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Cultural Disclaimer and Literary Sterility: Domestication of the English Language in Gabriel Okara's the Voice, Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart, and Amos Tutuola's the Palm Wine Drinkers

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ABSTRACT
One of the touchstones in the pursuit of literacy excellence, according to **Longinus**, is the creation of what ennobles and enriches the soul, an art which represents everything that shapes a society and orders its values. In western concept, however the above ideal can only be achieved through the deployment of an elevated and heightened linguistic expression rather the ordinary and culture-based expression of the ordinary people. This paper makes the case that contrary to western literary episteme, sublimity in African literature is largely dependent on the successful exploitation of the cultural raw materials and ordinary experiences of the people. An aspect of this literary enterprise is the domestication of the English language for the effective expression of African culture in the selected novels of Okara, Achebe and Tutuola. The study concludes that African literature has its root in the oral traditions and culture of the people and that the linguistic resources of this cultural environment are elevated and heightened enough to carry the weight of the people's experiences. The challenge however is that with the current preference for western epistemological paradigm in our blind quest for globalization, to the exclusion of indigenous and traditional episteme, African literary creativity in doomed to sterility. African cultural studies are therefore called to the rescue.
Keywords: African literature, culture, oral tradition, translation, transliteration and language.

INTRODUCTION

African Literature has been subjected to all kinds of critical scrutiny in terms of its character, nature and authenticity of existence. It might indeed be safe to assert that no other literature of the world has experienced the kind and weight of controversial interrogation as the study of African Literature. This critical controversy in particularly dominant in the area of prose genre, being the only literary genre that was imported from Europe and which has consequently resulted in fundamental difference in the thematic and stylistic preoccupations of Western and African critics.

One of the fiercest controversial issues in the study of African Literature has to do with the question of language and literary '*indigenity*', yielding to several scholarly interests and divisions (Obi Wali 1963; Senghor 1965; Chukwukere 1969; Chinweizu et al 1980; Abiola Irele 1981; Ngugi 1981, 1986; Achebe 1965, 1975, 1982, Darthone 1975; Bruceking 1980; Knappert 1964; etc). The questions have been, what kind of experience should African Literature encapsulate? And in what language should such experience be best expressed or portrayed? English, French or any of the indigenous languages? While scholars like Obi Wali, Ngugi and Chinweizu etc, challenge the use of English or French as the medium of African Literature, others like Senghor, Achebe etc., believe that the English language can be made to carry the weight of the African experience in literature. What matters, according to the latter group, is fidelity to cultural background and resources of African oral traditional environment. However, since this critical divide is not basically the concern of this paper, we shall not be deeply drawn into it. Rather, our major interest is to demonstrate how the selected writers have successfully domesticated the English language to artistically portray the experiences of the people in their works. This linguistic experiment, we observe, would entail the inclusion of the aesthetics of oral tradition such as myths, proverbs, folktales etc., in a unique African way, in a way that shows how oral traditional imagination enriched the minds of modern African writers and the subsequent profuse production of enduring literary works comparable to all ages and times.

Theoretical framework/Related literature

The connection between the literary resources of oral culture and modern African writing has engaged the attention of scholars in the discourse of African literature. Abiola Irele captures this connection, or rather the synchronic relation of oral culture to modern African writing when he states that:

> … in trying to formulate the state of dysfunction between an old order of being and a new mode of existence, literary artists in modern Africa have been forced to a reconsideration of their expressive medium, of their means of address. In the quest for a grounded authenticity of expression and vision, the best among our modern African writers have had to undertake a re-sourcing of their material and

