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Sense of Alienation Created by Hegemonic Use of European Languages: An Analysis of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's Decolonising the Mind

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Abstract

This qualitative descriptive research paper focuses on Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind* and analyzes the sense of alienation created by the hegemonic use of European languages in African literature. The purpose of this article is to explore how the dominance of European languages, particularly English, has suppressed African languages, literature, and culture. This suppressive colonial attitude led to a cultural and psychological alienation among African writers and scholars. The study analyzes Thiong'o's arguments against the imposition of European languages in colonial and post-colonial Africa. The findings suggest that while some African writers accepted European languages as their medium, others experienced alienation due to their exclusion from literary recognition. The paper emphasizes the necessity of African writers to embrace and elevate their native languages as resisting voices against cultural hegemony to nurture a sense of identity and unity among African peoples.

Keywords: African literature, alienation, colonial attitude, European hegemony

Introduction

Sometimes language can work as an identity; an identity which becomes the way to raise voice for oneself and to express one's feelings meaningfully to others. Literature is one of the ways of self-expression, language is the medium of literature, and that is how literature and language are inseparable parts. An overwhelming control over language

created by imperial forces “in colonial and neo-colonial phases” (Thiong'o 4) created an indeterminate definition of African literature. Hegemonic domination of European languages over African languages is noted in *Decolonising the Mind* by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, notably in the first chapter named “The Language of African Literature.” Imposition of European languages suppressed African languages; as a result literature and culture of post-colonial Africa were suppressed. Some writers of Africa accepted European languages as their medium of expression. On the other hand, writers who supported and used native African languages as their medium of literature were also in Africa. Some scholars debated that European languages can work as a unifying element to connect different cultural groups, but the hegemonic use of European languages also created a sense of alienation in the minds of some native Africans. European languages, especially English created a division between African ethnicities instead of creating a unifying effect. In 1962, Thiongo was invited to a conference titled ‘A Conference of African Writers of English Expression’. The title itself suggests that African Writers of African Expressions, who used to write only in African languages, were excluded from that conference. Thiong'o was qualified in that meeting in Uganda, an East African country, because of two of his published short stories named “The Fig Tree” and “The Return”; whereas great writers of African languages like Shabaan Robert and Chief Fagunwa were not qualified probably because of their language. Somehow, that proves some African writers were alienated in Africa because they did not use European languages as their medium. The perspective of Thiong'o about African literature is different from Achebe's perspective. Chinua Achebe took a neutral position about English as a medium of African literature, and he believed English could carry his African experience properly, but added that “it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit

its new African surroundings" (Achebe 434). That means African culture represented through English can flourish in African literature according to Achebe. On the other hand, Thiong'o advocated the use of African languages and noted about systematic suppression by European languages, especially English. This paper aims to show how the hegemonic use of European languages created a sense of alienation by dominating literature, culture, and education of colonial and post-colonial Africa from the perspective of *Decolonising the Mind* by Thiong'o. This paper also includes contemporary perspectives of Bangladesh about the use of English in literary, cultural, and educational fields in brief.

Debate Over African Literature

European languages were the language of the colonizers, which created a division between scholars about the definite definition of African literature. Whether it was literature about Africa or about the African experience, whether it should be written by African writers or non-Africans, and what should be the language of African literature, these were some overwhelming questions that were raised. Was African literature in English or other European languages enriching the literature of Africa, or was flourishing the literature of the colonizers? That question is also raised by Thiong'o. Language as a means of physical and spiritual subjugation opened the path for European literature to be at the center which hardly reflected the culture of Africa; some scholars supported the use of the language of the colonizers as a medium of African literature. So, African writers of African languages like "Swahili, Zulu, Yoruba, Arabic, Amharic" (Thiong'o 6), etc. were alienated in their places by the hegemonic use of European languages. Psychologically colonized and docile intellectuals advocated the importance of African literature in English as a medium to express themselves, to explain Africa

to the world, and to express African identity to the world. A question is raised here, was it identity or identity crisis that English language African literature would express? In that situation, there were great writers of African languages. They were quite alienated because of such advocacy of European languages by that docile intellectual class. African literature written in European languages can thus be called Afro-European literature. Though African language writers were alienated both by some groups of foreign and native scholars and audiences, Thiong'o advocated that "African literature can only be written in African languages, that is the languages of the African peasantry and working class" (Thiong'o 27). He expressed his hope that Africans would overcome colonial alienation by harmonizing internal and external worlds with their mother tongues. He emphasized the point that African writers need to express their anti-imperialist views with their language. That is how they can renounce the hegemony of European languages by creating their own identity.

Language And Cultural Hegemony

Dual characteristics of language as "a means of communication" and as "a carrier of culture" have been noted by Thiong'o in this book. He mentions that English, as a tool of communication, is used by British, Swedish, and Danish people. For Swedish and Danish people English is a tool of "communication with non-Scandinavians" (Thiong'o 13). For these people, language is not a carrier of culture and history, for British people English is their carrier of culture too. Non-native languages, both the languages of colonizers and African languages, are used in Africa as a means of communication, but sometimes mother tongues are inseparable as a means of communication and carrier of culture. Then Thiong'o notes three aspects of language as communication: the language of real life, speech, and written signs. Communication between

