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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Between Text and Texture: An Exploration of the Socio-Stylistic Imports in
Selected Songs of Ololade Asake

Mariam Titilope Olugbodi and Olanike Olaleru 1-10

Home language Dynamics: A Study of Cross – Lingual Households in Jos

Anthonia Eleajo Dugga 11-20

Analysis of the Realization of Hausa Sounds

Maimuna Muhammad Kabir 21-30

An Overview of Language Acquisition Processes: A Review Approach

Fauziyya Muhammad Hassan 31-39

Metaphorical Representation of Ideologies in Media Reportage on *Japa*
Discourses

**Dorcas Omaojo Idakwo¹, Ezekiel Olajimbiti Opeyemi², Peter Ochefu
Okpeh³** 40-56

Integrating Hausa Words and Phrases in French Language Instruction
Enhances Learning Among Northern Nigerian Students

Seini Bello, Jibrilla Garba and Obidah Daniel 57-66

Language, Literature and the Proverbial Tones of Cultural History in Ola
Rotimi's *Kurunmi*

Atteh, Femi Yinka 67-77

Evaluation of The State of French Language Teaching and Learning in Public
Schools in Adamawa State

Yaouba Ousmanou, Abubakar Muhammad Baba and Seini Bello 78-88

Language and Identity in Nigeria's Nollywood Dialogues

Shema'u Abubakar Umar 89-102

The Role of Forensic Linguistics in Detecting and Curbing Plagiarism Among
University Undergraduate in Katsina State

**Muntari Babangida, Bamidele Ibiyemi Lydia, Esther Nuhu Samuel and
Kwasau Blessing Shiyin** 103-113

Influence of L1 on Spoken English in Nigeria: An Assessment of Obolo Vowels

Ngor, Cornelius Iko-awaji 114-123

A Pragma-Craft Analysis of Shehu Sani's Selected Tweets/Headlines

Dorcas Chide Abdulsalam 124-142



Intertextuality in Bola Ahmed Tinubu's Press Releases on X
Oladele John Toluhi and Peter Ochefu Okpeh 143-165

Lexico-Semantic Analysis of Lassa Fever Reportage in Selected Nigerian Newspapers
Muhammad Muhammad 166-178

A Stylo-Linguistic Analysis of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu "Emi Lokan" Speech
TELLA Samson Adekunle, Ridwan Akinkunmi RABIU and Nafisat Bolanle AIYELABEGAN 179-197

Morphological Analysis of Lexicons in Hausa Dialects
Mustapha Ibrahim Garba, Abubakar Isa Abubakar and Abdullahi Usman Garko 198-207

A Comparative Multimodal Discourse Analysis of MTN and Airtel's Instagram Advertising Strategies
Suku Hyellamada Kenan, Ph.D and Juilet Aluke 208-224

Protest and Politics of Idealization: a Rhetorical Analysis of *òKéDìjì's RẹRẹ Rún* and *QlÁTẹ́jú's Iná Ràn*
SAKA, Idayat Oyenike and FARINDE, Muibat Abiola 225-237

Cohesion in Student's Academic Writing: A Linguistic Exploration of Language Organization and Meaning-Making
Emoruwa, Oluwatoyin Titilayo 238-246

SECTION B: LITERATURE

A Stylistic Exploration of Tanure Ojaides' *Narrow Escapes*, A Poetic Diary of the Coronavirus Pandemic
Taiwo Mary Akanmu, Olanike Olaleru and Mariam Titilope Olugbodi 247-259

Writing and The Voice of Difference: Despondent and Repressed Archetypes in Commonwealth Literature
Aliyu Haruna Muhammad 260-272

Ecopoetic Language And Symbolism In Selected Tomas Transtromer's Poems *The Deleted World*
Felix Oluwabukola Oladeji 273-284