their mode of expression in the traditional culture *(Anthology 78).*

Dr. Darthone reinforces this position of oral tradition as the matrix of African imagination when he writes that *"a European conception articulated by an indigenous African exposition has resulted in what is today regarded as the African novel"* (53). Without meaning to deny the existence of story–telling being indigenous to our culture, Darthone was basically concerned with the novel as an imported literary genre but which has undergone a unique metamorphosis in the hands of African writers with the outcome not falling short of Longinus's conception of what constitutes literary sublimity. This explains why I.T.K. Egonu asserts that one of the most significant and useful contributions of African writers to the growth of Africa literature is the extension of its frontiers in the use of language for the defense and illustration of African cultures and traditional values (*Humanities 150).* It is needless, at this point; to restate the use of language as an indispensable criterion by which a reader assesses the success or otherwise of an author. The centrality of language in the consideration of any literary phenomenon is a given, for as Abiola Irele states, "*literature in Africa has thus become the area of an active and focused self–consciousness that extends in its implication into both a sustained interrogation of history and a determined engagement with language*" (*Anthology 79).* The challenge should be how to adapt this language to capture and express the nuances of the oral culture, a challenge which, as this paper will seek to agree with, finds resolution in B.I. Chukwukere's article entitled, "The problem of Language in African writing", in which he argues that the problem of the language of the literary art, as it exists in Africa today, is first and foremost that creative writers should try to be master of their medium, English, French or any African languages. He says that "*the core of the matter lies in the effective control of the levels of utterances appropriate to the author, to the different persons of the story, and to the diverse occasions and contexts in which they encounter one another"* (*ALT 25).* The paper also finds appropriate analytical paradigm in E. N Obiechina's assertion that the oral folklore resources of indigenous African societies can successfully be converted and weaved into written literature without eradicating the basic assumptions of that heritage:

> The essential reality of the contemporary West African culture is that within it, oral tradition continues to exist side by side with the encroaching literary tradition…Whether in the tales of Amos Tutuola, in the novels of Achebe…, we are aware that the writers are drawing elaborately from West African folklore, traditional symbols and images, and traditional turns of speech, to invest their writings with a truly West African sensibility and flavour (143).

Domestication of the English Language in Selected Novels of Okara, Achebe and Tutuola.

One concern in this paper as stated earlier, is to see how the representative Nigerian writers: Gabriel Okara *The Voice*, (1964), Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Amos Tutuola, *The Palmwine Drinkard* (1952), have drawn from the cultural repertoire of their societies to enrich their linguistic expression. Relying on the transliteration of traditional customs, beliefs and attitudes into an entirely new context, and employing a language to which the modern reader can respond, they have, with varying degrees of success tried to re-create and investigate aspects of Nigerian traditional life.

In *The Voice*, Gabriel Okara, faced with the threat of disintegration and dilapidations in present-day African, voices his social and political criticisms of the states of affairs. He attacks the corrupt social and political order in Amatu and solonga–microcosms of present-day African nation states. Centred on the theme of quest for moral values, the novel questions the people's moral and spiritual decadence, unbridled materialism, corrupt and insincere political order as well as cowardly acquiescence on the part of the masses. In exposing these ills, Okara uses the translated and transliterated English to reflect the world view and culture of his society. Examples of such translations and transliteration are:

(1) *"Okolo had no chest"*
(2) *"Your head is not correct"*
(3) *"You are not with your body"*
(4) *"How many years has he killed"*
(5) *"Palmwine has held them".*

These examples reveal that Okara's English is a word for word translation from his mother tongue, Ijaw. We also notice that what standard English expresses with abstract images, Okara's transliterated English does with concrete things although in the mother tongue of the author they do not in reality mean concrete things. (Critical Theory 283). He uses English words, but in effect, he thinks and speaks in Ijaw.

Examples also abound where Okara infringes upon normal English syntactic rules by projecting the syntactic structure of his mother tongue into that of English:

(1) *"She said Okolo her body did not touch"*
(2) *"Nobody I have to give you"*
(3) *"I have something heard"*
(4) *"You cannot this thing do like that"*

(5) "There still Okolo's hand gripping entered her hut".

Okikwelu argues that the transliterated English Okara uses in The Voice is quite intelligible because Okolo, the hero of the novel uses it to communicate with other characters. He says that sort of English is thus a form of language and Okara uses the medium to expose to the reader his world view on the English language as well as the local Nigerian political culture.

On the political scene, it should be noted that the verbal exchanges between Okolo and the Elders of Amatu symbolizes the perpetual conflict between the dynamic youth and the impossible class of gerontocracy in a traditional Nigerian society. Chief Izongo and the Elders represent this class of chiefs who constitute the ruling class in their own locality and exercise supreme and irrational power over the youth be they right or wrong, for in the traditional society the elders are always right. The failure of Okolo in his quest for "it" or a new political order in his community symbolizes a failure for the youth, truth and progress in a developing community like that of Amatu. The tragedy of Okolo shows that nothing has changed, that nothing will change and that corruption and reckless abandon continue because everybody has persistently continued to close his "inside". Okikwelu opines that "Okolo's experience, despite its tragic nature, has proved that through the use of language, the hero can succeed in passing across his message and produce an impact on the society even if the latter refuses to accept and implement the contents of the message. (285).

