



A study of the use of language in select novels of Chinua Achebe

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Abstract

Language is always a socially conditioned utterance, a way of speaking or writing that is conditioned not only by individual temperament or intelligence but also by social and cultural institutions. Language can be scrutinized to reveal certain hidden assumptions which often may reside in what is not said as much as what is said in the gaps and silences of the text. It was speech which came first with the written form following in due course. In Africa, the oral culture was predominant and the written form was introduced only with the advent of colonization. Though much of colonial writing is written in English, what marks out the work of the African writer is their use of English language in depiction of the society to which they belong. Their fiction is governed by the habits, customs, norms and manners of their own group of community and so their speech is steeped in a perceptible quaintness that is unique.

Keywords: Language, reading, writing, culture, norms.

African literature in English and other European languages can be viewed as post-colonial literature. The spread of imperialism in Africa has produced a far reaching influence in the growth of African literature. English, French and other European languages became part of African culture and the literatures of the western world provided models for the African writer. The transport of the English language onto the African soil is a result of the colonisation. It is a fact based on history thereby giving room to a new kind of writing known as realism or social realism. Realism is a faithful representation of everyday life. “The characters and the plot are generally commonplace and the story narrated is plausible. The narration is linear and an omniscient third person narrator” (Sanjeev, 2)

Achebe has successfully employed certain native techniques of narration and he has

also modified English language to give a distinct African flavor to his novels. The novels of Achebe are reflect social realism as they are a faithful record of the transitional and turbulent period of African history whose cultural identity with the advent of Christianity and colonization came under direct attack till culture and traditions fell apart. In A Dictionary of Literary Terms has noted that realism ‘is best used for writers who show explicit concern to convey an authentic impression of actuality either in their narrative style or by their serious approach to their subject matter.’(Gray. 30)

Achebe has dealt with the African people who either never speak English or do so under special circumstances and pressures and also with proficient speakers of English in his novels. He uses plenty of translations of African idioms, phrases and proverbs into English even in the case of the

dialogues of his literate characters. He retains the Africanness by infusing transliteration and collocation as devices in the dialogues of his characters. Achebe has produced his own variety of style called 'Africanness' to depict the racy speech of the Igbo masses-illiterate, semi-literate and educated-as well as the standard English speech of the Englishmen.

Language is crucial to the creation of any society. The intervention of the colonizer onto the African soil created a new situation for the people. Nigeria had hundreds of autonomous communities ranging in size from the vast Fulani Empire in the North to tiny village entities in the east. Colonialism in Africa combined small scattered units into one big country. There are areas in Africa where colonialism divided up a single ethnic group among two or three powers but on the whole it did bring together many people who had gone their several ways. Natives began to acquire European education. It gave them a language with which they could talk to one another. If it failed to give them a song it at least gave them a tongue to sigh. Gradually the natives of the land began to use the same language to challenge Europe's presence and position in their native land.

Chinua Achebe in his essay *The African Writer and the English Language* tells that those who have inherited the English language may not be in a position to appreciate the value of the inheritance. One may resent the language because it came as part of a package deal. But he tells his fellow countrymen-'Let us not in rejecting the evil throw out the good with it.'(Achebe.35)

The African writer believes that an African can learn English well enough to be able to use it effectively in creative writing but does not wish to use the language in

imitation of a native speaker of English. English is used by the African writer in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. The African writers aim at fashioning out English that is at once universal and still able to carry his peculiar experience. Achebe in his essay *Colonialist Criticism* says 'Let no one be fooled by the fact that we may write in English for we intend to do unheard of things with it' (Achebe. 66).

English, French and the other European languages became a part of African culture but the native sensibility retained its identity. Ngugi Wa Thiongo in his essay *Decolonising the Mind* says that "English like French and Portuguese was assumed to be the natural language of literary and even political between African people in the same nation and between nations in Africa and other continents". (Thiongo, 1) During the colonial days, writers tried to approximate their writings to that of their rulers. To be told that someone spoke or wrote like an Englishman was the highest compliment paid to a 'native'. 'Language was the most powerful vehicle through which that power fascinated and held the soul prisoner..... Language was the means of spiritual subjugation" (Thiongo, 2) This attitude was in complete contrast to the French colonial attitude which believed colonization 'emptied the African of his Negro -ness and made him a Frenchman. The African writer, Chinua Achebe chose to write fiction in English and poetry in his own Igbo. Writers from colonized countries began to draw upon resources from their social situations which do not exist for writers whose only language is English. Earlier, that which was considered "lingo of the lesser breeds", a "desecration of the

greatest language” and “an abomination in the sight of the Lord” proved to contain much creative potential. Thus gave rise to the birth of Common Wealth Literature, literature from those countries which were once colonized by some foreign power. The crowning glory of Achebe’s novels is undoubtedly his language. While discussing the problems of the African writers writing in English, Achebe says “The English of the African will have to be a new English still in communion with its ancestral home but altered to suits its new African surroundings.” (Achebe.62)

