

A Stylistic Defence of Ideology Through Language Use in *Anthills of the Savannah* by Chinua Achebe

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Abstract

Style and ideology in any literary work are inseparable and go a long way to portray one's identity. This work has looked at how Chinua Achebe stylistically defended his ideology of using the English language to carry his African experiences in *Anthills of the Savannah*. It was discovered that Achebe made a blend of three language modes to stylistically defend his ideology. Achebe's ability to handle the three modes of the English language unquestionably demonstrates his stylistic defense of twisting the language to suit his needs to carry his African experiences.

Keywords: stylistic defence, ideology, language use, *Anthills of the Savannah*

Introduction

A creative writer, no matter the linguistic creed, indicates identity through style, language, characterization and/or setting. In portraying how inadequate a certain language is in expressing the emotions of the African Aidoo (1998) states that they have decided to create out of 'overwhelmed' and 'flabbergasted' a new word 'flabberwhelmed' to describe an emotion state which they had decided the English were not capable of experiencing, and therefore has no expression for. The foregoing indicates that experiences are unique so it is only the people for whom a creative writer identifies his/her thoughts with that the linguistic creed can be stylistically show.

Chinua Achebe (1972) in reaction to which language to use in writing African literature states:

For me, there is no choice. I have been given this language and I intend to use it. (I hope) ... the 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 communication with its ancestral home but altered to suit my African surroundings.

The reflections of Achebe are not different from Gabriel Okara who says:

As a writer who believes in the utilization of African ideas, African philosophy and African folk-lore and imagery to the fullest extent possible, I am of the opinion that the only way to use them effectively is to translate them literarily from the African language native to the writer into whatever European language he is using as a medium of his expression (1963:15)

In fulfilment of the above, Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* has been stylistically presented in defense of ideology through linguistic identity. This linguistic identity is presented in three language models: Standard, pidgin and transliteration.

Dilemma of the African Creative Writer

"Do you not feel my suffering and despair, which is beyond compared, to be forced to express in French this soul which comes from Senegal?"

The above, though written by a Haitian poet, expressed the dilemma in which African writers are caught and Chinua Achebe is no exception. The language in which his thoughts are nurtured and the people for whom he writes for are all ignored and the language of another culture is employed to express his ideas. This promotes the superiority of those whose yokes were forsaken.

This is not unknown to the African writers themselves for it was declared by Rabemananjara – "Malagasy poet in the second congress of African Writers and Artists as follows:

*Truly, our conference is one of language thieves.
This crime, at least, we have committed ourselves. We have stolen from
our masters this treasure of identity, the vehicle of their thought, the key to
their school, the magic sesame which opens wide the door of their secrets,
the forbidden cave where they have hidden the boot taken away from our
fathers and for which we must demand a reckoning.*

Since African writers are fully aware of the above statement and yet cannot resist this enslavement we might consider the reasons why they continue to write in European language.

In order to acquire wide readership the European languages are used so that their works can get market and their ideas promoted beyond Africa.

Apart, the multi-lingual nature of the African continent has called for the use of a lingua franca. Research has revealed that there are 2,035 African languages and others not yet discovered. A situation like Ghana is an example where we have about 44 languages and at times people within the same political boundary having

different languages and usually have to resolve their difference by expressing themselves in a foreign language.

Another conspicuous reason might be difficulty to represent the work in print. For instance, many of the letters of the alphabet in African languages are not found in the printing machines.

Despite these problems militating against the use of African languages to write African literature, many efforts are done by some of the African creative writers to enforce the presence of African setting in their works. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o has even made an impact by publishing his book *Caitani Mutharabaini* which surprisingly received a heroic welcome in Kenya. People who could not read engaged readers in public bars to read to their hearing. What is more than this? How many books written by Africans in European languages are read to the peasantry?

To Chinua Achebe, African literature is "a creative writing in which African setting is authentically handled or to which African experiences originating from Africa is integral." Achebe has realized the hurdles that African writers have to clear and has to adopt a different method that has to break the frontiers of the European language.

To fulfill the dream of African literature written in African language and at the same time get publication and receive wide readership, Achebe has adopted these levels of language in his *Anthills of the Savannah*. These are the conventional English spoken by the educated elites, pidgin perceived to be used by the down-trodden and transliteration used by the rural folk aim at preserving the culture of Africa. The rural folk see no other way of expressing their experiences if translation is to be used.

It is evidently clear that the impeccable English used by the cabinet and the educated elites portrays that Achebe is in control of the language and this goes a long way to defend any misconception about Achebe's knowledge of the language.