Commenting on the language of the novel, Taiwo holds the view that Okara's strange English prose is his peculiar invention in which his hero expresses his "voice", his self-identity, declares his total awareness of human condition and defines his relationship with a changing world (*Culture* 69-72). The use of language in the novel is quite symbolic and helps to convey total meaning and the universal message of the novel. The style, especially in those sections dominated by Ijaw syntax and way of thinking, has the over-all effect of slowing down the action and inducing a quality of contemplation which fits the theme of the novel.

> It was the day's ending and Okolo by a window stood. Okolo stood looking at the sun behind the tree tops falling. The river was flowing, reflecting the finishing sun, like a dying away memory. It was like an idol's face, no one knowing what is behind. Okolo at the palm tree looked. They were like women with hair hanging down, dancing, possessed…. And, on the river canoes were crawling home with bent backs tired hands paddling (p.26).

In *Things Fall Apart*, (1958) Chinua Achebe not only uses simple and lucid English, but has also artfully "domesticated" it in the Nigerian context, nay, African continent. He uses the English Language in a "new" and exciting way. In Darthone;s observation, Achebe's transliterations are in harmony with the weight of the African experience. (67-8). His characters speak in a manner reminiscent of Ibo thought pattern – in rhythm and verbal nuances. And, there is also an effective rendering of Ibo language processes – aphorisms, idioms, imagery, syntax and folktale – into English.

The use of proverbs is a distinctive feature of Achebe's style. He could not avoid using them since they are highly prized in his society. He tells us himself that the art of conversation is so highly regarded among the Ibos to an extent that "proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten". Here are some examples:

(a) The sun will shrine on those who stand before it shrine on those who kneel under them (p.7).
(b) An old woman is always uneasy when dry bones are mentioned in a proverb (p.19).
(c) I cannot live on the banks of a river and wash my hands with spittle (p. 150).
(d) Eneke the bird was asked why he was always on the wing and he replied: "Men have learnt to shoot without missing their mark and I have learnt to fly without perching on a twiq" (p. 183).

Achebe uses the proverbs as vivid illustrative analogies. In (B) above for instance, in imagining the uneasiness of the old woman we are thus made aware of Okonkwo's discomfort at the mention of anything relating to his father. The concentration of meaning and evocative power of proverbs imparts a poetic quality to Achebe's prose. As ironic rhetorical devices stating basic truths, they make Achebe's prose glow with radiance and serenity (*Palmer* 62).

The use of transliterated English is another remarkable achievement of Achebe. For instance, Ekwefi, in reply to a question about Okonkwo's attempt to murder her says: "I cannot yet find a mouth with which to tell the story". This is an apt way of making the reader capture the seriousness of the evaded tragedy. The admirable feature of this construction is that Achebe neither violates the syntactic rules of the English Language nor does he reduce the fundamentals of Ibo Language to obscurity.

Through this special medium, Achebe shows that the people have a set of mores by which they lived. They have their own form of government, how people are given in marriage and how disputes are settled. The use of Egwugwu to dispense justice and equity shows Nigerian society as democratic and organized where justice is not exchanged for gold before the emergence of the Whiteman with his bible and gun. Literature is concerned with celebrating a people's culture and therefore the totality of their life. Achebe shows how the Ibo

people celebrated death; how people are mourned. All these and many other features of Ibo cultural practices are discernible in African literature through English Language as the vehicle for transmission.

In The Palm-wine Drinkard, Amos Tutuola carries out a bodily translation from Yoruba language and world view to ensure a predominantly oral tone and to reinforce the cultural value of the novel. He assembles and embellishes Yoruba folktales and shows through his writing, the potentialities of African folklores and mythology as a vitalizing force in Nigerian Literature. Another Yoruba influence on Tutuola's language is shown in his use of proverbs and gnomic sayings, usually translated literally from the original. It has been suggested that his lack of sufficient education keeps him close to the oral tradition and subsequently affects the kind of English he uses in the novel.

