, there will be no “difference between colonial era and Postcolonial era” (Saha 205). For this reason, Thiong’o suggests abandoning the English language and abolishing English departments from educational institutions.

On the other hand, Achebe argues long before Thiong’o that “English language will be able to carry the weight of (my) African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit new African surroundings” (*The African Writer and the English Language*). Achebe critically comments on the variety of African tribes and their different indigenous languages. He argues that if they start using their native language, they will ultimately limit their readers to their individual community only. Therefore, he suggests that there should be

one language which may be used as a tool to unite different African tribes. He writes about the late Chief Fagunwa, a famous African writer, who used his native language to enhance the beauty of ethnic literature. After appreciating Fagunwa, Achebe further says that writing in English will provide the authors more work to do and “much excitement.” So, Africans should use Africanized English to express their own African experience and represent their African selves (“The African Writer and the English Language”). In this way, the paradigm of power can be shifted to turn the “Other” into the “Self.”

It stands to reason then that language and power are strongly interconnected. Frantz Fanon writes about the “invisible” and “psychological” relationship between language and power in his *Black Skin, White Mask*, “A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language. Mastery of language affords remarkable power” (Fanon, qtd in Saha 206). By using English, the colonized people get back their power, thus they get back their identity. They start to reclaim their “Africanness” by producing postcolonial African literature.

Postcolonial African literature is concerned with some important issues. The writers, poets, playwrights, and critics started reclaiming their culture, space, and tradition by getting involved in the powerful and well-spread literary movement like Negritude. The postcolonial authors used English language to express their African experience. The European colonizers interpellated their colonial ideologies which excluded the African version “outside of history.” Therefore, African authors determined to revise and revive their part of the history in their own Africanized English. In a word, telling the African story from their own perspective was one of the major preoccupations of postcolonial writings.

The West stereotyped African indigenous people according to their will. The postcolonial African writers broke the stereotypical shackle and emerged as an individual entity. In postcolonial African literature, the writers mainly focused on recasting the indigenous people and their culture. Chinua Achebe confirmed in his speech that the English language is capable enough to carry the weight of African experience. The African authors, thus, used English as a weapon of resistance and composed postcolonial African poems.

The role of African poetry, therefore, has been profoundly effective in providing significant insight into the African experience. The language of African poetry deals with a nation’s history as it moved from “freedom to slavery, from slavery to revolution, from revolution to independence, from independence to tasks of reconstruction which further involve situations of failure and disillusion” (Iyengar, qtd. in Rao).

The postcolonial African poets mostly glorified the Africans and celebrated their Africanness from their stance. After a long struggle against colonization, the Africans had to go through culture shock, colonial trauma, economic unrest, political instability, and lack of educational exposure. Despite these drawbacks, the African poets were capable of fighting back and reclaiming their culture, space, and tradition in English — Africanized English. English literature has flourished to a great extent with the contribution of African poets like Leopold Sedar Senghor, David Diop, Wole Soyinka, and Gabriel Okara.

The Negritude literary movement has produced a few very significant African poets. Leopold Sedar Senghor is one of the most influential and founding poets of this movement. He is called the father of Negritude. This very movement is based on the manifestation of the African race, culture, and origin. It is about the celebration of Africanness. Senghor writes magnificent poems that focus on and reinforce the ideas of Negritude. His poem “Black Woman” is such a poem in which he personifies Africa as an African woman who is “black” and “naked;” thus she is “clothed with (her) color which is life,/ with (her) form which is beauty!” Senghor celebrates the natural color of Africa – black.

The African woman in Senghor’s poem is a motherly figure. She helps him grow under her “gentleness of hands” which symbolize the motherly protection and affection of his motherland. The speaker calls Africa the “Promised Land” to which he must return. This is a metaphorical return to the peaceful pre-colonial Africa which was brutally colonized by the Europeans. As Senghor composes the poem during the process of decolonization, he uplifts the position of African people who, till then, have been represented remorsefully to the world from the colonizer’s viewpoint.

Throughout the poem, Senghor shows his appreciation of the black woman and her natural beauty. He writes,

Naked woman, black woman,
I sing your beauty that passes the form
That I fix in the eternal.

Before jealous fate turn you to ashes to

Feed the roots of life. (“Black Woman”)

This poem is written in the style of the colonizer’s literature. Therefore, writing about the African experience in the colonizer’s style and language is essentially a powerful form of resistance against the colonial superpower. Senghor first writes the poem in French as Senegal was once colonized by France. In that way, the colonizer’s language is used as a tool of resistance at first. Later, the English version of this poem also acts against British colonization. On the whole, Senghor writes poems to resist the European colonization.

Senegalese poet David Diop followed in Senghor’s footsteps. He depicts the long-suffering colonial experience of the Africans in his poem “Africa,” personifying Africa as a motherly woman. First, the poet glorifies the golden past of Africa. He talks of an unknown motherly lady of whom his “grandmother sings.” He has never known her, but her blood flows in his body. He is a part of her body and the history of oppression which constructs his consciousness. He refers to the long-struggling history of slavery. He writes about the colonial Africa which was humiliated and subjugated by the Europeans. He portrays the picture of a broken back as he writes, “Is this your back that is unbent/ This back that never breaks under the weight of humiliation” (“Africa”).

