



ANDREW NKADIMENG

LANGUAGE AS CULTURAL PROTEST IN AFRICAN LIT: A POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE

Language as Cultural Protest in African Literature



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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife-Lindiwe Pheladi Thabile Nkadameng and children- Sethokgoa Nape Innocent Nkadameng and Mankopodi Mahlako Rose-Mary Millicent Nkadameng.

My dedications also go to Magaseng Bosebo Edward Nkadameng, Mampuru Isaac Nkadameng and Mashianoke Moraswi Christoph Nkadameng. To them I say thank you for your encouragement and inspiration.

Andrew Phaahle Nkadameng

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- (b) Congress of South African Writers (COSAW)
- (c) African Writers Association (AWA)

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	ii
CHAPTER 1	1
1.1 INTRODUCTION	1
1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM	3
1.3 SOME OF THE ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT AFRICAN WRITING	4
1.4 METHOD OF RESEARCH	5
1.4.1 INTRODUCTION.....	6
1.4.2 COLONIAL AFRICAN EXPERIENCES AND THE INDIGENOUS AFRICAN LITERATURE	7
1.4.3 LANGUAGE POLITICS DURING COLONIAL AND APARTHEID ERAS AS THE BASIS FOR SOCIO-CULTURAL FREEDOM	7
1.4.4 POST-COLONIAL MENTALITY AND AFRICAN WRITING AS CULTURAL PROTEST.....	8
1.4.5 THE CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF AFRICAN RENAISSANCE PHILOSOPHY ON AFRICAN WRITING.....	9
1.4.6 GENERAL CONCLUSION	10
CHAPTER 2: COLONIAL AFRICAN EXPERIENCE AND THE INDIGENOUS AFRICAN LITERATURE	11
2.1 INTRODUCTION	11
2.2 SOME VIEWS ON INDIGENOUS AFRICAN LITERATURE	11

2.3	SOME DEVELOPMENTAL TRENDS IN AFRICAN LITERATURE	15
2.4	SOME MOVEMENTS THAT CHARACTERISE AFRICAN LITERATURE	20
2.5	THE IMPACT OF COLONIALISM ON AFRICAN WRITING.....	22
2.6	CONCLUSION.....	24
	CHAPTER 3: LANGUAGE POLITICS DURING COLONIAL AND APARTHEID ERAS AS SPRING BOARD FOR SOCIO-CULTURAL STRUGGLES	28
3.1	INTRODUCTION	28
3.2	SOME OBSERVATIONS TRENDS ON LANGUAGE PRACTICE.....	28
3.3	THE PRESENT LANGUAGE SCENARIO FOR LITERATURE	33
3.4	CONCLUSION.....	39
	CHAPTER 4: POST-COLONIALISM AS CULTURAL PROTEST IN AFRICAN WRITING	41
4.1	INTRODUCTION	41
4.2	SOME VIEWS ON POST-COLONIAL WRITING.....	41
4.3	SOME TRENDS IN POST-COLONIAL AFRICAN LITERATURE.....	46
4.4	A MATERIALIST INTERPRETATION OF LOCAL SOCIO-CULTURAL CONFLICT IN AFRICA	48
4.5	THE GLOBAL DIMENSION OF IDEOLOGICAL CONFLICT IN AFRICA	49
4.6	HOW CAN AFRICAN PRIDE BE RESTORED?.....	51
4.7	CONCLUSION.....	52

CHAPTER 5: THE CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE POSSIBLE IMPACT OF AFRICAN RENAISSANCE PHILOSOPHY ON AFRICAN WRITING	56
5.1 INTRODUCTION	56
5.2 LOCATING THE PREMISE OF AFRICAN RENAISSANCE.....	56
5.3 AFRICAN RENAISSANCE IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT	58
CHAPTER 6 GENERAL CONCLUSION	69
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	75

CHAPTER 1

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This introductory chapter gives a detailed outline of the dissertation and re-states the problem statement in more details. It depicts the hegemonic language control that the colonisers used over the institutions of African communities, which caused perennial suffering. It is for this reason that Margulus and Nowakoski (1996:1) assert that:

Language is often a central question in postcolonial studies... [C]olonizers usually imposed their language onto the people they colonized, forbidding natives to speak their mother tongues.

It is for this reason that language has assumed a function of protest in African literature. A language that is used in African literature is therefore viewed as an instrument towards achieving linguistic and cultural emancipation of the African people and in the process restore their identity in a multicultural society in the local and global contexts. Consequently, language is a central issue in the dissertation since it is intended to prove the struggles of the African people from colonial cultural value systems to African cultural value systems.

