

***“Voice of Jacob, Body of Esau”*: A Nigerian Writer’s Dilemma in Communicating the Postcolonial in the Colonial Language**

Hope Eghagha

Introduction

In a pluralistic postcolonial state like Nigeria, the choice of language for the creative writer is important both as a function of the literary imagination, and as a reflection of the choice of political ideology. In a sense, and in most cases, choice of language is imposed on the writer by circumstances of birth and the geographical environment he finds himself in. This may be no choice at all. Yet, how language is deployed helps to define the trajectory of a writer’s work. Often the writer in a postcolonial state has both his mother tongue and the language of the colonial conqueror at his disposal. Through the foreign language, he can reach millions of his own people and beyond. However, the inscribed meanings and cultures embedded in that language are alien, even injurious to the survival of the “conquered”.

In the case of “internal colonisation”, that is, when major ethnic groups impose their cultures on the minorities, the problem is more complex and perhaps more traumatic. Although they exist within the same geographical space, with a shared political history and common experiences, one ethnic group imposes its hegemony on the rest on account of population size, human resource and financial strength. In some extreme cases, it could force the language of the minority ethnic group into extinction. Some minorities like the Birom of Plateau State in middle belt Nigeria have adopted Hausa, the language of the conquering hegemonic group, as lingua franca. Their literature is expressed in Hausa. However, with the rise of ethnic ascendancy in post-military politics in the country, most of the minorities have worked on asserting the vibrancy of their culture. It is against this background that we can appreciate the ethnic and religious conflicts of the first three years of this decade in that part of Nigeria. This has also been reflected in emerging literatures.

Language communicates thoughts, cultures, and other nuances, which may not be directly intended by the writer. One of the assumptions of this paper is that because a writer cannot be divorced from the predicament of his immediate socio-political milieu, literary critics have to observe the currents and undercurrents of society with a view to judging how these dynamics of society have impacted

on writing. In Nigeria, the minorities have reacted to long years of subjugation and control over their natural resources. In spite of the enormous wealth which the Niger Delta minorities are endowed with in Nigeria, they are excluded from power politics at the national level. None of the languages of the region is designated an official or national language. This has created a dissonance and a degree of ambiguity in national discourse. This politics of exclusion, in spite of the enormous resources of the region, is a repeat of the colonial history when the British exploited and dominated the palm oil trade in the delta in the 18th and 19th centuries. Binaebi Oyeghe a poet from this region, captures this feeling in one of the poems in *Songs of Agonies* titled "Crusade for Justice" (48) when he says

I traversed the memory lane of history
 History not as obscure as a mystery
 Century upon century I laboured in slavery
 Decades upon decades of colonialism without reparations
 Images of oppression and dehumanisation

Having viewed contemporary occurrences in the region, the poet traverses 'the memory lane of history' and concludes that the history of oppression and exploitation is a long one and continues to repeat itself in contemporary times.

The Postcolonial Experience

The postcolonial experience within our discourse refers to the socio-political, economic, cultural, developmental, and philosophical problems which former colonies have to contend with in their quest for stability and growth. The current problems faced by postcolonial states are the creation of the colonizer. According to Ashcroft (1995: 117), post-colonialism "begins from the very moment of colonial contact" and it is therefore a "discourse of oppositionality which colonialism brings into being". As a discourse, post-colonialism helps in the process of decentering of discourse and focusing on the significance of language and writing in the construction of experience. Thus, the post-colonial refers to a "sustained attention to the imperial process in colonial and neo-colonial societies, and an examination of the strategies to subvert the actual material and discursive effects of that process". Although it is perceived that political power is in the hands of local leaders, there is a culture of subservience on the part of local leaders to members of the international community. For writers, these issues help to give focus to the themes of their writing. Identities are somewhat fluid, uncertain, and undefined. What is given today may be withdrawn tomorrow because those who make up the group are yet to resolve certain fundamental problems. The genocidal

conflict in Rwanda was a result of ethnicity.

A writer may also decide to appropriate a particular language different from his mother tongue. Samuel Beckett the Irish playwright adopted the French language in his creative work. It was an expression of discontent with the language of the colonial oppressor. It was also a medium which Beckett found easier to use for artistic and self expression. For the Nigerian writer, although numerous languages are at his disposal, his choice is limited in practical terms.

