

Face Off: Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and Salman Rushdie

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Abstract: This paper purports to differentiate the influences and styles of two major writers of African and Indian literatures on English language: Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and Salman Rushdie. Having undergone through an inexorable process both physically and mentally, those two writers have much to debate about the relationship among Africa, India and English Language. Apart from debating on their homes, creating a symbiosis of their native cultures and English Language is the main motivation of these two writers. On the one hand, there lies the traditional Africa and India as well as their rich languages, and, on the other hand, there is the modern versions of Africa and India inspired much from English language. When we think about the multicultural status of the modern world, we can't underestimate the effects of African and Indian culture on English language. For this reason, this paper's main argument will be mainly on the amalgamation of African and Indian cultures in terms of the use of English language in literature. To understand this combination, different approaches of Achebe and Thing’o to the relationship between language and literature will be examined.

Key Words: Intuitivity, Mau Mau Revolt, Kenyan People, Black Folk, Indian Culture

1. Introduction

Notwithstanding to the very fact that Salman Rushdie and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o seem to have different perspectives towards the use of English at first glance, as in every parabola, there is an axis of symmetry which is the line that runs down its 'centre'. In other words, after a close investigation, it can be grasped that these two authors serve for the same purpose, which will be exposed through a meticulous analysis both on Rushdie and Ngũgĩ.

In the abyss of postcolonial concerns, the two authors, Salman Rushdie and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o provide different perceptions regarding the use of the English language in their works. While depending on their authentic experiences and perspectives, this essay aims to reconcile their unique styles into a common symbiosis. In other words, this essay tries to confirm the diverse approaches of both Ngũgĩ and Achebe towards the fundamental reasoning and miscellany of English and Bantu Swahili languages. Achebe and Ngũgĩ have undergone through an inexorable process both physically and mentally, these two writers have much to debate about both new and old Africa. Apart from this issue on Africa, regarding 'how to create a symbiosis of African Culture and English Language as a discourse is the main distinction between these two writers. In fact, the main distinction between Ngũgĩ and Achebe is that they are authors standing on both sides of the bridge between nostalgic Africa and Africa on the

road to Europeanization. This, of course, does not mean that Achebe was either fully surrendered to Europeanization or that Ngũgĩ rejected Europe from beginning to end.

More often, the difference based on Ngũgĩ and Achebe should be whether the language is integrative or discriminative in the postcolonial process. Of course, beyond this debate, on the one hand, there lies the ancient Africa embedded in its rich language; on the other hand, there is the modern Africa inspired much from English language. When we think about the multicultural status of the modern world, we cannot underestimate the effects of African Culture on English. Asserting sincerely, the English language, which has become a global language from another angle, is obviously the most preferred language in terms of multi-communication, though its function is not necessarily limited with mere communication. Because, while providing communication in English language, it also associates and imposes subliminal cultural interactions. That's why Ngũgĩ's argument focuses on the fact that English shouldn't be used in conveying African literature in Africa. As for Salman Rushdie, it may be observed that he writes in English in order to appeal to a global network of readers, but this does not mean that he ignores the values of India and its peoples. His works involve "Hindi and Urdu names and allusions to Muslim and Hindu legends and myths" as well as references to European classics and popular

Hollywood movies,” so Western readers are often astonished by terms and phrases that Rushdie does not explain in order to keep their curiosity active (Brians 2003 p. 132). In the colonial period, Indians were taught English classics, history and cultural values, but postcolonial period implies that Western people now read literary works that are produced by Third world writers such as Rushdie and are taught the precolonial empires of India, its native food, traditions, religious celebrations and morals. Consequently, English has lost its former role of introducing the Western values to Indians and has become a language which carries the native values of India and which introduces such values to the Western societies.