- Social Equality in Hausa Oral Songs: An Overview of [Anmaraya's Song 'Mai Akwai Da Mai Babu' (The Rich and The Poor)
Rabiu Bashir, Ph.D 285-295
- Reimagining Power and Technology in African Science Fiction: Techno-Hybridity and The Aesthetics of Governance in Dilman Dila's *Yat Madit*
Dr. David Mikailu 296-310
- Traumatic Embodiment and Resistance among Persons with Disabilities in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*
Asana Kehinde Alemede, Ifeyinwa Genevieve Okolo and Oluwatoyin Barnabas 311-323
- Science, Myth, and Reality: Deconstructing Nigerian Women's Roles in Traditional and Modern Scientific Discourses through a Literary Lens
Idowu, Stephen Olufemi and Azeez, Abimbola 324-347
- Variations in the Representations of the Igbo Belief in Chi in Chigozie Obioma's *An Orchestra of Minorities*
Vivian Chukwu, Ifeyinwa Genevieve Okolo and Abba Abba 348-359
- Human Trafficking, Organ Harvesting and the Politics of the Body in Ifeanyi Ajaegbo's *Sarah House*
Okache C. Odey 360-370
- Gendered Silence in Igbo Funeral and Marriage Rites: Reclaiming Female Agency Through Cultural Reformation
Peace Chinenye Chidolue 371-386
- Changing Roles of Male And Female Characters in The Twenty First Century Women Writings: An Example of Zaynab Alkali's *The Initiates*
Suwaiba Mohammed, Ph.D 387-403
- The Language of African Literature in the Era of Globalisation
Fatima Muhammad 404-418
- Deconstructing The Narrative of Helon Habila's *The Chibok Girls: The Boko Haram Kidnappings and Islamist Militancy in Niger*
YOHANNA, Gilamdo Kwem and SAMUEL, Joy 419-430
- Migration, Modern Slavery And Sexual Objectification Of Women In Nigerian Fiction: A Study Of Unigwe Chika's *On Black Sisters' Street*
Joshua, Josephine, Dathini Yinasimma Brigh, and Ali Baba Dada 431-446



Widowhood Challenges and Expectations: an Analysis of Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *Seasons of Crimson Blossom*
Prof. Nesther Nachafia Alu and Sani, Sylvia 447-459

Otherring in The Genre of Life Writing: a Literary Critique of Awolowo's *Awo: The Autobiography of Chief Obafemi Awolowo*
Aliyu Sambo Alhassan and Professor Nesther Nachafiya Alu 460-471

SECTION C: COMMUNICATION

Influence of Instagram Celebrities' Fashion Lifestyle on Nile University Female Mass Communication Students
Ben Ita Odeba, Jummai Mbuzi Waziri and Desmond Onyemechi Okocha, Ph.D 472-487

Influence of Japanese Animation on Indigenous Nigerian Cultures Among Youths in Abuja Municipal Area Council
Akuta Michelle Idialu and Farouk Umar Mohammed 488-503

Perception of the Undergraduate Mass Communication Students of Bingham University towards Teaching as a Career
Ben Odeba, Ruth Barnabas and Bridget Azenda 504-521

Assessing Brand Awareness of ULesson among Bingham University Undergraduate Students in the Digital Era
Ben Odeba; Ruth Barnabas, Bridget Azenda, and Melchizedec James Onobe, Ph.D 522-545

Evaluating the Effectiveness of Digital Public Relations Strategies for Brand Awareness and Reputation Management by Andela in Abuja
Melchizedec James Onobe, PhD; Richard Okujeni, PhD and Ben Odeba 546-575

Between Heritage and Reform: Traditional Education and Nigeria's Quest for Transformation
Fasehun Mercy Ayò and Òjó Ìlúfóyè Fáwọ̀lé 576-592

SECTION D: REVIEW

Udenta's Revolutionary Aesthetics and The African Literary Process: A Review
Christopher Anyokwu, Ph.D 593-602

