

## The Voice of the Oppressed: The Altered Language of Prospero

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Language is inseparable from the community as it carries culture and values. A major contribution of colonisation is the English language. When the postcolonial world uses English language to suit their temperament, that language differs from the English language used by British people. A good command of English offers the natives lucrative jobs. It bridges the coloniser and colonised. It provides a window through which the intellectuals could view the world. Indianisation and Africanisation of English language is aimed at modifying the language for the purpose. Native writers keep up the cultural independence to avoid the Western norms. The Kenyan writer, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, has experienced the harsh realities of colonisation. He rejected Christianity and in honour of his Gikuyu heritage changed his original name in 1976 from James Ngugi, which he saw as a sign of colonialism, to Ngugi wa Thiong'o.

The language Ngugi wa Thiong'o used as he worked in fields and outside the home was Gikuyu. Born into a large peasant family, his father had four wives and twenty eight children. In *Decolonising the Mind (DM)* he recollects the story telling practice in which the elders tell the stories to children. The following day the children retell the stories to their friends. When the stories of hare and leopard are told, the children identify themselves with hare which is weak but full of innovative wit. Ngugi asserts, "His victories were our victories and we learnt that the apparently weak can outwit the strong" (*DM* 10). Same language is used at home and at fields. The harmony of language is broken when he goes to school. He comments, "The language of my education was no longer the language of my culture" (*DM* 11). English became the language of my formal education. "In Kenya English became more than a language: it was the language, and all the others had to bow before it in deference"

(*DM 11*). This reverence shown to the English language is exhibited also to the coloniser by the natives. Ngugi remembers the punishments given to students who were caught speaking Gikuyu in the vicinity of the school:

The culprit was given corporal punishment – three to five strokes of the cane on bare buttocks – or was made to carry a metal plate around the neck with inscriptions such as I AM STUPID or I AM A DONKEY. Sometimes the culprits were fined money they could hardly afford. And how did the teachers catch the culprits? A button was initially given to one pupil who was supposed to hand it over whoever was caught speaking his mother tongue. Whoever had the button at the end of the day would sing who had given it to him and ensuing process would bring out the culprits of the day. Thus children were turned into witch hunters and in the process were being taught the lucrative value of being a traitor to one's immediate community. (*DM 11*)

This practice took place in variant forms in other colonies too. The students who failed to speak in English were given insulting punishments like shaving off the head and also unaffordable fine. Ngugi remembers a friend of his who was made to fail in the entire exam though he had distinction in all subjects except English in which he had failed.

The condition was similar in India. The Minutes of Macaulay prepared in 1835 recommended English as the medium of instruction in schools and universities thinking that English tongue is best suited in the universities. English became the language of expression of the cultured Indians and also the language of creative writing. Due to these, the literary landscape of India changed.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o comments that language has a dual character. It is a means of communication and carrier of culture. For the British, English language is a means of communication as well as carrier of culture. But in other countries where English is used, it is only a means of communication. But unknowingly this means of communication becomes a carrier of culture too. In the colonised countries, languages like Sanskrit, Swahili etc are carriers of culture. Language plays a vital role in transmitting habits, attitudes and experiences from one generation to another. The rejection of the foreign culture occurs when the native is forced to mould his lifestyle in accordance with the foreign. He feels cramped and uncomfortable in his European clothes, language and

patterns of thought. The rejection of a foreign language occurs when the foreign tongue becomes inadequate to express the native experience.

The novelists Raja Rao, Arun Joshi, Bhabhani Bhattacharya, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and George Lamming have used English to express their native sensibility. In this attempt, they have tried to mould the language to fulfil their purpose. Indian writing springs from the Indian scene, manner and gesture. In order to create the Indian atmosphere, a literal translation of the Indian words is done to create the impression that it is an Indian novel and Indian characters are speaking. In the Foreword to *Kanthapura*, Raja Rao comments:

One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word 'alien', yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up – like Sanskrit or Persian was before – but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will someday prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American. Time alone will justify it. (5)

The highly philosophical novel by Raja Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope (SR)*, projects quotes from different languages like Sanskrit, Hindi, Italian, French, Latin and Provencal; but it is striking to note that only Sanskrit is translated. Owing to his sojourn in France, Ramaswamy could not chant or listen to Sanskrit hymns. So during his temporary return to India, Rama admires his Little Mother's recital of Sankara's *Nirvana Astakam*. Rama starts on *Mano budhi ahankara* as he had been to a Sanskrit School. Later he chants to her *kashikapuradinatha kalabhairavam bhaje*:

I worship *Kalabhairava*, Lord of the city of Kashi,  
Blazing like a million suns:  
Our great saviour in our voyage across the world,  
The blue-throated, he three-eyed grantor of all desires;  
The lotus-eyed who is the death of death,  
The imperishable one,  
Holding the rosary of the human bone and the trident

*Kashikapuradinatha kalabhairavam bhaje. (SR 21-22)*

The chanting of these holy verses during his return to India highlights the fact that the French culture has not annihilated the Brahmin in him. A linguistic return takes place in Rama. He later sings a hymn of Sri Sankara's *Sri Dakshinamurthi Stotram*. Raja Rao employs many Sanskrit words like *kumkum, aarthi, sari, choli, tali*. It is full of epigrammatic sayings: "Love is rejoicing in the rejoicing of other." "To wed a woman, you must wed her God." *The Serpent and the Rope* becomes outstanding because of the Sanskrit words and rhythm, paradoxes, parables and digressions. Raja Rao declares that Sanskrit has the breath of eternity and considers it as the language of Gods. So he writes in that form of English which is nearly equivalent to Sanskrit which could be comprehended all over the world. He comments on the syntax of English language:

We have neither punctuation nor the treacherous 'ats' and 'ons' to bother us – we tell one interminable tale. Episode follows episode, and when our thoughts stop our breath stops, and we move on to other thought. This was and still is the ordinary style of our story-telling. (Foreword. *Kanthapura* 5)

Though Raja Rao feels English language is treacherous, he has survived as a writer with this tongue. In 1964, Chinua Achebe stated in a speech entitled, "The African Writer and the English Language":

Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else's? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling. But for me there is no other choice. I have been given the language and I intend to use it. (*Morning Yet on Creation Day*)

This paradox of idea presented by Achebe highlights the problem. Those who use English have "no other choice" and they employ the borrowed tongue to carry the weight of their native experience. Achebe asserts if the English language has to carry the African experience it will have to be new English "still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit new surroundings."

The African English which Achebe uses in his own style reflects the African culture in the postcolonial world. He gives an example of a boy in his wife's class who refused to write on *harmattan* because it was a bush. He would rather write about winter. Achebe states, "Now things like this show one that the writer has the responsibility to teach his audience that there is nothing shameful about the Harmattan, that it



is not only daffodils that can make a fit subject for poetry, but the palm tree and so on" (qtd. in Duerden 8). In *Arrow of God*, the servant of Winterbottom, John, speaks a peculiar kind of English which astonishes even the English man. Achebe uses a new kind of English to reflect the African thought. Pidgin is a mixed language that has developed to help communication between members of different cultures in contact. This usually occurs in situations of trade or colonialism. Winterbottom's servant John uses Pidgin English, a simplified form of English which blends English grammar with that of a native language. The learning of English language has helped the natives to increase the respect among natives. Moses Unachukwu, who learned carpentry from the mission church, could obtain respect from the natives due to his knowledge of English and his ability to translate it into local Ibo. This is one reason for the elders including Ezeulu, sending their sons to mission school. The butlers and cooks from the native population are trained to European cuisine and table manners. John Nwodika learns functional English from his master. There is a church where service is conducted by native evangelist who also conducts an elementary school which the native children are encouraged to attend. Local cases and disputes are dealt in the office of a white district commissioner. The road building project is supervised directly by a white man. Winterbottom's servant John says "Dem talk say make rain come quick quick" (AG 31). "My pickin na dat two wey de run yonder and dat yellow girl. Di oder two na cook im pickin. Di oder one yonder na Gardener him brodder pickin" (AG 31). Unachukwu's English is also different. He says "dat man wan axe master qeshon" (AG 83). Postcolonial literature presents English not as a coloniser's language but an anti-colonised one.