2. Ngũgĩ and Language

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, one of the pioneers of the Pan-Africanism¹ concept that lives, has been struggling for the rights of the vulnerable black people against the atrocities that Africans have been exposed to. Influenced by the discourses of Frantz Fanon and Aime Césaire, wa Thiong'o is an internationally distinguished novelist, dramatist, and critic. Born in Kenya, which was under British rule from 1895 until 1963, not only did he see the perilous growing of the colonialism at first-hand, but also witnessed the Mau Mau Uprising² against the colonial British powers. Per Ngũgĩ, European writers are simplifying the issues on Mau Mau Revolt by claiming the Mau Mau Emergency, which could be said to have begun when the first European settlers came to the country, and they, in through their so called 'good faith', they tried to impose their own ways and ideas of civilization on a group of 'primitive peoples' still living in something akin to the stone age (Thiong'o, 1973). In this political turmoil leading to independence, one of Ngũgĩ's stepbrothers was killed and his mother tortured. In 1959, Ngũgĩ entered Makerere University in Uganda, receiving his B.A. in 1964; there he also began his writing career, publishing the acclaimed novel *Weep Not, Child* (1964) about the Mau Mau War and East African culture. After attending Leeds University thanks to a British Council Scholarship (1964-1967), he returned to Africa to take a position at Nairobi University. Nevertheless, after a

short while he resigned in protest over governmental interference in the university. When Ngũgĩ became the head of the literature department, he renounced his Anglicized name, James Ngũgĩ. He thought this name held to be a sign of colonialism. By taking his name in his native Kikuyu language, he thereafter wrote first in Kikuyu and then translated his own work into English.

For Ngũgĩ, writing in English would leave him away from the 'memory bank' of his folk, a kind of gap caused by colonialism which he is determined to find a remedy for it. He champions vernacular writing style over literary crafting in other languages. For this reason, had he written in English, he would have seen the world through the scope of colonial forces, not through the ancestral 'spiritual eyeglasses'. Therefore, Ngũgĩ sets his position to display his willingness to restore the Kenyan child to his environment by assembling the African literary works in his native language (McLeod, 2000).

Ngũgĩ puts emphasis on the importance of language because not only does it help any person to develop an understanding of the world, but it also encodes values and beliefs which provide insight and structure to his life. In his *Writings in Politics*, he states that “[l]iterature as a process of thinking in images utilizes language and draws upon the collective experience history embodied in that language” (Thiong'o, 1981). Furthermore, a nation's culture is conveyed by spoken and written language through which a person has the opportunity to question his sense of belonging to that peculiar culture, and by doing so, he perceives his place as an individual in the world. Since language is a set of reflections about the black culture, and identity, Ngũgĩ rejects using English language in literary works.

Ngũgĩ, as it is visible from his objections, has posed some questions to pinpoint his position:

“Whose language and history will our literature draw upon? Foreign languages and the history and cultures carried by those languages? Or national languages – Dholuo, Kiswahili, Gikuyu, Luluba, Kikamba, Kimasai, Kigiriama, etc. – and

¹ Pan-Africanism is a movement rooted in the 20th century as a distinct political movement primarily formed and led by black intellectuals to gather the Africans and decolonization process into one integrated activity.

² One of the bloodiest military conflicts that took place in Kenya between Kenyans who demanded their freedom and the British forces who retaliated this demand brutally from 1952 to 1960.

the histories and cultures carried by those languages?" (Thiong'o, 1981)

Ngũgĩ, himself, is again clearly and definitively responding to the answers to these questions:

"Only by a return to the roots of our being in the languages and cultures and heroic histories of the Kenyan people can we rise up to the challenge of helping in the creation of a Kenyan patriotic national culture that will be the envy and pride of Kenyans" (Thiong'o, 1981).