SECTION E: CREATIVE WRITING

Humanity is Dead and other Poems
Ibrahim Fatima Usman 603-605



The Language of African Literature in the Era of Globalisation

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Abstract

Language and literature are intricately entwined. While literature ensures a continuous survival of language, language becomes the medium through which literature is expressed. As such, the identity of a literary work is determined by its language of expression. Thus, when a debate on the ideal language of African literature was raised at a conference in 1962, - African writers, up till today, fail to come to a compromise regarding the language of expression of modern African literature. While Afrocentric scholars/critics claim an authentic African literature must be in an African language (Chinwezu et al 1980), Universalists, such as Senghor (1962), argue that colonial languages should be adopted due to their universal appeal. Critical works on language of African literature debate draw either from the Universalists, or Afrocentric viewpoint to articulate their take on the ideal language. If language determines the origin of a work, why must African literature be expressed in an alien language? On the other hand, how can adopting African languages in literature solve the multilingual nature of Africa? This paper examines scholarly contributions on the language of African literature debate with emphasis on the agreements/disagreements of Afrocentric and Universalist scholars. While the paper draws from Afrocentric argument that African literature must be expressed in African languages, it suggests the adoption of national literature in African languages, as a response to Universalists critics who point out the multilingual nature of Africa. Via translation 'the language of all languages,' (Ngugi 1992:38), African literature can be globalised.

Key words: African literature, Afrocentric, Universalist, language

Introduction

Communication refers to the exchange of information (verbal and nonverbal) by people, using various tools and technologies. In literary context, writers communicate by conveying ideas, beliefs, and cultures via literature. Communication is actualised via the means of a language. This is because, language is the medium of

communication or expression of humans and also a fundamental aspect of a peoples' culture. It provides an avenue for people to express themselves and identify with their culture. In Ngugi (1986) words, 'culture is almost indistinguishable from language that makes possible its genesis, growth, banking, articulation and indeed its

transmission from one generation to the other,' (Ngugi 1986: 15). This indicates that language is a channel through which a people's culture is passed. As such, literature, which is an element of culture, is categorised as belonging to a particular culture based on the language of expression. In other words, language becomes the marker through which a literary work is identified, (Epounda 2022). For instance, Arab, English or French literature is referred to as Arab, English or French literature based on the language of expression of the literature, which is Arabic, English or French.

Unfortunately, despite having rich cultural heritage, most African countries adopt colonial languages as the official languages. These foreign languages, especially English and French, take centre stage in Africa today, occupying enviable position- used to promote education, mass media and formal communication. In Africans' defence, the adoption of foreign languages is to solve the multilingual nature of African modern societies. Thus, even though as a carrier of culture, African authentic languages are left to compete from peripheral position as these foreign languages acquire more relevance in Africa in the global era. Thus, due to their

more powerful roles in the society, many African artists shift to communicating in these foreign languages.

Consequently, most African literary artists adopt these foreign languages to express their ideas, beliefs or cultures in their literary texts, so as to accommodate a wider audience and stay relevant. African literary works written in African languages are marginalised, neglected or excluded in modern African literary canon, (Muhammad & Ahmed 2021). However, if a language is the key element needed in identifying a literary text, what would be the identity of African literature written in English? Should it be regarded as original African literature or should it be considered as what Roscoe (1971) refers to as appendage of European/English literature (due to their language of expression)? In addition, if German literature, for instance, is a literature of/about German people and their experiences, has Swahili as its medium of expression, will that still be called German literature or German literature in Swahili or more importantly does that qualify it to be Swahili literature? In defining literature, why is language so important? Why must African literature be in an African language? If not, how can colonial languages represent African literature?



This paper seeks to answer these questions with specific interest in the consensus/controversy among Afrocentric scholars, such as Ngugi wa Thiongo and Universal scholars, such as Chinua Achebe (who believe in the adoption of a domesticated language), on what the appropriate language of African literature should be.