Right after showcasing a brief picture of colonial Africa, he draws the picture of postcolonial Africa which has sprung up so well after enduring all the bloodshed and oppression. He ends the poem optimistically:

That is your Africa springing up anew
Springing up patiently, obstinately
Whose fruit bit by bit acquires
That bitter taste of liberty (“Africa”)

David Diop’s poem “Africa” beautifully depicts the long history of Africa from its precolonial freedom to colonial slavery to, finally, postcolonial liberty.

Another very significant postcolonial Nigerian poet Wole Soyinka has written some poems which contain the colonial experience and postcolonial resistance. His poem “Telephone Conversation” depicts an exchange between a white lady and an African black man to shed light on the issues of racism and white supremacy. Soyinka uses irony and sarcasm to show the ridiculousness and vagueness of racism in Europe. In the poem, the poet portrays a white landlady of “good breeding” who belongs to an upper class white family. Soyinka uses visual imagery like “lipstick coated” and “long gold-rolled cigarette-holder piped” to represent the aristocrat’s sense of white supremacy. On the other side of the phone, the poet draws the image of a black African who, from the racial perspective, belongs to the savage group of people. However, the “silence” in the conversation after assuring the nationality — “I am African” — shows the racial conflict between the speakers.

The landlady is obsessed with the skin color of the African man. She repeatedly asks him, “ARE YOU LIGHT OR VERY DARK?” and again, “ARE YOU DARK? OR VERY LIGHT?” Her hysterical inquiry proves the ill-mannered attitude of the racists in the West. The conversation is supposed to take place on one particular issue — that is, renting a place or house or land. However, the excessive concern of the white lady regarding skin color brings out the irony so well. Soyinka ends the poem with a mysterious question that may leave the readers visualizing the next unwritten scene. Soyinka’s use of sarcasm and irony is remarkably admirable.

Gabriel Okara is one of the most significant African poets who wrote in English and shared African stories with international readers. Before that, the world viewed Africans through the European lens which presented Africans as “uneducated,” “uncultured” savages. Okara writes poems in which he depicts African identity, folklore, religion, and culture from an African perspective. This Nigerian negritudist poet received an award at the Nigerian Festival of Arts in 1953 for his first poem “The Call of the River Nun.” His popular poem “Once Upon a Time” combines the recollection of the past, interpretation of the present, and expectations for the future. In this poem, the speaker addresses a listener, calling him “son” and shows him how the African identity has changed over time. It is written in a postcolonial context where the British successfully teaches the British manners by omitting indigenous heartfelt emotions. The speaker uses simple, yet very effective symbols to show the difference between pre-colonial genuine emotion and postcolonial plastic feelings. The “heart” is the symbol of genuine emotion. Once upon a time, the Nigerian people laughed “with their hearts.” The eyes convey the heart’s emotions but now the people have learned to hide their true feelings, they “laugh with their teeth” only.

Once upon a time, the pre-colonial people used to “shake hands with their hearts,” but now “that’s gone.” While shaking right hands, which project surface intention, they keep their left hands inside

their pockets. The left hand projects real intention which is to search for money inside pockets. The left hand is controlled by the right side of the human brain that direct rational and material tasks. The speaker, in this way, shows how the people have changed to become materialistic and emotionless.

In the next stanza, the speaker criticizes the vague formalities like “Feel at home!” and “Come again.” When people say these phrases, they really do not mean them. They are welcoming others on a surface level, but deep inside, they do not welcome guests more than twice. They shut their doors. The speaker says that he has learned to wear so many “faces like dresses.” This sophisticated postcolonial world is very manipulative. People wear context-based faces like “homeface, officeface, streetface, hostface, cocktailface, with all their conforming smiles.” This smile is also not natural. It is like a perfect meaningless portrait smile. The speaker also has learned to say and show all the affectations like “Glad to meet you.” When people say it, they do not mean it. When people say “nice to meet you” after spending a boring time, they actually show their colonial British manner to sound more gentlemanly.

The last two stanzas reveal the speaker’s expectations of unlearning these pseudo-feelings and relearning the pre-colonial innocent and natural emotions. He says to his “son,”

I want to be what I used to be
When I was like you, I want
To unlearn all these muting things.
Most of all, I want to relearn
How to laugh, for my laugh in the mirror
Shows only my teeth like a snake’s bare fangs! (“Once Upon a Time”)

The speaker uses the “snake” symbol to compare the “muting” of people who are like the unfaithful and harmful reptile. He says he want to be like his son – innocent and natural. He seeks proper guidance from his son who will show him back to the way he used to be. He says,

So show me, son
How to laugh; show me how
I used to laugh and smile
Once upon a time when I was like you. (“Once Upon a Time”)

The poem ends on the note that the son is the father of man and it is he who will help to reclaim and revive the old golden African identity.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o comments, “English language opened the door to a wide range of fiction” for the African writers (72). The African poets, who used English to compose African poetry, have played a vital role in shifting the paradigm. Achebe too rightly says,

The African writer should aim to use English that brings out his message without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out English, which is at once unusual and able to carry his peculiar experience (qtd. in Rao).

African poets have taken the initiative to narrate their African stories, which contradict the European version of the African experience by maintaining internationalism of English language. So, the devil is not as black as it is generally painted. Colonialism, having endless cursed sides, has a blessing in disguise too, and that is the English language.

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