An analogy to Ngũgĩ's approach is visible as quoted in John McLeod's *Beginning Postcolonialism* "Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history (McLeod, 2000)." Asserting diversely, as Ngũgĩ indicates "[l]anguage is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world" (Thiong'o, 1973). Besides, the colonialists, namely the British forces, tried everything to prevent revolutionary wakening of the black people even by disabling their local language and imposing English as the colonial language. In addition to that Fred Majdalany in his *State of Emergency* goes one step ahead and blames black people for being savages and acts as if the colonial forces were the 'saviour' of the black people. Thus, he aims to exonerate the atrocity of the white men. As a reaction to Mau Mau uprising, British Government decided to take the control over the education in Kenya since the teachers in some of the schools, including independent mission schools, were native Kenyans. Therefore, to take precaution against another possible 'uprising' in a near future, they did not only take the control of the education system but also made educational instruction in English mandatory. This is feasible to suggest that this was a deliberate attempt by the colonial forces since they were aware of the very fact that language was the predominant force behind the Kenyan people that unites them. For this reason, Ngũgĩ calls Kenyan and African writers to unite under a social and universal Black theme:

I believe that African intellectuals must align themselves with the struggle of the African masses for a meaningful national ideal. For we must strive for a form of social organization that will free the manacled spirit and energy of our people so we can build a new country, and sing a new song. Perhaps, in a small way, the

African writer can help in articulating the feelings behind this struggle. (Thiong'o, 1973)

Although Ngũgĩ's objection to the use of English can be underestimated by some critics, his struggle is not ephemeral since his resistance is an astonishing and intuitive one inspired by the African nature and myths. Thus, his inspiration is always embraced by his Bantu Swahili mother language. Because the Bantu Swahili language is the combination of past legendary African oral tradition and the reflection of this long-lived language, he uses it as his mother language. For Ngũgĩ, primarily, using Swahili language in his novels encapsulates the prosperous past of the black folk. Consequently, the Bantu Swahili language invites a combination of satire, myth and intuitive imagination and this combination could be found in many of his novels. Only then, this authentic language can be translated into English lest it loses its rich tradition. After hearing Ngũgĩ waiting on one side of the bridge, one must also pay attention to what Rushdie asserted.

3. Rushdie and Language

Salman Rushdie is originally an Indian writer who produces his literary texts in English. His main concern is with the political and cultural legacies of colonialism on India and the imperial metropolises in America and England. His conception of India is far from that of a homogeneous nation since it consists of a multiplicity of castes, communities, religious beliefs, cultural norms and languages, so it makes little sense if any single culture is tried to be imposed on the society (Brians 2003 p. 130). This heterogeneity can become a case of disadvantage and conflict when the government tends to overlook the existence of multiple voices in India. The sense of unity in the face of such non-standard configurations can be achieved only through "a kind of Western democratic model of India as a plural, secular and tolerant society" (Morrison 2003 p. 142). The clashes between extreme religious groups of Hindus and Muslims may be one of the factors which draw him into adopting such a perception. His sense of Indian cultural identity is not a uniform and pure one.

He refers to the cultural frontiers between India and the Western world and expresses his suspicion about to what extent such lines can be drawn by claiming:

We are Hindus who have crossed the black water; we are Muslims who eat pork. And as a result – as my use of the Christian notion of the Fall indicates – we are now partly of the West. Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools (Rushdie 1991 p. 15).

This statement displays an emphasis upon the fact that colonialism has added a Western cultural dimension to the heterogeneous side of India. India has become so merged with the Western civilization that it is almost impossible to consider them in a separate and independent way. Both Muslims and Hindus have lost their distinctive characteristics and embraced certain Western attitudes that starkly go against belief systems. As a result, this raises the fact of floating between the local Indian values and the Western ideals. Each sect of the Indian society includes the Western elements as well as their original properties and shows a tendency to move between different cultural identities and patterns. Rushdie seems to reject the assumption that India can return back to its ancient and original cultural roots and also that it can be westernized entirely by fully abandoning its primordial ties. It becomes indispensable for India to learn how to maintain its existence by combining different forms and getting accustomed to ambiguities. The relevance of this argument to the linguistic features of Rushdie's texts is that his use of English reflects his approach to colonialism and cultural formations.

