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English: A Blessing in Disguise – A Study of Chinua Achebe's Technique of Hybridization

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Criticism against Chinua Achebe's Position on Language

The main objective of this paper is to look into Achebe's technique of hybridization of English language wherein it is metamorphosed into a brand new usage and by its uniqueness becomes an inevitable asset to its users.

"Language is a weapon and we use it. There is no point in fighting over a language" (quoted in Gallagher, 260). This is an observation put forth by one of the greatest writers of African literature, "the voice of Nigeria" and the winner of the Man Booker International Prize, 2007 - Chinua Achebe. The issue of language had brought him scathing criticisms from the African writers.

How Achebe Views Hybridization

Achebe relies heavily on the hybridization of African and European culture wherein the English language turns out to be 'African English'.

While studying at the University of Ibadan, Achebe was appalled by the misleading picture of Nigeria and the whole of Africa that he found in many novels written and published in the West. The stunning consequence of his yearning spirit to emancipate Africa from its Eurocentric version was the all-time favourite novel, **Things Fall Apart** (1958) - a novel that demonstrates the linguistic and social sophistication of pre-colonial African societies.

What Is Hybridization?

The novel is written in English but a hybrid English. Now let us see what hybridization actually means. As defined by Garcia Canclini, an anthropologist, *hybridization* is an intersectional and transactional process, it avoids the elements of segregation present in multiculturalism and facilitates the transition from multiculturalism to interculturalism (qtd. in "Cultural Diversity: Source of conflict or solution?").

As far as linguistics is concerned, *hybridization* is a term used to describe the process of one language variety blending with another variety.

Achebe's Use of Hybridization

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Achebe uses Standard English blended with pidgin as his style of communication rather than an indigenous language such as Igbo. Writers like Ngugi Wa Thiongo lashed out at Achebe's choice of the colonizer's language rather than the Igbo language. As far as Achebe is concerned, English is a language given to him by his parents. Nevertheless, he believes that only English can carry the burden of his experiences. Only English would enable him to reach out to Africa and the world which includes the colonial ruling nations too.

Use English to Attack Eurocentrism

As stated earlier, Achebe's main purpose of writing **Things Fall Apart** was to reconstruct the image of Africa in a language that respects the national tradition of his native land while recognizing the demands of a cosmopolitan, international audience. Therefore, English is no more the language of the imperialists because it has undergone a denationalization in the hands of writers like Achebe.

The Role of Indigenous Language

Considering the Igbo language, there are some valid reasons for Achebe's denial to use it in his novels. The Igbo language had only oral forms and had no written script.

In Nigeria there are hundreds of autonomous communities within it and the Igbo language also has a number of dialects. Igbo is more appropriately called a dialect continuum with many mutually intelligible dialects independently operating within the broad continuum. Like many other African languages, formal, standardized written Igbo came into being as a result of the Christian missionaries' desire to translate the Bible into indigenous tongues. The standard was originally based on Central Igbo, but through various language movements the current form of Igbo has become more inclusive of lexical items from other dialects as well.

Later on, English was chosen as the official language of Nigeria and it gave rise to a national literature. English is now the preferred language for communication between various tribes and also the language of the educated.

An Enduring Gift of Language from the Colonialists

Achebe is a man who never discards the positive side of anything along with its ills. In "The African Writer and the English Language", he discusses how the process of colonialism provided the colonized people from varying linguistic backgrounds, "a language with which to talk to one another" (142).

Novels like **Things Fall Apart**, **No Longer at Ease** and **Arrow of God** (all of which are included in **The African Trilogy**), exemplify Achebe's point that although written in a colonial language, they carry the flavour of African culture while undertaking the task of correcting and re-establishing the African identity.

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Counter-Balance to Check the Elimination of Native Dialects

The domination of English language and European ways is countered by Igbo words, phrases, proverbs and idioms. For example, words like 'obi' (hut), 'chi' (a personal God), 'osu' (an outcaste) and egwugwu' (the masked ancestral spirit) that occur frequently are not difficult to comprehend by the readers.

Less frequently occurring words such as 'ilo' (a village playground) or 'agbala' (a woman of no title) are better understood after their translations but in no way do they hinder the flow of the narratives.

Developing African Identity Using the Colonizers' Language

A larger role is played by the proverbs used in his novels to convey traditional wisdom of the people who were deprived even the status of human-beings. To convey an Igbo experience, he manipulates the colonizer's language. Yet they invoke the Nigerian culture forcing the reader to accept his linguistic terms.

Some examples are:

"You can tell a ripe corn by its look" (**The African Trilogy**, 31), means that a successful man can easily be pointed out by his personality.

"Proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten" (**The African Trilogy**, 20).

The blending of native language with English, forces his readers to look outside their limitations and experience the alien culture.