In *Arrow of God*, the language used by natives is realistic and that of the common, uneducated African. Ezeulu addresses his people and says, "If you go to war to avenge a man who passed shit on the head of his mother's father, Ulu will not follow you to be soiled in the corruption. Umuaro, I salute you" (AG 26). One of the striking features of Achebe's language is his use of literary devices such as proverbs and legends. "We have a saying that a toad does not run in the day unless something is after it" (AG 20). "When we see a little bird dancing in the middle of the pathway we must know that its drummer is in the near-by bush" (AG 40). "When the mother-cow is cropping giant grass her calves watch her mouth" (AG 172). "The fly that perches on mound of dung may strut around as it likes. it cannot move the mound" (AG

130). “The white man is not like the black men. He does not waste his words” (AG 138). Addressing people like ‘Son of Our Daughter’ or ‘Father of My Mother’ is common among the people of Umuaro. Ezeulu’s enemy Nwaka is known as owner of words. Winterbottom is called ‘Destroyer of Guns’ by the clansmen. Another feature is calling people by peculiar names. Obiagili calls her brother ‘ant hill nose’ and the brother reciprocates by calling her ‘long throat’. Songs are also given much importance in the Ibos of Umuaro. “Written literature and orature are the main means by which a particular language transmits the images of the world contained in the culture it carries” (DM 15). Obiagili comforts the crying child by singing:

Tell the mother the child is crying.  
Tell the mother the child is crying  
And then prepare a stew of Uziza  
And also a stew of Uziza (AG 124).

Songs are sung on every occasion. Even the labourers working in the coloniser’s compound sing. There are work songs like the one sung by the grass cutters in Winterbottom’s compound.

When I cut grass and you cut  
What is your right to call me names? (AG 56).

Songs are given importance in Ngugi’s *The River Between* also. During the ceremony of circumcision, after cutting the symbolic umbilical cord, the woman starts singing:

Ali-li-li-li-li-li-li  
Old Waiyaki is born  
Born again to carry on the ancient fire. (RB 14)

Achebe does not provide translation of the native words employed in *Arrow of God*. But Ngugi does. Achebe employs many Ibo words in *Arrow of God*. He uses words like *llo* (an open ground), *obi* (a house), *calabash* (a bowl), *foofoo* (yam food), *chi* (personal spirit), *egusi* (a native green leaf used as edible) *Okwe* (white wood), *ikenga* (the wooden symbol of personal spirit), *nwa-anyanwu* (handsome man). Moreover names of Gods such as *Eru*, *Idemili*, *Ulu* and *Ekwensu* are found throughout the novel. Names of days of week *Oye*, *Afo*, *Nkwe* are used. Names of river and stream spirits like *Nwangene* and *Ota* are also used. The art of conversation is given utmost importance in Ibo culture. Words are used sparingly and spoken with relevance attracting the attention and the interest of the listener. Another feature of the language of

*Arrow of God (AG)* is the corrupt usage of European terms like 'Wintabota' and 'gorment heel' by the natives.

Fanon comments in *The Wretched of the Earth* that the people of South Africa, Namibia, Kenya, Zaire and many other colonised countries do not sleep to dream, but dream to change the world. In a conference of African writers of English expression, the discussion was once on extracts from works in English and hence they excluded work in Swahili, Zulu, Yoruba, Arabic, Amharic and other African languages. The effect of colonisation on African language is drastic. The neocolonies of Africa are defined in terms of the languages of Europe: English-speaking, French-speaking, or Portuguese-speaking. He further mocks the practice of the natives welcoming the foreign tongue. "English, French and Portuguese had come to our rescue and we accepted the unsolicited gift with gratitude." It is in the Statement of *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngugi frankly admits, "This book, decolonizing the mind is my farewell to English as a vehicle for any of my writings. From now on it is Gikuyu and Kiswahili all the way" (*DM* xiv). A favourable attitude to the indigenous culture can be expected by returning to the native languages. This will save many languages which are on the verge of extinction. The question is whether the present generation will challenge the English language as done by Ngugi and Achebe or blindly ape the Western practice. With the help of English language, the postcolonial writers transmit their ideas universally and their words are audible enough to echo in the ears of the coloniser. The words which Caliban utters to Prospero come from the hearts of these writers too:

You taught me language; and my profit on't  
Is, I know how to curse: the red plague rid you,  
For learning me your language! (*Tempest*: Act 1 scene 2)

When Caliban uses the coloniser's tongue to curse, the writers react and revolt against the coloniser using his language.

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### **Fraternal Publication**

#### **Indian Journal of Postcolonial Literatures (IJPCL)**

(Estd. 2000. ISSN: 0974-7370)

(An International Biannual Refereed Journal Published in  
June and December)

Published by Centre for English Studies and Research, Newman  
College, Thodupuzha, Kerala, India - 685585

Chief Editor: Sr. Dr. Alphonse Maria,

Associate Editor: Dr. Bijimol Thomas

Managing Editor: Prof. Vincent John K.

Email: <alphonse.cmc@gmail.com> ; <bijimolnewman@gmail.com>