people, according to him, is “the basis and process of evolving culture” (Thiong'o 14). So, language as a means of communication has a significant impact on the culture of a certain locality. “Mutability, certain patterns, moves, rhythms, habits, attitudes, experiences, and knowledge” (Thiong'o 14) are cultural aspects that are impossible to emerge without communication. These aspects of culture are inherited and reared, and then people keep passing those to further generations, and that is how “internal and external relations” and “ways of life” formulate culture and history. Thiong'o notes, “Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people’s experience in history. Culture is almost indistinguishable from the language that makes possible its genesis, growth, banking, articulation and indeed its transmission from one generation to the next” (15). Then he points out three important aspects of language as culture. He mentions culture as “a product of history” which reflects the communication of human beings in various aspects of creating and controlling wealth. The second aspect he mentions about “language as culture is as an image-forming agent in the mind of a child” (15). He discusses that the whole conception of people is based on those images, and that is how language as a culture mediates between self, others, and nature. Then he adds the third aspect and states that “Culture transmits or imparts those images of the world and reality through the spoken and written language, that is through a specific language” (15). Then Thiong'o argues that colonialists did not only control the wealth of colonized people, they also controlled “the entire realm of the language of real life” (16). Colonial languages had their impacts on the cultures of colonized groups. Thiong'o added, “To control a people’s culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others” (16). Thus, the alienation of native languages by the colonizers and then by some native scholars dispersed the way of the growth and continuation of native

African culture. The hegemony of European languages thus created cultural hegemony too, and alienated native culture in a sense.

Colonial Education And Language Alienation

Another note of alienation created by the imposition of European languages is noted by Thiong'o when he describes the situation of education in colonial schools. He narrates his own story. His mother tongue is Gĩkũyũ which he and his family members use in their daily lives. He noted "the suggestive magical power of language" (11) which was "well beyond the immediate and lexical meaning" (11). Home and field are described as a pre-primary school by him, and the language of home, field, discussion, teach-ins, and the language of the immediate and wider community was one, the mother tongue. Then he narrates his school life which was a colonial school. He describes how the harmony of language and culture was broken there, though his first four years of formal education were in his native tongue. Then, in 1952 the schools which were run by "patriotic nationalists were taken over by the colonial regime" (Thiong'o 11). Formal education was then under the control of the District Education Board led by Englishmen that was how English became the medium of education. The suppression of English was not confined only to education; it deducted the value of other African languages in every aspect of the colonized places. Thiong'o states, "In Kenya, English became more than a language; it was *the* language, and all the others had to bow before it in difference" (11). That means colonizers alienated the languages of native Africans by imposing English in their education system. He also shares a humiliating experience of the education system where speaking in their native languages near school was a punishable offense, and students were physically or mentally punished for speaking their native languages which Thiong'o

mentions as “corporal punishment”, or they were punished with a huge amount of fine which they could hardly afford to pay. The way of catching the culprits for speaking their mother tongue was another way of suppression where children were supposed to pass a button to their fellows whenever they were caught in the offense of speaking their mother tongue. That sort of oppressive strategy created division and those who spoke their mother tongue were somehow alienated by some of their fellows as well as by the power hegemonic of English. Thiong'o notes the influence of English in the education of the colonized place: “English became the measure of intelligence and ability in the arts, the sciences, and all the other branches of learning” (12). The learning process of colonial children is also criticized as it creates emotional alienation for them. Thiong'o states, “Learning, for a colonial child, became a cerebral activity and not an emotionally felt experience” (17). That means the colonial children were not only externally alienated, they were also internally and psychologically alienated. From the perspective of Bangladesh, English as a language is still playing a significant role in our literature, culture, and education. Academic reading of English literature and English as a medium of instruction in the present situation seem popular. Nowadays, English is used as a medium of instruction in most cases at the tertiary level of education, and the interest of people is growing day by day in English medium and English version schools. So, the students who complete their primary, secondary, and higher secondary education from Bangla medium, can face some sort of difficulty and feel a sort of alienation in classrooms at the tertiary level because of their native background. This alienation also creates a cultural boundary where interactions between fellows become limited because of language. It is true that in a world of trade and technological development English works as a global lingua franca, so the importance of English cannot be ignored. On the other side, our mother

tongue as the carrier of our feelings, emotions, and culture is also valuable; and we have a glorious history of sacrificing lives for the language Bangla. So, the importance of the mother language cannot be ignored either.

Conclusion

Thiong'o expresses that it is the duty of African writers to elevate their languages as English, Russian, and other writers did for their own languages. Challenges were there for those English and Russian writers too to create and establish their language as a medium of literature, which later endeavored the acceptability of their languages in other areas of knowledge like "philosophy, science, and technology" (Thiong'o 29). He emphasizes on that point that writing in their own languages was one of the most necessary steps, but to be effective those writings need to contain the impression of unity of the people against the internal and external imperialist suppression. He writes, "Writers in African languages should reconnect themselves to the revolutionary traditions of an organized peasantry and working class in Africa in their struggle to defeat imperialism and create a higher system of democracy and socialism in alliance with all the other peoples of the world" (29-30). Nevertheless, the hegemonic place of European languages over the literature, culture, and education of Africa is echoed by Thiong'o in the chapter "The Language of African Literature", the hegemonic place created division among the scholars, some writers and natives were alienated in their own place by some of their own people and the hegemonic force. Thiong'o again notes the necessity of unity of the multi-lingual diversity to create a link between "the people of Africa and the peoples of Asia, South America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand, Canada, and the U.S.A." (30). Then again expresses his apprehension of the challenge as the "awakened peasantry and working class" (30)

can be considered the biggest threat to the comprador ruling regimes. Writers who try to express their thoughts of unifying and connecting people in their own languages would face many hardships, such as “possibilities of prison, exile or even death” (Thiong'o 30). So, from the above discussion it can be stated that during the colonial and post-colonial periods, African languages were in a state of exile in their own places which created a sense of alienation from the part of many native African scholars and common people.

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