Seeing also that language in African literature is a contentious issue in defining this literature, language *per se* is not going to dominate the discussion. For instance, Selepe (1993) made another attempt at re-defining African literature and pointed out that its definition cannot be limited to language but that it extends to broader issues of historical experience and ideology. Although important, this re-definition remains one of the many possibilities. Therefore, the question of language in African literature in this study is going to be viewed also as a vehicle which either projects a particular world-view or inspired Africans to deal with certain socio-political and economic issues both within and outside the framework of literature. In other words, language is going to be considered as an intrinsic element of all other aspects of the unfolding drama on the African landscape. As well-known author and critic, Ken Saro-Wiwa, said before being sentenced to death by the Nigerian military regime:

My lord, we all stand before history. I am a man of peace, of ideas. Appalled by the denigrating poverty of my people who live in a richly endowed land, distressed by their political marginalization and economic strangulation, angered by the devastation of their land, their ultimate heritage, anxious to preserve their right to life and to a decent living, and determined to usher to this country as a whole a fair and just democratic system which protects everyone and every ethnic group and gives us all a valid claim to human civilization, I have devoted my intellectual and material resources, my very life, to a cause in which I have total belief and from which I cannot be blackmailed or intimidated (cf. Anyidoho et al., 1999:6)

Another dimension to this is that literary art with respect to language plays a pivotal role in the post-colonial socialization of the African people, especially in acquiring social and cultural value systems of the indigenous societies into which they are born. Speaking from the historical perspective most modern day African people were born into a culture of turmoil between African value systems and western culture that came via colonialism and reinforced through cultural imperialism. This has led to uncertainty among Africans about which cultural and value systems they should adopt. The underlying cause of this identity crisis revolves mostly around the question of language.

This problem has as a result also plunged African literary practice into academic and cultural crisis, which has also driven the wedge among practitioners and in turn affected the question of African identity. Margulus and Nowakoski (ibid.) argue in this case that:

In response to the systematic imposition of colonial languages, some post-colonial writers and activists advocate a complete return to the use of indigenous languages. Others see the language (e.g. English) imposed by the colonizer as a more practical alternative, using the colonial both to enhance international communication [...] and to encounter a colonial past through de-forming a "standard" European tongue and re-forming it in new literacy forms (cf. Ashcroft et al, 1989).

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Since language is a fundamental aspect of cultural life and cultural identity, there is no way in which African people can realise African dream without achieving linguistic freedom. This linguistic freedom pertains to a right to use indigenous African languages even to deform colonial languages to express African thought (cf. Ashcroft et al., 1989 and Ngugi, 1986). For instance, Seegers (1997) also stresses that:

On the one hand, there is the search for cultural authenticity, the return to origins, the need to preserve minor languages, pride in particularism, admiration for cultural self-sufficiency and maintenance of national traditions.

In post-colonial Africa language rights of people should not be separated from human rights principles that govern any democratic society, which should also afford African people the democratic rights and the freedom to communicate in the languages of their ancestors. This view is expressed by Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986:7) when he argues whether: "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."

Post-colonial African writers championed the cause of Pan Africanism, Negritude, African Nationalism, Black Consciousness and presently African Renaissance for the glory and beauty of Africa. They wanted to go back to their roots to achieve cultural emancipation and to revive African cultural heritage. African literature has become a powerful instrument in its advocacy for cultural freedom. African writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o (**Decolonising the Mind and Moving the Centre**), Chinua Achebe (**Things Fall Apart**), Alan Paton (**Cry the Beloved Country**), Piniel Viriri Shava (**A People's Voice**), Abiola Irele (**The African Experience in Literature and Ideology**). We may as well mention other South African writers and scholars such as Steve Biko, Muthobi Mutlloatse, Miriam Tlali, etc. They have, together with others, made notable contribution to the philosophy of Black Consciousness.

1.3 SOME OF THE ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT AFRICAN WRITING

In compiling the findings of my research I have realised that African people still have a sense of negative attitude towards their own social and cultural values. They still seem to regard colonial languages as the highly prestigious media of communication in a post-colonial and post-apartheid world despite the current debate on African Renaissance as another possible vehicle towards achieving cultural emancipation.

This point is emphasised in Chinweizu et al. in, **Toward The Decolonisation of African Literature** (1983:242) when they argue that:

We would like to call an end to the debate over the use of Western languages by African writers. The use of these languages is a part of the problem of contemporary African culture. Ideally, African literature should be written in African languages. But the same historical circumstances that presently compel African nations to use Western languages as their official languages also compel African writers to write in them.