In his own fiction, he more than meets the challenge and succeeds in creating an English that is exceptional. A whole range of human experience is brought before the mind’s eye by his use of imagery drawn from both native and alien sources. He makes use of devices like proverbs, folk tales and religious tenets conveyed through prayers, speeches and song sequences. Achebe’s novels give the readers a close and real picture of the past and present African life with all their pains, pleasures and puzzles with immediacy and force. Achebe’s reconstruction of Igbo history, his evocation of a traditional culture with a predominantly oral sensibility makes his book ‘Things Fall Apart’ one among the few written documents on the Igbo. His book can be considered an oral record of the Igbo life as it focuses upon the legend of Okonkwo and is recounted by the oral teller of tales –Chinua Achebe.

Language of the illiterate African characters

Chinua Achebe has carried out experiments in the English language and has produced his own variety of style to depict the racy speech of the Igbo masses about whom he writes in his novels. He carried out

experiments in English language and has produced his own variety of style to depict the racy speech of the Igbo masses about whom he writes in his novels. In order to be able to convey Igbo sensibilities and culture he has used an African style with traces of Africanisms in it. A recurrent feature in Achebe’s language is his use of literal translation of phrases, idioms and proverbs into English from Igbo language. He translates proverbs and sayings into English reflecting the African manner and outlook on life.

In order to render African modes of perception, social and cultural behavior patterns, nuances of speech and local environment in an alien language, the writer resorts to various linguistic devices like borrowing hybrid formations and transliterations. The problem is two faced. One the one hand, there is the problem of communication and on the other; the writer has to take care not to distort the structure of rhythm of the language he adopts as the medium of his expression that it becomes unpleasing and incomprehensible to the native speakers. Achebe has attempted to make these contradictory obligations harmonize with one another in each of his works.

The necessity of borrowing from the native language arises when English is not in a position to provide an appropriate word with appropriate meaning or when it is not culturally familiar to users of the English language. A native speaker of English who is not familiar with the cultural and linguistic pluralism in Africa may consider experimentation with English lexically, syntactically and semantically deviant. Moreover the transference of mother-tongue patterns into English also serves to overcome the problem of linguistic alienation which plagues all non-native

writers. It bridges the cultural gap and makes use of the alien medium more acceptable to non-native speakers themselves. But when carried to extremes, experimentation with language poses serious problems of intelligibility for native speakers of the foreign language .Achebe uses several kinds of English in his novels to convey the speech, thoughts and values of different groups of characters. He suggests the Igbo language spoken by the people of the Igbo land by means of simple, dignified English; the simplicity is achieved through the use of short direct sentences, proverbs, actual Igbo words and formal phrasing.

Achebe himself has given us a vivid idea of what he achieves by this English imitation of Igbo in his collection of essay Morning yet on Creation Day.

“The Chief Priest is telling one of his sons why it is necessary to send him to church; I want one of my sons to join these people and be my eyes. If there is nothing in it you will come back. But if there is something there you will bring home my share. The world is like a mask dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place. My spirit tells me that those who do not befriend the white man today will be saying had we know tomorrow.”(AOG .101)

Now supposing I had put it another way. Like this for instance,

“I am sending you as my representative among these people just to be on the safe side in case the new religion develops. One has to move with the times or else one is left behind. I have a hunch that those who fail to come to terms with the white man may well regret their lack of foresight”(AOG.103)‘The material is the same. But the form of the one is in character and the other is not. It is largely a matter of

instinct, but judgment comes into it too.’(MYOCD. 61-62)

Here Achebe translates his own style of Igbo-English into contemporary English. Achebe’s language suits his people. His deliberate use of Igbo proverbs and mannerisms lend African flavor, density and distinction to his style. “The contribution of oral traditions has shaped form, content, style, role, characterization, and the notion of quest in the African novels....it is typically short, didactic and heavily reliant upon stereotypes and patterns” (Sullivan,188)

He has successfully formed a new diction and provides his characters with an impressive range of speech style-formal, appropriate to the highly educated, dislocated broken English to less educated and illiterates. Achebe has adopted certain linguistic devices for maintaining linguistic realism in case of the language of traditional Igbo characters.

