



## Achebe's Innovation in English Language Using African Lexica

**Dr. Bhagavatidevi A. Chudasama**

Government Teacher, Mandvi (Gujarat) E-mail: [bhagavati\\_c@yahoo.com](mailto:bhagavati_c@yahoo.com)

### ABSTRACT

Thinking about language not only from the literary perspective, but as language as a whole, we have to accept that it plays a great role in human life, no matter whether it is in oral or written form. After a historical collapse of the colonial period, the hegemony of English cannot be overlooked in all the fields of life all over the world. However, in the postcolonial period the writers of the independent countries have taken the same language as a challenge for the open protest against the colonialists and to take the wraps off that atrocious past to the world. Chinua Achebe is one of such writers of the postcolonial Africa who has artistically used the colonizer's language and by giving it a touch of his native culture, he has introduced an English language which seems to be his own. The present paper aims to investigate Achebe's innovation with African lexical words in English language under the title, 'Achebe's Innovation in English Language Using African Lexica'.

**Key words:** language, innovation, proverbs, expression, African lexica, English language

### Introduction

Albert Chinualumogu Achebe is a rebellious postcolonial African novelist. He has played a leading role in initiating a movement towards the articulation of a strong counter-hegemonic discourse of resistance and otherness against the racist-colonialists, like Conrad. African fiction in English is actually generated by the intense historical experience of colonization, decolonisation and neo-colonisation. And Achebe's contribution in it surpasses all others.

Language was the initial problem the postcolonial authors faced. Wali, a well known African writer, insists for the use of African languages which can, in his opinion, only produce national literature. He criticizes the postcolonial writer who "parrots Aristotle and the current clichés of the English and American New Critics" (332). He believes that the national literature written in English "lacks any blood and stamina, and has no means of self-enrichment" (332). He raises his voice against the uncritical acceptance of English and French as the inevitable medium for educated African writing. He believes that it does not only misdirect but also deducts chance of advancing African literature and culture. He writes, ". . . until these writers and their Western midwives accept the fact that any true African literature must be written in African languages, they are merely pursuing a dead end, which can only lead to sterility, uncreativity, and frustration" (333). He believes that to think and feel in

native language and then tend to write in English using the translation method is “unwise”, as in such case “the real stuff of literature and the imagination” (333) will be lost. He considers literature,

. . . the exploitation of the possibilities of language. It is the African languages that are in crying need of this kind of development, not the overworked French and English. There is, for instance, a good deal of scholarly work being on the linguistic structure of several African languages, but there is practically no use being made of this work by creative writers, simply because we are all busy fighting over the commonplaces of European literature. (333-334)

Supporting to Wali’s view, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, a well-known writer of Kenya, calls for a return to African languages. In his critical works he has unveiled how colonialism has damaged African literature, education and culture. He suggests other African writers to go back to African languages. However, it sounds unfair when he himself is writing in English. After his declaration that he would write in Gikuyu, he tries his hands at translating his own works in English and earns name and fame immediately. He does not clearly mention that African writers should use their own languages, but he opines that, “writing in our languages. . . will not itself bring about the renaissance in ‘African cultures if that literature does not carry the content of our people’s anti-imperialist struggles to liberate their productive forces from foreign control” (29). He further says, “. . .writers in African languages should reconnect themselves to the revolutionary traditions of an organised 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 other peoples of the world” (29-30). Ngugi forgets to ponder if it would be possible to create such alliance with the world using only African languages. When Wali and Ngugi insist for the use of African languages to produce African literature or National literature, we need to ponder on what Bernth opines.

In her interview Sen asks Bernth if Western readers read a book as an item of curiosity if it is written in English by an African writer. Bernth replies that most of the Western readers have turned to African literature with a genuine openness to judge it on its own terms. Respond to it, favourably or unfavourably, depends on the readers’ own predispositions and background that dictate their ability to understand or appreciate the work. Some might be dismissive saying this is peripheral, marginal. In Bernth’s opinion such people haven’t read the works in the right spirit for the works are exciting enough themselves. He audaciously asserts, “. . . the best work from Africa is comparable to the best work anywhere else in the world” (Sen 17). He further says,

African writers who wrote in English 25 years ago were often accused of addressing themselves to a Western audience and to some extent, they were engaged in a debate with the West about the Western interpretation of Africa and in a sense they were directing a message both at the colonizer and the

colonized. They were trying to reform European ideas about the African experience by using the coloniser's language to express their ideas. (Sen 13)

There are many critics of the third-world literature, who believe that the third world artists often write for the European readers. But Rao opposes such wrong observation by providing an authentic illustration of Achebe's book that, *Things Fall Apart* "had better sales in Nigeria than in the U.S.A. or the U.K. or Europe" (24). Thus, Bernth is quite right that the readers' psyche plays a significant role in the success or failure of the author and his work. Moreover, the postcolonial writings are written for not only one nation, but they are intended to the world market. Hence, English language as a medium is quite an appropriated choice.