In postcolonial Nigeria, which has about four hundred ethnic groups, a sizeable number of potential readers outside one's own ethnic group would be shut out of the experience once a writer restricts his creative work to his mother tongue. The total population of the country is one hundred and forty million. Specifically, a man writing in Hausa or Fulani immediately excludes his fellow countrymen from Igbo, Izon, Hausa, or Urhobo. To graphically illustrate this point, if Achebe had written *Things Fall Apart* in Igbo, the ethnic group where the novel is set, without a translation, other Nigerians outside Igbo land would have been excluded from entering into the experience of the hero Obi Okonkwo. Achebe has defended the use of English in writing when the question of language and the colonial experience raged in literary discourse. As far back as 1975, Achebe (1975:62) argued, "I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit new African surroundings". This appropriation of English to express native consciousness is deliberate, what Achebe calls "a new English". Its nuances are typically African, with the use of idioms and proverbs which tend to domesticate the language. The problem with this position however is that the tool of communication remains foreign, the irony of rejecting a culture but producing ones culture through the instruments that have been rejected. If Soyinka had concentrated on writing his poetry and drama in Yoruba language without any translations, he would have excluded the rest of Nigeria and indeed the world from his rich literary aesthetics.

As Ngugi Wa Thiong'o has postulated, writing in the English language of the colonial exploiter is tantamount to reasoning in his mind frame. It is a projection of culture, of a way of life and thoughts. Ngugi (1981:290) says further: "Language as communication and as culture are then products of each other. Communication creates culture: culture is a means of communication. Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world".

Words have the power to make us reason like the race from which the language was acquired. So how can a writer think in his first language, his mother tongue, and write in the acquired language? This is what has been referred to as the voice of Jacob and the body of Esau.

The long years of military rule (twenty nine years out of forty six years of independence) have raised the level of tension in Nigeria and citizens have receded into their ethnic shells. This was because after their exit, it became clear that the nation has not been truly defined and accepted. Military force and coercion had been employed to suppress true feelings. The consequence is that primordial instincts have now overridden national interests. Politicians have raised the stakes further by concentrating infrastructural development on their areas of origin. As a result, there is a general disenchantment with the political class. The recent attempt by the democratically elected president, Olusegun Obasanjo a retired General of the Nigerian Army, to foist an amended constitution on the country has also exacerbated tension. Eminent Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe rejected a National Award last year in protest against how the Federal Government had managed the affairs of his home State. Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka was involved in the fight against the incumbent president's plan to remain in office after the constitutionally prescribed 2007. If the future of the nation is in jeopardy, it follows that the future of what currently constitutes Nigerian literature is in jeopardy as well.

One of the reasons the Nigerian State has not been able to define itself is the absence of an acceptable cultural language and the presence of a plethora of languages that draw a negative attitude in national discourse. The language of the Izon of the Niger Delta whose region produces a huge percentage of the nation's oil cannot be spoken in the country's National Assembly. Although their population (about eight million, making it the fourth largest) is considerable by all standards, they are not considered one of the big three nations in the country.

Exclusion and Inclusion

Yet another dimension of the language crisis is the difficulty which the modern Nigerian writer has in reading and writing in his mother tongue. Many years of English as a medium of national discourse and as the favoured language have further reduced the importance of local languages. Indeed writers of my generation from the minority Urhobo area of the Niger Delta were not taught the orthography of the language. As far as teachers were concerned, the language was vernacular and should not be spoken in the school. Ironically, this situation still exists in the Niger Delta. This is a classic example of the politics of exclusion. When a language draws a blank at national level, its native speakers begin to lose confidence in the importance of the language. For some of the writers born outside their ethnic enclave, they adopt the language of their host community. Their true identity is lost in the new culture, the new language.

Ethnicity

The disparate ethnic backgrounds of the peoples of Nigeria and indeed with some other former colonies have continued to pose problems both for ordinary citizens and writers in particular. It is against this background that Hargreaves et. al (2006: vii) observes in another context that “faced with the ethnic divisions at the heart of colonial and postcolonial writing, authors emphasize notions of originality associated with their ethnicity”. When Nigeria was created, the so-called amalgamation of the South and North in 1914, there was no regard for the homogeneity or the possibility of mutual co-existence of the peoples. It was an act that served the administrative convenience of the British. The north was largely Islamic, fixed and conservative in its ways. Indeed the North opposed a “Self-government Now” motion in 1954 because they were not ready for independence. This approach to political developments has continued to dictate relations between the north and the south.