These devices are the use of sprinkling of Igbo expressions mainly words with accompanying translations, collocations, proverbs, anecdotes etc the significance and density of which vary from context to context and character to character. These devices make us feel that the characters are Africans (Igbo) with their specific way of talking, thinking, living and the local habitation provided to them is also African with its own fauna and flora, religion and mythology and the social, spiritual, cultural ideas and traditions of the land.

Language of the semi-literate African characters

The policemen, drivers, servants, court messengers and traders are the semi-literate people. The language of these semi-literate characters is pidgin English. Pidgin serves as the first language of contact between the

British and the Africans. Achebe shows how it enters the tribal world of *Things Fall Apart* through the word 'kotma' (a distorted form of the English word for court messenger) Language here becomes a subtle means of historical comment. Pidgin conveys a foreboding sense of dissolution of tribal authority and values by the superimposition of foreign administrative structure. This includes the creation of a class of slaves, court messengers, and intermediaries between the ruler and the ruled, who by their unquestioning acceptance of British usage of vocabulary accelerate the process of colonization.

These characters are frequently presented as comic figures. Yet because they share the Whiteman's power, these characters have the ability to influence events significantly. Through them what we see is a clash between traditional courtesy and a parody of official protocol. They consider themselves superior but in fact to the reader they are made to appear absurd. They have lost the traditional dignity and courtesy and have become rather bad imitations of the Whiteman. This can be seen most clearly in their language. They use pidgin or 'broken' English to impress the locals but their speech appears comic and naïve from both the point of view of the Standard English of the Whiteman and the simple dignified English Achebe uses to imitate Igbo. Igbo society excluded them and denounces them as outcastes or slaves of the Whiteman. Their British masters regard them no better than menials. Their recourse to pidgin reflects a desire to seek status by association with the Whiteman's manners and language.

Achebe seems to have a special ability to create a special idiom for the social setting which he is trying to depict in his novels. The most complex experiment in the use of

language is seen in his writing of urban novels where characters seem to have left their home land and have moved to cities. The complexity of the situation is further complicated by the fact that there are many people who use English-pidgin and Igbo in varying circumstances. The language in which they choose to express themselves and the way in which they do so reflect their thoughts and their life-style. It is through their language that we are able to enter their world and share their experience. As Achebe has said in his book 'The Black Writer's Burden' 'No man can understand another whose language he does not speak.' (Achebe. 56)

He has used pidgin for both serious and comic effect in his novels and it is primarily communicative as Achebe says of Christopher in 'No Longer At Ease' 'Whether Christopher spoke good or broken English depended on what he was saying, where he was saying, to whom and how he wanted to say it.' (NLAE.109-10) In 'A Man of the People' Achebe writes 'Mr. Nanga always spoke English or pidgin; his children spoke impeccable English, but Mrs. Nanga stuck to our language—with the old English words thrown in now and again.' (AMOTP. 32)

In 'Things Fall Apart' and 'Arrow of God' pidgin is used in a meretricious style to show the alien forces trying to corrupt the traditional Igbo values. In the first novel 'Things Fall Apart' the court messenger and the District Commissioner use pidgin English. In 'Arrow of God' Captain Winterbottom uses it while speaking to the interpreter John Nwodika. The court messengers use pidgin English to impress the local officers and their idiom is comic when compared with the Whiteman's English or the simple dignified English of the narrative. Several examples of pidgin

English are found in 'A Man of the People' spoken by Chief Nanga's servants, Odili's cook and by a number of other characters. In 'Anthills of Savannah' pidgin has become the legitimate language of the common people while Standard English represents the language of the elite of Nigeria. Pidgin is used by all the characters whether literate or semi-literate and the use of it as normal discourse characterizes decolonization and a repudiation of the artificial distance created by the colonist between the ruler and the ruled.

The Language of the Literate African Characters

Achebe seems to acknowledge the fact that the educated African lives at the cross roads of culture which gives a new meaning quality and atmosphere to life. In the language of the literate Africans like Obi Okonkwo, Odili Samalu, Sam, Chris, Ikem, Beatrice and Clara, Achebe introduces to the reader individuals standing at the juncture of traditional Igbo culture and westernization. They are men and women in transition alienated by their western education from the traditional way of life. In the imitative patterns of the speech of these representatives of modern, educated Nigerians, Achebe traces a process where western patterns of the speech of thought have been imposed on the Igbo experiences. It appears that these literate characters have been imprisoned by the perceptual frame work of the alien language they have adopted. It could be observed how Obi Okonkwo in 'No Longer at Ease' employs the vocabulary of courtship and engagement in defining his relationship with Clara, an Osu which is ironical in the context of the traditional taboos and barriers against marrying an Osu which still control modern living.