Regarding the acquisition of English, Rushdie claims that "those peoples who were once colonized by the language are now rapidly remaking it, domesticating it, becoming more and more relaxed about the way they use it ... they are carving out large territories for themselves within its frontiers" (1991 p. 64). Even though Britain aimed to impose English on the Indian nation by means of education and other tools, English has not remained in its original form in the postcolonial India. Rather than using it in accordance with largely accepted standards and rules, Indians have disrupted and transformed it by adding new words, visions and rules to it. This is one of the most common features of postcolonial period in which the imperial languages can be reshaped in new expressions that are formed totally according to the native context (Ashcroft et al 2004 p. 37). In a similar vein, Rushdie as a postcolonial writer tends to play with English and adapts it to the Indian

context. The reason for such an attempt could be grasped out of his explanation:

Those of us who do use English do so in spite of our ambiguity towards it or perhaps because of that, perhaps we can find in that linguistic struggle a reflection of other struggles taking place in the real world, struggles between the cultures within ourselves and the influences at work upon our societies. To conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free (1991).

Inserting Indian elements into English and transforming it, for Rushdie, express some sort of resisting the entire elimination of the native Indian values as well as the contribution to the richness of English. In the light of such a notion, it may be said that Rushdie sees the postcolonial period as a process in which India could penetrate into the just centre of Britain and its basic components.

The ways Rushdie embraces English is often mentioned as "chutneyfication" which has been derived from "chutney" being "a common Indian side dish, tangy, and essential to the flavour of the main meal" and which shows that English is flavoured by Indian syntax, vocabulary and other devices (Nayar 2015 p. 29). The main implication behind such a term is concerned with what Rushdie adds to English in his writings. The term means that Rushdie achieves in using English in a way that is loaded with informal speeches of Indians which do not comply with grammatical and syntactic rules of the standard English while his localization of English politically signifies his opposition to the acceptance of the hegemony and domination of the imperial English (Nayar 2015). In some sense, Rushdie proves that postcolonial nations are not passive receivers that adopt what is sent from the imperial centres but active modifiers that are able to reform what is taken from the Western nations.

Rushdie's attempt to use a different English language in his works can also be explicated with the terms "abrogation" and "appropriation." "Abrogation" denotes the rejection of "correct or standard English" and "inferior dialects or marginal variants" (Ashcroft et al 2001). In abrogation, the colonial powers cannot set the linguistic rules for the colonized peoples whereas the native peoples begin to determine which English they would use. Rushdie most possibly abrogates English by intermingling it with various Indian dialects and terms in order to show that the imperial languages are ordinary tools of communication, rather than

occupying any superior unchangeable status, that are vulnerable to the new inventions and distortions that are derived from postcolonial peoples. As for "appropriation," it refers to "the process of capturing and remoulding language to new uses" and making "a separation from the site of colonial privilege" (Ashcroft et al 2004). In other words, it is the transformation of the imperial languages in accordance with non-standard rules and practices. Frank claims that "Rushdie typically moves about in linguistically heterogeneous localities, such as Bombay, London, and New York. As a result, his novels orchestrate heteroglossia in which countless types of discourse collide, contaminating official or imperial English" (2008 p. 153-154). Rushdie makes English lose its uniform side and gain a new structure which reflects a variety of Indian, British and American elements since his works narrate the stories from three continents.

4. Conclusion

Even though different critics attended the debate at Makerere and myriads of others have uttered their ideas interferingly, Rushdie and Ngũgĩ stand still at the top of this long lasting, ever relevant debate. Some of their discussions caught the same basis and although Ngũgĩ is merely considered more drastic of them, both authors are interested in individual, cultural and national responsibility, and finally keeping the African ideals among prolonged multilingual differences. Ngũgĩ lasts to distinct national and ethnic literatures as two divergent but evenly crucial aspects of African literature nowadays. National literature he illustrates is written in the mother language and has possible addressees along with this area. On the other hand, Rushdie is of the opinion that English needs to be used in producing literary texts by giving it new forms and spoiling its original structure. Through such a way, the colonialist countries can understand that postcolonial period points to the new hybrid formations which can be observed out of the merging of English and Indian

cultural values in a single language. In his works, it is manifest that English has lost its purity and gained a new identity that carries the mindset and culture of the Oriental world.

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