The impact of cultural imperialism has left African people with no choice, but to opt for the promotion of African culture through the medium of Western languages. Chinweizu, et al. (1983:248) also stress that:

If many African writers have to do that in borrowed languages, that is not a fault to be interminably lamented, not a fault of the writers alone, but a symptom of the deeper decay within our culture. When the deep diseases of our culture are cured, most writers will write in the indigenous languages.

The fact that African people still display negative attitude towards their own social and cultural values is also expressed by Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986:3) when he stresses that:

The oppressed and the exploited of the earth maintain their defiance: liberty from theft. But the biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism against that collective defiance is the cultural bomb. The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity,

in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance, with other peoples' languages rather than their own. It makes them identify with that which is decadent and reactionary, all those forces that would stop their own springs of life.

Therefore, the purpose of this research is in part to raise the consciousness of the indigenous people of Africa about the danger of continuing falling victims to neo-imperialism which is being perpetrated and advocated by the institutions of higher learning such as universities. Most universities in South Africa are still continuing to perpetuate the seeds of colonialism by promoting European and Asiatic languages while ignoring indigenous African languages. Such universities offer Latin, German, French, Hebrew, etc, but fail to offer tuition in languages which are spoken by the indigenous citizens of South African such as Sepedi, Xitsonga, TshiVenda, IsiZulu, Sesotho, etc.

This is against the principles of the South African constitution and the philosophy of African Renaissance. South African universities should primarily be offering tuition in eleven official languages of the country before considering foreign languages, which are less important to the majority of South Africans. Although I believe in the philosophy of cultural pluralism I think the interests of Africa must come first. What necessitated this research is therefore the way in which the language issue, the cultural issue and the philosophy of African Renaissance are trivialised in African literature. The research is consequently against this socio-cultural humiliation of African people and the mental subjugation they are subjected to.

1.4 METHOD OF RESEARCH

Speaking from the historical and global perspectives, the question of language, culture and identity is something that will take the world centuries before the issue is resolved. Like in African, the Calatan language in Spain has experienced serious cultural and linguistic repression until 1983 when the "Law of linguistic

Normalization" was voted by the Catalan parliament, (Manuel Castells: 1997:48). Pujol, quoted by Castells in his book, **The Power of Identity** (1997:47-48) says that: "Language is the foundation of Catalan identity and that identity Catalunya is linguistic and cultural." In the same vein Pujol regards language and culture as the backbone of identity. Manuel Castells, (1997:52) in his hypothesis argues that:

Language, and particularly a fully developed language, is a fundamental attribute of self-recognition and of the establishment of an invisible national boundary less arbitrary than territoriality, and less exclusive than ethnicity.

Therefore, the marginalisation of African languages in the local and global context should be challenged until language equity is realised and maintained. Related language issues will be elaborated in detail in the following chapters of this research.

1.4.1 INTRODUCTION

The introduction focuses on the problems of linguistic enculturation and alienation of the colonial era which made African people to despise African languages in favour of colonial languages. Colonisation of Africa deprived African people of their cultural identity and made them to pay allegiance to alien philosophical hegemony was imposed on them through coercion and enslavement of thought. The chapter depicts the hegemonic control of the colonisers over the institutions of civil society in Africa that caused African people to be credulous to colonial propaganda and consequently suffer considerably from inferiority complex. However, the emergence of Pan-Africanism, Negritude, African Nationalism and Black Consciousness helped to create a new-world outlook for African people toward self-discovery and self-identity.

By definition an African is any one who lives in Africa, who shares and understand African life experiences and pays allegiance to African philosophy and respect Africa's cultural values. Jane Watts stresses the role of Black Consciousness Movement in her book, **Black Writers from South Africa** (1989:5) when she argues that:

The Black Consciousness Movement served a threefold purpose. It worked to destroy the negative self-definitions imposed by the white minority; it fostered national unity within the black masses, and it sought to establish traditional African cultural values which had been deliberately perverted by Nationalist government in order to separate the tribes and divert them, with a toothless and ersatz version of tribal culture, from any kind of political understanding or power struggle.

1.4.2 COLONIAL AFRICAN EXPERIENCES AND THE INDIGENOUS AFRICAN LITERATURE

Chapter two deals with the colonial African experience and the indigenous African literature, which was characterised by cultural turbulence as a result of colonial tyranny. During this period African writers had been writing from the colonial perspective without realising their own African philosophical thinking. Themes of religion, especially Christianity, influenced African writing of that period. As such African people have been dehumanised and demoralised by colonial policies and were made to detest their own mental creation.