Besides, he vulgarizes the language to more or less nearer the dream of African literature written in African languages. There is none like the pidgin he employs through the down-trodden such as the taxi drivers, the market women, the truck pushers and the like who represent the common in Lagos street.

This vulgarization of the language is seen in the conversation between the police superintendent and his subordinate.

"Nonsense police, you think na so we do am?

Come reach superintendent?

You pass standard six self?"

Also, another scene depicted is that of the taxi drivers who visited Ikem to apologise for their rude behavior on the road. This visit also wisps up the power in Ikem to criticize the government the more because he knows he has support from the masses who are the down-trodden that he fights for. This conversation is between Elewa and the taxi drivers.

"Na him this oga take him pen write, write, write stay City Council they

So wetin you come do here again?

Make uno sidon."

We just come salute am."

Though this language is extensively used by the common man in the street of Lagos we sometimes see the educated elites condescending to speak it. This shows that the pidgin represents African language that is why both the down-trodden and the educated elites use it.

To reinforce his definition of African literature that it should be of an African setting he further employs the rural folks whose language is mainly transliteration and use of proverbs. He therefore *Africanises* the language as illustrated below;

"The cock that crows in the morning belongs to one household but its voice
is that of the property of the neighbourhood."

Then my mind just make *krim* and I remember.

Language is light of the mind illuminated through the style of presentation of ideas. Language reflects the ideology of the person which goes in line with the monist theory of style that the man is the style. Style is inseparable from the way it is presented. *Anthill of the Savannah* is a perfect illustration that style is the man.

Stylistic Defence of Ideology

"A novelist must listen to his characters who after all are created to wear the shoe, and point the writer where it pinchers" (Achebe, 1987:97).

The above quotation is an apt one by Achebe to fulfill his ideology of Africa Literature written in English but containing African experiences and settings. In an attempt to justify his ideology Achebe stylistically presented his novel *Anthills of the Savannah* in three forms of the English language to reflect his characters and his audience as well as his African setting.

The language forms include Standard English, pidgin and proverbs. These three forms are stylistic presentation of the complex multilingual situation of the African creative writer who is expected to meet the

needs of his/her audience whose levels of education vary.

To meet the expectation of the highly educated African who aims at nothing but standards as indicated by Sey (1973) use is made of the Standard English by Achebe in the novel. This sort of language is used by Sam and Ikem in pursuit of their political ideology. It portrays that politics in Africa is more of the elite. Achebe equally demonstrated his own dexterity and ability to handle the English language as he wishes to convey his African experiences in a language he claims he will use to carry his African experiences. The creativity and dexterity are further portrayed by the way Achebe sails smoothly from one form of the language to another and infuses proverbs by way of transliteration to demonstrate his identity as African and identity for his work as African novel leading to the establishment of African literature.

The swing from Standard to pidgin is indicated by the character of Ikem who moves from the highly educated clan to the lowly educated group when he wanted to convince his girlfriend Elewa. This is a style that he uses to strengthen his ideology.

An instance of proverbs in African setting is:

Your greatest risk is your boyhood friends, those who grew up with you in your village. Keep them at arm's length and you will live long (P. 23).

The above proverb came from the folklore of the wise old tortoise. African oral literature is the source of wisdom told to educate the youth. The story of the wise old tortoise is carefully crafted in the novel to convey the African setting. This stylistically performs the dual role of defending the use of English language to write African literature and to be with the people in whose culture, linguistic identity is found. The African experience is further expressed in the proverb: "...the goat owned in common dies of hunger" (p, 36).

Furthermore, the use of these proverbs in *Anthills of the Savannah* supports Achebe's own statement in his book, *Things Fall Apart*, which goes: "Proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten" (Achebe, 1958). The preceding quotation illustrates the role of proverbs in the linguistic context of Africa. The linguistic competence of the African is through the use of proverbs. Achebe therefore relies on proverbs from the African setting to convey his African experiences through the English language which Quarcoo (1994) refers to as artifact of the Ghanaian which by extension covers all the colonized nations that use English as a national language.

The artistic work of Achebe is further illustrated by the poetic language. A move from prosaic language to a poetic language is an outstanding style employed by Achebe. The poetic song goes:

*The worst threat from men hell
May not be their actions of cruel
Far worst that we learn their way
And behave more fierce than they (p. 43)*

It is evident from the poem above that the African writer has the ability to manipulate the language to suit his/her purpose. The poetic language is also seen on page 30 and 31 where Achebe stylistically brings in his African setting as "Hymn to the sun" and consequently carved the title of the book from this hymn.