Perhaps, the most controversial aspect of African literature in postcolonial era lies in its definition. This is because the attempt to give it a holistic definition more than fifty years ago at the African literature conference held in Kampala in 1962, has still not been resolved in the 21st century. Literary scholars/critics still fail to come to a compromise regarding what African literature actually means or entails. The bone of contention, preventing a unanimous definition of the term right from when the question was raised in 1962, lies in the language of expression. While scholars agree that the term refers to literature about/of African people and experiences whether in pre, during or postcolonial era, the appropriate language for expression is where the controversial debate emanates.

To begin with, Afrocentric scholars and critics, such as Wali (1963), p'Bitek (1973) and Ngugi (1992), among others, posit that the literary expressions of African literature must be African languages. That African literary works expressed in foreign/colonial languages should not be regarded as authentic African literature but as 'merely a minor appendage in the main stream of European literature,' (Wali 1963: 13) or 'Afro-European literature' as Ngugi (1986) calls such works, rather than African literature. Other scholars such as Chinua Achebe and Es'kia Mphahlele, on the other hand, believe that a colonial language such as English or French should be the appropriate language of expression for African literature. The use of such languages in literature is to enhance the global acceptability of the African literature. Unlike the Afrocentric scholars who argue that the authentic African experience and culture can only be effectively captured in an African voice, Universalists claim that any language can carry the weight of the African experience, (Mphahlele 1997), (Akinwale 2015). They believe that a writer can think and feel in his/her language, but needs to transliterate its equivalence in English. The question is, why must an African writer be urged to transliterate his/her literary work in a colonial language? Besides, how can these colonial



languages effectively capture some African expressions?

Studies have shown that when transliterating some African indigenous expressions to colonial languages, the meaning is lost entirely, (Muhammad & Ahmed, 2021). This is because geographical, historical, cultural and colonial differences make some African expressions impossible to transliterate in foreign languages such as English. Literature has a social function; as such, representing the peoples' culture and experience in an alien language produce a distorted and unrealistic portrayal of the people. Thus, the argument about the efficacy of colonial languages in conveying African experience is illogical and has no intention of promoting African literature. It does not only alienate and marginalise many Africans who cannot comprehend English, but also leads to a lifetime support of colonial/imperial bondage in Africa.

The language debate is still active even in the 21st century. Critical works such as Ugwu (2020), Mugane (2018), Ayakoroma (2011), among others, draw from Afrocentric scholars'

argument such as Ngugi (1986), (2009), (2018), Wali (1963), Irele (1981), among others, on the need to employ African languages in literature. They maintain that African languages must be used in an authentic African literature/novel.

Like earlier Afrocentric scholars, these critical works indicate that, reliance on colonial language (English) by African writers only leads to what Ngugi (2009) refers to as 'linguifam', (wiping out the existence of African languages) in the global arena. Since language conveys culture and culture informs us of a people, African languages must be used to capture the African reality in literature. African identity is embedded in African languages and, therefore, one of the criteria to consider when labelling a literary work African or non-African, is the language of expression - it must be African, (Chinwezu et al 1980). Language is a badge, an identity of a people and, therefore, must reflect in the literature of the people. When literature is expressed in a foreign language, it belongs to the people whose language is used, not the people whose experience is portrayed in the work. As Irele (1981) argues in his paper titled

'African Literature and the Language Question' 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, (Irele 1981: Ndede 2016: 5)

Afrocentric scholars' advocacy for African languages in literature is based on the premise that literature evolves from a language and as such, a foreign language cannot effectively capture the African reality. Above all, using European languages as the language of expression only justifies Eurocentric argument that African literature/novel is an extension of the European one (based on the chosen language of expression).