Between 1967 and 1970, there was a civil war in Nigeria. A northern-dominated Federal Government led the rest of the nation to crush a secession bid by the Eastern Region, comprising mainly the Igbo and some minorities. To demonstrate the fragility of the postcolonial fusion called Nigeria, writers on the Eastern side took sides with their kith and kin. The late poet Christopher Okigbo for example, fought for the Biafran side, and died in battle. He had prophesied the coming of war in the period preceding the conflagration. In one of the poems, *Come Thunder*, he observed:

Now that the triumphant march has entered the last corners
Remember, O dancers, the thunder among the clouds...
Now that laughter, broken in two, hangs tremulous between the teeth
Remember, O dancers, the lightning beyond the earth...
The smell of blood already floats in the lavender-mist of the afternoon
The death sentence lies in ambush along the corridors of power.

Kole Omotosho, a Nigerian writer currently residing in South Africa captures the political process in an experimental book on faction, titled “Just Before Dawn” (1988). He “factually” depicts Nigerian political leaders in action, presenting some inter-ethnic intrigues that have dogged the nation before and after independence. The import of his presentation is that although the founding fathers of the nation along with their British counterparts were aware of the problem of plurality, there was not much they could do to correct the anomaly.

Creative writing then functions as a recorder of the mores, cultural values and underlying political currents of these contradictions. Ironically, it provides

recondite material for creativity, that is, it provides the writer with contradictory materials to enable him interrogate the political and cultural processes of his native land. Taking a stand on political issues is often guided by variables not far removed from the direction of the national question in a postcolonial state. Invariably, the writer becomes involved in the process of redefining a nation or breaking up the nation because of perceived acts of injustice or what in Nigeria is referred to as "marginalisation".

In November 1995, the junta of General Sanni Abacha executed Nigerian writer and environmental activist, Ken Saro Wiwa. Saro Wiwa had been involved in the liberation struggle for his native Ogoni whose ecology had been decimated by the multinational company, Shell. Apart from using his writing as a platform for questioning the basis of the Nigerian federation, he stepped up activities at the global level in drawing attention to degradation of life in Ogoniland. The truth therefore is that literature emerging from such a climate of dissatisfaction with the direction of State policy must have its own focus. The irony is that such literature has to be written in English.

One of Nigeria's foremost writers J.P. Clark, who happens to be of Izon origins, has written a semi-historical play titled "All for Oil". In it he dwells on the notion of imperialism, both local and international and how this has helped to undermine the people of the Niger Delta. His language is reflective of the sensibilities of the Izon particularly. So while disparaging imperialism, he writes in "Queen's English". However, to domesticate the play, local idioms and expressions are used.

The choice of language which a writer makes is one dimension of the process of self-identification and self-assertion. Language itself is a part of the struggle to overthrow the burden of political hegemony which an ethnic group may have perceived or experienced. As Ashcroft (1995:283) has observed "the control over language by the imperial centre— whether achieved by displacing native languages, by installing itself as a 'standard' against other variants which are constituted as 'impurities', or by planting the language of empire in a new place—remains the most potent instrument of cultural control".

Whose Consciousness?

One of the fundamental questions writers have to confront is: Whose consciousness does the so-called national literature represent? There is the nation which is defined in terms of the powers that are exercised by a clique, often in romance with global capitalistic interests. Interests defined by the World Bank, IMF and other financial houses guide such notions. There is also the nation that is fluid, dependent on

internal political circumstances such as ethnicity or military interests. For, as we know, in most postcolonial states in Africa, the military has remained a potent force even outside State House. In the Nigerian experience, the military class continues to control the levers of power although the nation practices liberal democracy in principle.

A nation also emerges when the constituent parts of the country have agreed on the fundamentality of freedom of expression and the other freedoms. As long as citizens are dissatisfied with how the government manages the image of the country, it would be difficult to sustain the notion of a national literature. The truth is that there may be no values, which are representative of the Nigerian ethos. Fundamentally, therefore, as a result of linguistic and cultural differences, the question of the Nigerian identity is yet to be resolved. In such works as *Anthills of the Savannah* (Achebe), *When It No Longer Matters* (Tanure Ojaide), and *this story must not be told* (Eghagha) all writers from the Southern part of the country, the national question receives considerable attention.

Another aspect of the writer's dilemma is the potential changing and or dilution of borders as interests change, as a new leadership emerges. Changing borders occur at two levels. First is the level of internal creation of states, by splitting ethnic groups into small groups for administrative convenience. At the other level is that of marriage or migration for economic or political reasons. Invariably, these borders collapse into one whole— alienation from the mainstream decision-making process.