Further Odili , while voicing his objection to Edna's forthcoming marriage to Chief Nanga is employing the western mode of perception. 'I think a beautiful young girl like you deserves better than to marry an ancient polygamist.' (AMOTP.98)

But in 'Things Fall Apart' Achebe tells us that among the Igbos , a man's status is known by the number of wives he had. Therefore, by naming this practice polygamy as Odili does, he is applying the social norms of western cultural system to the practices prevalent in the African cultural system. Achebe has successfully employed a formal style appropriate to the highly educated characters. For example, Chief Nanga's idiom which is pidgin reflects his sense of the degree of formality of the occasion. When he and Odili visit the house of Hon. Simon Koko, Minister of Overseas Training, Nanga tells Koko: 'Ino follow you black Whiteman for drink tea or coffee in the hot afternoon...Whisky and soda for me and for Mr. Samalu.'(AMOTP..33)

In 'Man of the People' yet another level of language is discovered and turned into account. This is the language to which Odili aspires and which serves as the main vehicle of his distancing in his book. In its own way it is half-digested and false as the Kotma's pidgin. It leans heavily on redundant metaphors and the clichés of second-rate fiction. Odili has literary ambitions against others. It is this language that undermines the confidence which the reader has on Odili's reliability as a narrator.

There are various linguistic devices used by Achebe in delineating the language of the literate characters in the socio-cultural and political context. Achebe has attempted several linguistic devices in delineating the language of the literate African characters.

He has tried to recreate native sensibility in an alien linguistic system and has also tried to capture the flavor of Africans by using different linguistic devices. Lexical borrowing is a common feature of the novels written in an acquired language. One notices them as much in African literature in English as in the Indian novels in English. The borrowing is done in terms of single lexical items, parts of compounds, complete phrases and parts of sentences. This is more or less a phenomenon we find in the novels of Achebe.

Words are borrowed from regional languages like Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa. The use of these words in italics in the novels is intended to show the distinction between the African and the English novels.

‘Leave me *Ojare*’, said Clara (NLAE.16)

‘*Ojare*’ is a Yoruba word meaning rude.

‘And I can tell you that a man does not challenge his *Chi* to a wrestling match’, said Joseph (NLAE.p37)

Chi is a Igbo word which means personal God.

‘We are Christians’, said Obi’s father Issac Okonkwo. But that is no reason to marry an *Osu* (NLAE.120)

‘Neither God nor juju would save him’, said Odili (AMOP.126) ‘juju is an Igbo word which means black magic.

The borrowing of these single lexical items from regional languages like Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa is indicative of the novelist’s attempt to create africaness in his novels. Since all of Achebe’s five novels are situated in Igbo land in Nigeria and the literate characters move from their native villages to city areas and it is seen that it is natural that they use regional words and it creates an African social, cultural atmosphere in the novels. The use of these

words is intended to show how the culture is essentially African.

Collocations are another device used by Achebe in the language of literate African characters. Its function is to show that though the literate characters are westernized by their education, they are still rooted in their African culture. Another device used by Achebe is literal translation through the literate African Igbo characters. Many Indian writers in English like Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, Kamala Markandaya use this device in their novels. But Achebe appears to be using it unobtrusively in his novels, especially in the case of the language of his literate characters. Braj Kachru defines transliteration as establishing ‘formal equivalent’ or ‘partially equivalent formations’ (Kachru,37.)

in English for formations in Indian languages. The same definition can be applicable to Achebe’s novels which are African in content but English in form. Though translation in itself does not guarantee any africaness in the novels, it is also noticed that it is one of the ways in which an African writer in English can establish the African setting. Referring to Achebe’s novels it can be pointed out that Achebe does it so unobtrusively that one cannot call them translations; they appear to be his original creations in English. Almost all the literate characters in Achebe’s novels use these translated idioms and phrases in their speech. ‘In times past,’ he told,’ Umuofia would have required of you to fight in her wars and bring home human heads’, said Samuel Ikedi (NLAE.p.9) ‘The day is still young. Have a cold beer.’ Said Joseph (NLAE.p.30) ‘Sit down, we don’t eat people’, said Chief Nanga (AMOP, p. 117)