On the other hands, numerous scholars oppose the use of African languages in literature. Scholars such as Akinwale (2013) believes that, contrary to the Afrocentric view, colonial language does not strip African literature of its cultural value. In accordance with Mores (2000), cited in Adedun (2010: 11), the paper opines that African fiction employs 'strategy of evocation' which often denotes the setting and, therefore, this makes literary works written in English essentially African

(though structurally English). This means that the language of African literature is hybrid. Like Achebe (1975) who views the English used in African literature as an abrogated and appropriated one, the study is of the position that the language of African literature is/should be hybrid. Similarly, Ndede (2016) posits that, a nativist approach/call to literature by Afrocentric scholars, such as Ngugi (1977) and Wali (1963), is not attainable due to its propensity to promote the disintegration of 'mutual communication' especially in the global arena. Colonial languages such as English 'cannot distort the African culture. In fact, any language can express any culture, since all languages are systems whose references to reality are arbitrary.' Through 'naturalization', the African writer can master English language so as to use it and gain global recognition. The paper's conclusion is that, language of expression should not be the criteria to consider when defining African literature. Instead, its ability to carry the African experience should be considered.

The truth is that, 'accommodationists' critical works, such as the ones above, championing for foreign language in modern African

literature, fail to realize that colonial and African languages from the onset never met on a mutual ground but rather via colonial encounter, which according to Fanon (1961), was a violent one. While the former represents the language of the conqueror, the latter presents that of the conquered. Thus, the 'superior' language 'inevitably carries racist and negative images of the conquered nations, particularly in its literature,' (Ngugi 1977: 82). This means that, when writers prefer English (domesticated or standard) to express their African experience in literature, they not only portray their complacent stand to the defeat of colonial violence, but most importantly, contribute to the justification of Eurocentric view, such as Roscoe (1971) and Povey (1972), among others, that African literature by its choice of language of expression, should be regarded as a supplement to European literature. Similarly, if a language is a carrier of history, a people's memory bank, colonial languages which are enforced on the people cannot effectively capture the experiences of the African working class. Therefore, while African literature in English will appease to global audience, it will ironically marginalize the African working class/majority who are not conversant with the language.

Critical works on the language of African literature debate today are categorised into two. Firstly, the 'accommodationists' draw from earlier universal scholars/critics such as Achebe (1975) and Mphahlele (1997) who posit that colonial language should be employed in modern African literature, so as to enhance the global recognition of the literature. The 'radicalists', on the other hand, are inspired by Afrocentric scholars/critics, such as Ngugi (1986) and Wali (1963), among others, for championing the retention of African languages as languages of expression in modern African literature. Afrocentric scholarly works on the language of African literature, though they claim African languages should be the identity of African literature, they fail to address the multilingual challenge in Africa. Their arguments often suggest every African language should be the voice of African literature. In an era of globalisation where cultures are intertwined, the adoption of every African language cannot accommodate the multicultural/multilingual nature of African societies in literature. The Universalists, on the other hand, clamouring for colonial languages, fail to see potentials in any African language in

expressing the African experience. This paper posits that while African languages should be the languages of expression of African literature today, it would be unrealistic to make all languages the voice of African literature. The solution to the multilingual/multicultural nature of Africa today should be the adoption of national literature which employs the major languages of each African country as the languages of literature.

Scholarly Debate on the Language of Expression of African Literature

Afrocentric Viewpoint

Ngugi wa Thiongo posits that African literature must be expressed in an African language, because language is the true identity of a people's culture/memory and as he puts it, 'to starve a language, is to starve and kill a memory bank,' (Ngugi, 2009: 19). Therefore, like Wali (1963), Ngugi believes African literature in English is an 'absurd anomaly' which is detrimental to the existence of not just the indigenous languages but our entire civilization since language bears the weight of civilisation, according to Franz Fanon in his *Wretched of the Earth* (1961). Ngugi argues that, African writers who emphasize on 'tapping' from African folklore

in order to embellish their literary works written in colonial languages, contribute towards the enslavement of African civilization. In his words, such writers:

Cannibalise African lives and memory. What they created, even when it is the master's piece of a ventriloquist, is hooked up in Oduche box, accessible to the owners of the language and those of the writer's folk who have the linguistic key, (Ngugi 1986:27).