Piniel Viriri Shava's book, **A People's Voice** (1989-7-14) states clearly that colonial writing was influenced by religion. It is stated in this book that Sol Plaatjie's books **Mhudi** and **Native Life in South Africa**, have been heavily influenced by Christianity since Plaatjie himself was a Lutheran and a lay-preacher. However, it is also stated in **Mhudi** that the Boers regarded themselves as "God's chosen people" who used the Bible to profess Christianity to the point of bigotry and to oppress black people.

1.4.3 LANGUAGE POLITICS DURING COLONIAL AND APARTHEID ERAS AS A BASIS FOR A STRUGGLE FOR SOCIO-CULTURAL FREEDOM

The third chapter deals with language politics and linguistic development of African languages for the achievement of language equity. Due to socio-cultural imperialism and colonialism, African languages have been marginalized and have therefore suffered a great deal of linguistic alienation on the African continent. As

such African people started to protest against language policy and planning which have been designed in such a way that the colonisers could enjoy and benefit.

To emphasise this argument **The Citizen** newspaper of 13 January 2000 has published the outcome of a weeklong conference on language and literature, which was held in Asmara, Eritrea whereby delegates concluded that:

The suppression of local languages threatens democracy in Africa. If you take away my right to speak my own language by mandating another language as the official language, you pull me out of circulation, you take me out of the dialogue.

The conference was called "Against All odds: African Languages and Literature into the 21st Century." At the conference Charles Cantalupo, a writer and literature professor at Pennsylvania University concluded by saying that "Being able to speak your own language is the most obvious, most fundamental right, yet in Africa, the most suppressed" (ibid.)

The Pan South African Language Board (PANSALB) also believes that government leaders should address communities in the languages they understand best. Dr Neville Alexander, a language activist was quoted in the **City Press** of 12 September 1999 as saying: "There will be no renaissance without the development of indigenous languages."

1.4.4 POST-COLONIAL MENTALITY AND AFRICAN WRITING AS CULTURAL PROTEST

The fourth chapter deals with the experience of post-colonial mentality and the emergence of cultural protest. African people started to realise the importance of their own traditions and customs. They wanted to achieve cultural emancipation and promote the spirit of Africanism. As such the decolonisation of African people was necessary in realising the dream of African cultural freedom.

In his book, **Moving the Centre** (1993), Ngugi wa Thiong'o argues that we are all drawing from the languages and cultures we are rooted in, and that English should not be a substitute for our own languages. He goes on to say that the oppressor nation uses language as a means of entrenching itself in the oppressed nation.

English was made to appear as if it was a language spoken by God. English has been regarded as a language of conquerors and African languages as languages of the vanquished. He argues further that culture is a product of peoples' history. Consequently, the economic and political conquest of Africa was accomplished by the mental, spiritual and cultural subjugation as well as the imposition of the imperialist cultural tradition.

1.4.5 THE CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF AFRICAN RENAISSANCE PHILOSOPHY ON AFRICAN WRITING

Chapter five deals with the critical analysis of the possible implications of the African Renaissance Philosophy on African writing, which has become a powerful philosophical concept in a post-apartheid South Africa and the African continent as a whole. This chapter embraces many issues that make the concept problematic. African Renaissance is regarded as a continuation of the previous movements such as Pan-Africanism, African Nationalism, Black Consciousness, etc. However, what makes this concept complex is its application for the entire continent. Some people argue that there is nothing to revive in Africa because Africa was a "dark continent" before the arrival of the colonisers. Some argue that total abstinence from Western culture is necessary for the achievement of cultural freedom. And from other African schools of thought there is a saying that both Western and African cultures should co-exist. Many such issues are raised in this chapter as to whether we are to be Afro-European or fully fledged African people who are proud of their own cultural roots.

In his speech on the 9th of April 1998 "The African Renaissance, South Africa and the World" when President Thabo Mbeki addresses the community of the United Nations about his philosophy of African Renaissance he concluded that:

And in the end, an entire epoch in human history, the epoch of colonialism and white foreign rule, progressed to its ultimate historical burial grounds because, from Morocco and Algeria to Guinea Bissau and Senegal, from Ghana and Nigeria to Tanzania and Kenya, from the Congo and Angola to Zimbabwe and South Africa, the Africans dared to stand up to say the new