Nigerianizing an English Text through the Use of Igbo Idiom

Another element that contributes to Achebe's hybridization is his subtle use of idioms. These idioms help in Nigerianizing the text so that the conversations sound natural. A few such idioms are:

"Okonkwo's fame had grown like a bush-fire in the harmattan" (**The African Trilogy**, 17).

"Women carrying pots are like a spirit with fantastic heads" (**The African Trilogy**, 337).

Semantic Extensions of Existing Words as Part of Retaining African Identity

Achebe also implements semantic extensions to many words. Semantic extension is a process whereby an English word is assigned a new meaning which is more relevant to the new users and is not unfamiliar to the natives. For example, Earth is considered *Language in India* www.languageinindia.com

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as Goddess and Yam is not just an eatable. It is a man's crop and also sacred. Python is also regarded as sacred.

Meeting the Linguistic Demands in Creative Writing

In his essay "The African Writer and the English Language, Achebe elucidates on his own technique of moulding English to meet the linguistic demands. He cites a dialogue from **Arrow of God** where Ezeulu tells his son:

I want one of my sons to join these people and be my eyes there.
If there is nothing in it, you will come back. But if there is something there, you will bring home my share . . .

He puts it in the normal English style.

I am sending you as my representative among these people - just to be on the safe side, in case the new religion develops . . . (148).

The second dialogue lacks the use of poetical and rhetorical devices, frequently used by Igbo's during informal conversations. The first one, on the other hand, sounds more natural, in terms of conversational style of Igbo's.

Subversion Rather Than Rejection

Unlike Ngugi Wa Thiongo who advocates the rejection of the colonialist language, Achebe practices the idea of subversion rather than rejection. By tactfully altering the syntax, usage and forms of English, he uses it as a boomerang to destroy the prejudiced notions of the imperialists. We can infer that Achebe fully recognizes that English is symbolically and politically related to betrayal and bigotry. Yet he chose English as it is the best tool by which he can strike back.

The greatest irony is that his **Things Fall Apart** which was initially rejected by British publishers has now turned out to be one of the most important books in African literature, and world literature for that matter, getting translated into 50 languages. The 50th anniversary of its publication was celebrated on February 2008, marked by several conferences and events that were being held across the globe in Europe, the Americas, Africa and Asia.

It is not the victory of Achebe alone, but also the victory of his linguistic innovation. Achebe's aim is to bring out a message best without altering the authenticity of the native language.

Embodiment of African Civilization through Linguistic Processes

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Achebe's fiction demonstrates his pre-occupation with language is not merely a technique but the embodiment of African civilization. This technique helps his characters sound quite natural while speaking an alien tongue.

Yet he very well understands the serious setbacks that an African would face if he writes in English. He himself had once stated, "Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling" ("African Writer and the English Language", 348).

Anyway, Achebe is of the strong conviction that it does not matter what language you write in as long as what you write is good. It has been a prejudice among at least a few, that those who chose to write in English are unpatriotic. Achebe says that it is utterly nonsensical because it depends on which language one is more comfortable with and in which, one is more talented. Achebe exhorts the writers of his ilk to expand the frontiers of English so as to accommodate the African ethos into it.

Writing in Mother Tongue is Honored

While portraying the experiences and culture of Africa, Achebe never tends to slip into pseudo-nativism. Without any kind of blind glorification of his land, he brings reality into his language. Achebe has no qualms over using English language. At the same time he never has any aversion towards those who write in their own mother-tongues as is relevant in Achebe's recent poems having written in Igbo language.

Again, there is another instance which can be cited to show his love for Igbo language and also his frustration and helplessness having to communicate in English to a person of another tribe of Africa. In **No Longer at Ease**, Achebe talks about Obi:

"He spoke Ibo whenever he had the least opportunity of doing so. But when he had to speak in English with a Nigerian student from another tribe he lowered his voice. It was humiliating to have to speak to one's countrymen in a foreign language, especially in the presence of the proud owners of that language. They would naturally assume that one had no language of one's own" (214).

Should We Banish English?

Today, Achebe is adamant that the decision to banish English language from Nigeria is not wise. English has become the link language between various tribes of Nigeria.

In an interview, Achebe opined that it is impractical to abandon English in Nigeria because for one single day it is not without English." On the administrative front, it becomes all the more impractical (qtd. in "Chinua Achebe and the language of the colonizer").

In the final analysis, Achebe emerges out successful in using English as the "weapon" to convince the outsider that Nigeria is a nation with great potential. His efficient use *Language in India* www.languageinindia.com

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of English to portray the gyres that African life is made to whirl through is being perfectly established.

The way of perceiving Black Aesthetics becomes a different experience for the readers as Achebe hybridizes English language with Igbo language, inventing an Igbo-English language.

Achebe would always be grateful towards the Britishers for providing English to the Nigerians, a language that enables them to communicate, a language which plays a vital role in official matters, and a language through which Achebe himself could break the myth about pre-colonial Africa and thereby blame the Westerners for the loss of dignity and culture of the natives.

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