Based on the above quote, Ngugi contends that such a move keeps them apart from their people. If language is our identity, then as Ngugi and some scholars such as Irele (1981) argue, African literature written in colonial languages does not belong to us. Language is part and parcel of who we are and, therefore, employing an alien language to tell our story is an imposition on our freedom. Similarly, using English at the expense of African languages only promotes

'linguicide' and further alienates the writers from their folks. Ngugi explains that: The

choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to people's definition of themselves, in relation to the cultural and social environment, indeed, in relation to their entire universe. Hence, language has always been at the heart of the two contending social forces in Africa of the 20th century, (Ngugi 1986: 4)

Ngugi's emphasis on language in African literature is linked to the decolonization struggle in his time. The colonizer knows the role language plays in awakening the colonized towards liberation, the idea of wiping out native memory/language and replacing it with the coloniser's becomes crucial for the continuous survival of imperial hegemony. He explains that:

Berlin of 1884 was effected through the sword and the bullet. But the night of the sword and the bullet was followed by the morning of the chalk and the blackboard. The physical violence of the battlefield was followed

by the psychological violence of the classroom. But where the former was visibly brutal, the latter was visible gentle, (Ngugi 1986: 9)

The physical control of the colonizer would not have been effective without binding the colonized to the Centre psychologically. One of such ideological effacement carried out by the colonizer, was to impose their language on the colonized, a language tied to success, intelligence and most importantly universal. Thus, this psychological subjugation via an alien language is what is affecting most African writers. As writers, they fail to develop their indigenous languages in literature but adamantly defend and accept the language of the colonizer as the best medium of communication. If African writers are genuine in their quest for truth and liberation, then they must embrace indigenous African language as the medium of projecting their experiences. When African writers limit their definition of African literature to simply refer to as literature about African experience, while excluding the African language as medium of expression, Ngugi like Wali, and Irele, among others, contend that such writers end up producing a

'hybrid tradition, a tradition in transition, a minority tradition that can only be termed as 'Afro European literature,' (Ngugi 1986: 24). Adopting a colonial language in literature ensures a lifetime bondage to the forces of colonial and imperial subjugation. Therefore, if writers are the custodians of their culture and history, they must work towards saving the African literature and identity by replacing the imperial language with the African one. Ngugi calls for a total rejection of foreign languages in African literature because these colonial languages are symbols of oppression.

Thus, expressing African literature in an African language is a sign of liberation from neo-colonial bondage. Wali (1963) takes his argument further by explaining that all African languages have the right to be developed into literature. This is a response to critics who identify the multilingual nature of Africa and orthography as the major obstacles African writers face when they choose to write in African languages. He claims that 'literary unity' is unrealistic in literature and, therefore, he is against national literature too. He cites European writers such as Milton and Spencer who abandoned Latin and Greek despite the fact that these

'classical languages' were the cosmopolitan languages at their time, (Wali 1963:14) and adopted their indigenous language (English) and their works flourished.

This paper disagrees with Wali (1963) on the right of every language to be the voice of African literature. This is because, in a multilingual continent like Africa where some of the languages barely have enough speakers, it will be futile to assume that every language must be represented in literature especially in the modern era. Rather than develop all languages, literary artists should concentrate on enriching the majority languages. This is because most people today speak and identify with the major languages in Africa. For instance, in northern Nigeria, people voluntarily speak Hausa instead of their languages. A recent study carried out by Lambu Ibrahim Badamasi in 2019 in an article titled 'Hausanization of Nigerian Cultures,' indicates that Hausa language is silently dominating Nigeria. He argues that:

Interviews with various tribes such as Yoruba, Igbo and Efik, reveal the strong influence of the Hausa language and their culture in their daily activities. The influence is especially

evident by its swallowing of the tribal languages of Fulani, Kanuri, Bura and others. Limited segregation and intermarriages with other Nigerians has made the Hausa ubiquitous, (Lambu 2019:1)