Another form of language featured in *Anthills of the Savannah* is pidgin. This is the closest substitute of the African languages. The phonology of pidgin is akin to that of the African languages. The African syntax of Standard English is absent in pidgin. These friendly features of pidgin make it easy for the characters who are lowly educated to communicate with others who do not share a common mother tongue with them. Examples of characters from *Anthills of the Savannah* are Elewa, a girl friend of Ikem, the soldier and the maidservant. Let us examine Elewa's language and that of her friend Ikem.

Elewa: You explain what? I beg you no make me vex..... Imagine! Hmm what woman done chop sand for dis world-o—imagine! But we na causam. Na we own own fault. If I no kuku bring my stupid nyarsh come dump for your bedroom you for de kick me about like I be football? I no blame you at all!

Ikem: I no want make you join all the loose women for Bassa who no de sleep for house.

The above conversation between Elewa and Ikem portrayed in pidgin illustrates how characters who belong to the elite group condescend at times to meet the language level of the uneducated. One would wonder why Ikem Osodi, an editor of Gazette, would engage himself in pidgin with Elewa. However, the answer is not far-fetched. In defence of ideology, pidgin is employed to bring the English language closer to the African languages in terms of phonology, morphology and syntax. It is not surprising then to see from the conversation above that where there is supposed to be a juncture, it is ignored in the case of pidgin. This indicates the competence of Achebe to stylistically handle his African experiences in the English language. Unlike pidgin, the Standard English used contains the appropriate punctuations.

Again, Ikem is seen condescending to the level of the taxi driver as he (Ikem) speaks as follows: "Never mind", said Ikem. "That wahala for road no be such bad thing as he come make us friends now for house" (p, 138).

It is undoubtedly clear that the purposive handling of language towards the defence of ideology is done by Achebe as he creates his characters to belong to different classes: yet harmoniously they understand themselves

through a language which Achebe said he would use to convey his African experiences.

To illustrate the gap that exists between African politics and that of the European, Achebe used Idemeli (the God in-charge of choosing appropriate leaders) to show how leadership is divine, clean and righteous in the African context. The divinity of African leadership is shown in how Idemeli struck the man who could not control his sexual desires yet wanted to buy power through his affluence. In the eyes of the community the firth of the man was not known, however, the gods of the land who see everything in secret exposed the filthy in selfish, ill-mannered and heartless people who are desirous of attaining power. The use of this political setting in Africa is in defense of ideology of using English to convey his African experiences.

In consequence, the linguistic creed of Achebe is in consonance with that of Narasimharah (1978) as he writes:

I have chosen the craft of writing and my entire linguistic creed ...is simply to find a suitable medium. I find the English language is the kind of medium. It needs to be modified to suit my purposes (p, 406).

Achebe in his response to the dilemma of the African writer and the sort of language to use to write African literature said:

For me, there is no choice. I have been given this language (English) and I intent to use it. (I hope) ... the 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 communication with its ancestral home but altered to suit my African surroundings (Achebe, 1962:62).

The stylistic use of the language as portrayed in the three forms, Standard English, pidgin and transliteration is a clear demonstration of a defense of ideology. The English has been modified, yet it is still in touch with its ancestral home. *Anthills of the Savannah* has really been artistically presented in defense of ideology.

In furtherance of his defence, Achebe cross-referenced how the French policy of assimilation failed to turn Senghor, a great scholar and Former President of Senegal, to be a French. He quotes:

The French taught their little African picaninies to recite. Our forefathers, the Gauls It didn't prevent Senghor from becoming a fine African poet.... A true descendent of Mandingauls! Since assimilation did not make Senghor to forget his Africaness, the use of English to communicate ideas to the world would not make those ideas not African. English is only a vehicle used to carry the ideologies, cultures and experiences of Africans to those who are ignorant about Africa and the African.

The above could have been a reaction to African creative writers who otherwise think of African literature written in African languages and not in European languages (Ngugi, 1982; Walli, 1963). Though the debate might continue to swing, one cannot fail to distinguish a creative work produced by African because the handling of the English language by African poets, novelists and playwrights are influenced by their characters, setting and their audience. Achebe has explored these resources available to the African to stylistically defend his ideology in *Anthills of the Savannah*.

Conclusion

Contradictions are the very stuff of life. If there had been a little dash of contradiction, among the Gadarene swine, some of them might have been saved from drowning. Contradictions if well understood and managed can spark up the fire of innovation. Orthodoxy whether of the right or the left is the graveyard of creativity,(Achebe, 1987:100).

The controversy of the language use to distinguish African literature is a necessary ingredient that will enable African writers to effectively manage their creativity. A total turn away from the use of the English language by African writers will lead to the drowning and suffocation of the African culture and practices. There could be diversity but not total abolishing of the use of English in the writings of African novelists, poets and playwrights.

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