Wole Soyinka states that the novel "is the earliest instance of the new Nigerian writer gathering multifarious experience under the two cultures, and exploiting them in one extravagant, confident whole" (*American Scholar* 387).For this reason, Darthone opines that Tutuola "has therefore succeeded in presenting attitudes on a level higher than that attained by Achebe and in taking the quest out of the genre used by Okara" (94)

In the epic tradition of story telling, the hero undertakes a journey in search of his tapster, encounters difficulties during the journey and in the end overcomes all obstacles. He comes back not with the tapster but with a magic egg which helps him to save his town from famine. Setting out to find his dead palm-wine tapper in the Dead Town, he wants to perpetuate the transient, to give to the sensual, qualities of spiritual longevity. Darthone suggests that the language which expresses the hero's decision to undertake his journey has just this combination of the legendary and the more immediately material, the impulsively supernatural and the compulsively natural (96):

> When I saw that there was no palm-wine for me again, and nobody could tap it for me, then I thought within myself that old people were saying that the whole people who had died in this world, did not go to heaven directly, but they were living in one place somewhere in this world. So that I said that I would find out where my palm-wine tapster who had died was (*Drinkard* 9).

Darthone states that in choosing to put the tapper in a town in the world, Tutuola is not blindly incorporating mythology but that he intentionally perverts the Yoruba belief about death; or rather he merges and reinterprets two beliefs on the subject. The hero's search for his tapster symbolizes physical and spiritual purity and therefore, what he stands for is almost an inversion of the legend.

It has been argued that part of Tutuola's success at this imaginative modernizing of folklore is due to his use of language. Those who argue that he writes "wrong" English do not take two factors into consideration. The story, written in the first person, concerns a palm-wine drinker and palm-wine in Nigeria is to a large extent the drink of the poor working classes (though in contemporary terms, it is cherished by the high and mighty). If the narrator were to speak Standard English, anyone acquainted with the realities of Nigerian speech would find the results ludicrous. Secondly, Tutuola's English is a sensible compromise between raw pidgin and Standard English (*Darthone* 78).

Taiwo also argues that the newness of Tutuola's English lies not in the sense of an invention but in the way it has been applied with great imaginative power to a new situation (*Culture* 78).

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is evident that these authors succeed in effectively weaving aspects of our oral tradition and culture into their art without undermining the basic values of both the source and the target language. Also, their art negate the charge, often leveled, that Africans are cultureless and incapable of literary afflatus, rather in the words of Virgy Anohu, they have "given us scepter in place of chains, and carved out a place for us in the global literary family" (*English language* 100).

Another aspect of this problem arises from our attitude toward tradition in the discourse of African literature. Here, indigenous people are assumed to be primitive, uncivilized and 'cultureless' people who lived in dim past, and their tradition therefore becomes automatically archaic, outmoded, static and unproductive. This prejudice was inaugurated by Romantic scholars who advocated the revival of these 'cultural fossils'. Ruth Finnegan observes that "the feeling that through folk popular art one could reach back to the lost period of natural spontaneous literary utterance as well as to the deep and natural springs of a national identity was basic to the romantic attitude, and received extra force through ideological and nationalistic references to 'tradition'" (*Oral Poetry* 34). The study and understanding of African oral cultures and their literature has consequently suffered undue setback as a result of this prejudice. T. S Eliot however advises that tradition "should not necessarily be so much an abiding, permanent, immutable stock of beliefs and symbols, but an experience that is felt as being at once continuous and significantly new" (*Tradition* 74). What this means is that tradition as the knowledge repertoire of indigenous people is a living phenomena. This indigenous knowledge finds expression

in the oral narratives, folktales, legends, proverbs and sayings which form the empirical observations of traditional African societies. The appropriation of these knowledge has made possible the adaptive syntactical manipulation of *Ijo* language in Okara's *The Voice*, the narrative inspiration in Tutuola's *The Palmwine Drinkard*, and the very successful domestication of the English language in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* among other literary masterpiece into which aspects of indigenous knowledge were artistically weaved.

The challenge however is that with the current preference for western epistemological paradigm in our blind quest for globalization, to the exclusion of indigenous and traditional episteme, African literary creativity in doomed to sterility. African cultural studies are therefore called to the rescue.

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