What this indicates is that, the so called multilingual/multicultural nature of Nigeria/Africa today can be tackled when Hausa is adopted as the lingua franca (in the Nigerian context). Similarly, the recent adoption of Hausa by the United Nations as one of the 'recognized languages adds impetus to the globalising attitude of Hausa,' (Lambu 2021: 11). Thus, this answers the question of global outreach. Adopting language of the majority, such as Hausa, in the Nigerian context, to represent our literature is more realistic and relatively easier compared to enhancing more than two hundred and fifty languages, some of which have barely enough speakers, as Wali (1963) connotes.

Universalist Viewpoint

In his memoir, *There was a Country* (2012), Achebe on the other hand, argues that the primary aim of an African writer is to

'represent the absent voice of African literature on world map and also write stories from an African perspective,' (Achebe 2012:57). In other words, writers from his generation are tasked with the responsibility of restoring the glory of African history and culture which was violently distorted by Eurocentric writers and scholars. He argues that, in order for the task to be successful and understood universally, the colonizer's language should be used as the medium of expression. To Achebe, a language is flexible and accommodating and therefore, can express any form of literary aesthetics. In other words, the African experience can be captured effectively in any language. Unlike the Afrocentric scholars, Achebe thinks that enhancing the written form by exploiting African folklore when 'writing back' to the west does not alter the uniqueness of African literature but rather attempts to change the narrative between the colonizer and the colonized, (Achebe 2012:58). This means that, Achebe opts for hybridity; a style that adopts and Africanise the English language in literature so as to accommodate the African audience. Even though he agrees that abandoning one's mother tongue is a great betrayal, he confesses that he has no any other choice but to employ English as his medium

of expression, because the language is a gift given to him and out of freewill, he intends to utilize it, (Achebe 1997: 434).

In order to be able to globalise the African experience, writers need to domesticate the English language to suit their local experience and, at the same time appease to a wider audience. But is such a mentality not reinforcing colonial subjugation and halting the decolonization project? Soyinka, another Universalist, demonstrates his preference for colonial language in his literary works. His critics such as Mazrui (2000) and Crow (2009) argue that Soyinka's works are meant to impress and not to communicate. Rather than channel his writing towards the African struggles like his contemporaries, Soyinka chooses to flaunt his mastery of the English language through his writing. This often renders his works incomprehensible to the readers, as his target audience is the few intellectual elite and Europeans. While Soyinka limits his audience to fellow intellectuals, Leopold Senghor professes his intention as an African writer to write about Africa not for the African audience but for the French people. To him, African languages are hollow and inadequate but French

language has a universal appeal (Senghor 1962), thus, his justification to write in French.

It can be said that due to Universalists' choice of language and audience, they fit into Ngugi's description of writers as 'educated elite [who] was ultimately cut off from the social body by the ideology of self-abnegation,' (Ngugi 2009:27). In other words, as African writers, they tend

to mimic western writers, such as James Joyce, while disregarding their peoples struggles (by marginalizing majority while appealing to the west).

In their article titled 'African Languages and African Literature,' Cecilia A. Eme and Davidson U. Mbagwu (2011), posit that writers such as Achebe and Senghor, who always defend the use of colonial language in their literary works are not just doing it out of colonial mentality but most importantly, for commercial purpose. They explain that 'commercial value of novels, plays and poetry books written in African languages is infinitesimal compared to such works written in English or French,' (Eme & Mbagwu 2011: 122). This means that, Universal writers, such as Achebe lay more emphasis on the popularity of their works at the expense of the decolonisation project.