The above examples indicate that the literal translations of these expressions have given much of the directness and African flavor to the language of the literate characters. Achebe has deliberately translated some of the peculiarly African idioms and phrases into English, giving them a distinctly African garb in such a manner that they do not cause any undue strain to the non speaker of African language. Some expressions used by the literate Igbo characters are so universal in their overtones that they do not require any back reference to a typical context or situation for understanding their meaning when they are translated into English. The word-to word translation in all these expressions enables Achebe to create an African atmosphere in his novels, the atmosphere one generally finds in any African family. In every language there are socially determined speech functions such as the use of proverbs, sayings, comparisons, kinship terms, modes of address, curses and abuses which are closely related to that particular context of culture. The use of these different means of communication of thoughts and feelings helps the speakers of that particular language express their thoughts and feelings easily and effectively and put them in harmony with each other. The speech habits of the community cannot be separated from the language in which the speech is to be recreated. The expressions used in speech are of a repetitive nature and are socially and culturally determined.

The language of the colonizer in representation of the colonizers in Achebe's Novels

Achebe has intentionally drawn the white characters in his novels as flat characters for they do not totally represent any people but together symbolically stand for forces

of an alien colonizing culture. They are the white missionaries and administrators. They are arrogant, misguided or even wicked colonizers. Their motives are nominally those of evangelism and 'of bringing light' to the dark places of the world, but in reality those of colonization and exploitations. One interesting thing about Achebe is that he does not condemn these men as he could so easily have done. He presents them in his novels without condemnation and only occasionally with ironic comments.

In 'Things Fall Apart', Rev Brown and Rev Smith are different in temperament and attitude though they exhibit militancy as colonial administrators guarding the interests of Imperial Rule. In 'No Longer At Ease', Mr. Green, Obi's boss is a dull representative of the old colonial system. He is a man who despises Africa and Africans. In his view, 'the African is corrupt through and through' (NLAE.7)

Captain Winterbottom, the District Commissioner in Arrow of God is a foil against the inordinately ambitious Chief Priest who desires to demonstrate his imperial authority in Umuaro. The District Commissioner in Things Fall Apart is an archetype of those numerous Europeans, particularly missionaries and administrators whose instant expertise on Africa has contributed to the westerner's profound ignorance of the continent. In A Man of the People, there is the American couple Jean and John interested in 'things' African representing a generation. Achebe has deliberately made his white characters just phantoms playing insignificant roles in the history of their province and gives them names suggesting anonymity.

The Europeans' ignorance of African customs has led to shallow and misleading generalizations. In Things Fall Apart Mr.

Brown's grasp of the Igbo religion does not include real understanding or a sympathetic recognition of the African morality. The missionary's 'lesson' is merely an intellectual insight into the dynamics of a culture that he is determined to destroy. The European's ignorance of the African language and culture complements the ethnocentric bias of his Christianity and this connection between the white religion and cultural perception is demonstrated by the pathological implications of the European's language in Mr. Brown's successor Rev James Smith 'He saw the world as a battlefield in which the children of light were locked in mortal conflict with the sons of darkness.' (TFA..166)

Conclusion

In the final section of *Things Fall Apart* Okonkwo's slaying of the court messenger has brought out the District Commissioner. He is intent on 'doing justice' but Okonkwo's suicide forestalls him. To the Commissioner the inability of Okonkwo's fellow tribesmen to handle the body of a suicide is fascinating. He is a student of 'primitive custom'. But the Igbo speech is quite incomprehensible to the Commissioner who has had to speak through an interpreter. To the Commissioner anything that the Igbos say sounds like a series of primitive grunts because for him, they are speaking in a savage tongue. Through a simple pointing device Achebe has demonstrated the Commissioner's exclusion from the society he rules. It is a linguistic exile. Defeated by the impenetrability of the Igbo world, the Commissioner retreats into a language as the representative of all those aged colonial administrators who 'know their natives'. His reflections on the scene are preparations for memoirs and

reminiscence. But what he reflects on is not a memory but an act, not reminiscence but an experience. Okonkwo, the man, the Colossus of Umoufia with his unfamiliar value system is reduced to a mere anecdote in the Commissioner's book. The use of the standard British usage that Achebe uses in British portions is prosaic and dull. This is deliberate because Achebe desires to emphasize the sterility and shallowness of those British functionaries whose mistaken, half digested accounts of native culture have served as manuals for understanding Africa. He ironically recreates the formulaic precise but lackluster patterns of British speech which condense its attempts to fit the unfamiliar African culture into stiff, neat, familiar ethnocentric stereotypes.

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