A National Literature?

It is impossible to create a national literature when a consensus has not been reached on what constitutes the cultural and political ethos of the nation. In other words, until the nation is defined in terms of language, geography, philosophy, justice and political structure a truly national literature cannot emerge. Currently the minorities in Nigeria are struggling for internal independence by demanding control over the natural resources in their homeland. This has been reflected in the rash of poetry which new writers from that region have produced in the last five years. Such writers include Sophia Obi (*Tears in a Basket*), Binaebi Oyeghe (*Songs of Agonies*), George Itade (*The Contemporary Man*), Tonye Biria-Bebe (*Youna*), Christian Otobotekere (*Live Two Lives*), Augustine-Neto Emiemokumo (*Seasons of Laughter*) and Kieriama T. Julius (*Black Man's Cry and other poems*). Significantly, all of these writers are of Izon origin, the ethnic group whose youths have waged a war over oil resources with the Federal Government of Nigeria.

Some of the poems are quite illustrative of the struggle for freedom and internal independence. For example, in 'Oloibiri', Sophia Obi writes:

At last I am free
Free from bondage
Yet,
Desolate like a wealthy aged whore
Wrapped up in gloomy attire,
I lay on the altar of a faded glory,
Oily tears rolling through my veins
To nourish households in the desert.
Along my coast,
The smoke and stench
Of my crude flow desecrates
My marine reserves
This is the coated freedom of torment
When anguish enfolds joy

Oloibiri is the town where crude oil was first discovered in commercial quantity in Nigeria in 1958. The federal government has neglected the town since. It has no amenities or infrastructure to reflect the millions of dollars that have been extracted from its soil. Gas is still flared in its environs. The oil well in the town has been closed and so Oloibiri is "free from bondage" yet it has become "desolate like a wealthy aged whore".

In "Ode to the Niger Delta", Kieriamia Julius pictures the delta when "Infants gather as usual /To hear folk tales". He uses the story motif to tell the story of the deprived region from "Morning" through "Evening". In "Evening", he writes that:

Dark clouds began to gather
In a perpetually dry season
What has brought this blow?

The "dark clouds" gathering in the dry season symbolize an anomaly, an unusual occurrence. It is an indication of impending disaster.

In the choice of language, there are political considerations. First there must be a realisation that the language of the colonizer is imperial. The second step is to have the will power to jettison it and suffer a temporary setback in the period of reconstruction. Albert Memmi (1965: 137) observes that the colonized would have to "forgo the use of the colonizer's language, even if he is the first to be inconvenienced. He will prefer a long period of educational mistakes to the continuance of the colonizer's school education". African writers have found a way of expressing universal thoughts in a language that is at once expressive of their protest feelings and open enough for readers anywhere in the world to receive their message.

Conclusion

The postcolonial condition, which is captured in the literary works of Nigerian writers, can be best conveyed when expressed in a mother tongue. As we have contended in the body of this work, language is essential in the process of identity formation and assertion. There are over four hundred languages in the Nigerian geographical space. These languages represent different persons of disparate backgrounds. It becomes impossible therefore to communicate with persons outside one's immediate geographical environment in one's mother tongue. This is one of the dilemmas of the average Nigerian writer.

It is true that the problem of writing in one's native tongue and communicating with non-native speakers can be overcome through translation. Ironically, most Nigerians born in the period just before independence and after cannot write in their mother tongue because the colonial education had de-emphasised use of one's native language. Indeed, with globalisation, there seems to be the reasoning that one's native tongue is no longer important. The current generation of youthful Nigerians do not fully subscribe to calls for ethnic or national identity. Some writers come from this crop of Nigerians. Such writers are compelled to continue to write in the language of the colonial.

In appropriating local idioms and expressions, some of the older writers such as Achebe, Soyinka and Clark are able to infuse the spirit of the indigenous into literary works. While in secondary school some of us who had become writers were flogged for speaking "vernacular", vernacular being the mother tongue. It severed us from our roots, the consequences from which we have not been able to extricate ourselves. Thus the writer in a postcolonial state is still saddled with the practice of communicating in the voice of Jacob while carrying the burden of the body of Esau. These burdens have become multifarious and sometimes mutational. This dimension is created by the overall effect of globalisation and local politics.

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