While this paper agrees with Achebe and his contemporary's concerns about the success of their works, their adamant regard for the use of colonial language in African literature, apart from colonial mentality, lies in their obsession with 'writing back' to the colonizers. They are so caught up in trying to prove to Eurocentric scholars such as Hegel (1873), Conrad (1899), Carry (1939), among others, who believe Africa was a dark continent prior to the arrival of the European colonizers. Naglaa Abou-Agag (2021) argues that writers such as Achebe and his contemporaries:

Use the language of the 'Other' to address the 'Other' and to describe themselves, which keeps them imprisoned in the dichotomy of 'us and them' and hints at the superiority of the 'them'; the masters who taught them the language in the countries where the writers come from...hence their works, though attempts to stand up and write back, is imprisoned with the language of the Empire; which makes the project of postcolonial literature a hegemonic project, rather than a liberating one, (Abou-Agag, 2021:33)

This raises the question as to what is the purpose of writing and who the real audience of such writers are. When African

writers insist on expressing their feeling in a colonial language, they are not only contributing to the perpetual epistemic and ideological bondage but most importantly proving to the Eurocentric scholars, such as Hegel (1837) and Trevor-Roper (1965), among others, that indeed, Africa was baptised intellectually and culturally by the European colonizers. Similarly, when African writers lay more emphasis on 'writing back' to the Empire, they act like the man in the Igbo proverb who abandons his house on fire to chase the rat in the bush. They chase the colonisers, trying to restore the authentic image of Africa distorted deliberately by the colonisers, while abandoning the destructive effect of memory erasure caused by colonial and imperial power in Africa. Therefore, if African writers really intend to restore order out of the chaos brought about by colonialism and imperialism, then they must consider writing literature *of* Africa (stories that express the glorious past, consequences of colonial and neo-colonialism on Africans, and most importantly, they must employ major African languages, with Africans as the primary audience) rather than literature *about* Africa (literature that laments, complains to the colonial masters about the atrocities of

colonialism in Africa, proving to the 'Other' that Africa had her civilisation and appealing to white audience by employing a colonial language as the language of expression). This is because when the subaltern Other borrows western epistemic tools to critique their subalternity, it only leads to a compelled and restricted understanding of subalternity and critique of Euro centrism (Grosfoguel 2011.) Thus, these writers choice to use colonial language as the medium of expression in African literature, in order to 'write back' to the Empire, cloud their understanding of how the whole imperial system constructed to exploit them politically, intellectually, economically and socially. Therefore, when dealing with what African literature should entail, the issue of language of communication is essential. Writers must consider African languages as authentic medium of expression of the African experiences. As Wali (1963) argues:

The whole uncritical acceptance of the English and French as the inevitable medium for educated Africans writing, is misdirected, and has no chance of advancing African literature and culture. In other words,

until these writers and their western midwives accepts 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 frustration, (Wali, 1962:14).

African writers especially in the era of globalization need to task themselves with the role of preserving and restoring the African language/memory via the use of African language as the medium of expression in contemporary African literature.

Conclusion

Modern African literature is known to be reactionary/polemical in nature, a tool that has been used for decades to fight against colonial and subsequently, neo-colonial/imperial oppression, (Nwaukoni & Anukwu 2022). However, as African writers continue to criticise neo-colonial subjugation in Africa, while expressing themselves in the language of oppression, they are only re-echoing Africa's cultural dependency on the ex-colonialists even in the postcolonial era. As Ngugi (1986) says, 'what is the difference between a politician



who says Africa cannot do without imperialism and a writer who says Africa cannot do without European languages?' (Ngugi 1986: Olaniyan & Quayson 2007: 302). There is none, as both the politician and 'accommodationist' writer are content with neo-colonial bondage of Africa. The debate on the appropriate language of expression of African literature can be solved when African writers concern themselves with producing literature of African origin- a literature that strives to appeal to African audience rather than literature about Africa- a literature that is primarily concerned with 'selling out' the African experience to Europeans. Similarly, since it is unrealistic to develop all languages, national literature in African major languages should be adopted as a way out of the problem of multilingual/multicultural nature of Africa. Through translation of literary texts into various languages, African literature can appeal to global audience without relying on the colonial languages.

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