Thus, which language should be used by the postcolonial writers is in fact a debating question. However, as the postcolonial literature is an attempt to make the world comprehend how European countries exploited their nations, their lives, their dignity, psyche, culture, tradition, etc., the writes of the decolonized countries have chosen, in spite of many controversies, English as a vehicle. Language is always a powerful weapon for them. Use of English Language is the only option for them if they want to expose the colonialist. The native languages or the regional languages would not do, as they have their own limitations. They are confined to the national or regional territories, while the English as a language has encroached to the territories of all the countries of the world. Moreover, the postcolonial writings are the voice against the English dominated literature and they are an endeavor to seek the place in the global market of literature where they are read, reread and, interpreted and reinterpreted by many and from many angles. There they are like the open books to be explored by the readers. African writers like Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe took it as a challenge and duty, and their works raise the voice against such erroneous notion. They knew that English language would be the only vehicle to open the eyes of the Westerners and to tell them what they are in real. Thus, they employed English language not under any influence, but as a weapon to hit the Westerners with a full blow. That is why Achebe goes against Wali and considers the languages of colonialists "a boon" (Ahmed 26) for Africans. He writes,

There are not many countries in Africa today where you could abolish the language of the erstwhile colonial powers and still retain the facility for mutual communication. Those African writers who have chosen to write in English or French are not unpatriotic smart alecs, with an eye on the main chance outside their countries. They are by-products of the same processes that made the new nation-states of Africa. (English 344)

This is how, like other postcolonial writers using English language as a medium of expression of the thoughts, Achebe, too, gives his voice to a new voice coming out of Africa, speaking of African experience in a world-wide language. He suggests, "The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language so much that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost" (English 347). Such work, eventually, is considered as the national literature or African literature, as though it is written in

English, it represents the Nation in particular and Africa in general. Suppose it is written in any regional language, Hausa, for instance, then it would be considered as an ethnic literature. Achebe sees African literature not as one unit “but as a group of associated units—in fact, as the sum total of all the national and ethnic literatures of Africa” (English 343).

Achebe does not argue on the question whether Africans could write in English, but whether they ought to. He further writes, “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 this language and I intend to use it. . . . For those of us who opt for English, there is much work ahead and much excitement.” (English 348). Achebe says, “the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home, but altered to suit its new African surroundings” (English 349). Kachru also writes that the power of English is so dominant that a new caste of English-using speech fellowships has developed across cultures and languages. It may be relatively small, but it is powerful, and its values and perspectives are not necessarily in harmony with the traditional values (295).

Thus, choice of language was a question and a challenge for the postcolonial writers, as their writings were not limited to their nation, but they were intended for the English speaking classes as well. Two camps can be seen in Africa opposing each other at the use of English language. One belongs to the writers like Wali and his supporters like Ngugi, who insist for the use of African languages and another belongs to the writers like Achebe and his supporters like Wole Soyinka, who using English language give a healthy fight to the European countries who underestimated the dignified culture of Africa. Though Achebe has used English language for his writing, he is not departed from his Igbo culture. His novels in English are nothing but the expression of Igbo culture in particular and African culture in general, and in this way he actually wrangles against the notorious criticism of Africa and Africans by the writers like Conrad. He writes, “I probably have spoken more words in Igbo than English but I have definitely written more words in English than Igbo” (Achebe, *Named* 190). However, the Africanness does not die within him while using the language of the colonizers. Achebe writes that the trouble with African writers is that they will often refuse to live by “rationality” (*Named* 193). Thus, African literature deals with the “conflicts between generations, but it reflects also the new attitude being adopted by the younger generations as a result of the contact with a different culture” (*Madubuike* 141).

Achebe is a revolutionist in his use of English language to produce Nigerian Literature/National Literature. He knows very well that “English has been historically subject to a large variety of uses and has therefore become an efficient tool for conveying cultural complexity, as well as functioning as an interregional language” (*Ashcroft* 39). His writings play enormous and ambiguous role in post-colonial literature. He has used English as paraphernalia to revolt against the very concept of

colonialism. Achebe provokes the reader to think what it is that has conspired to place English in the position of national language in many parts of Africa. Using English language, he boldly gives credit to the British for the creation of Nigeria of present. He writes,

Yet the fact remains that Nigeria was created by the British—for their own ends. Let us give the devil his due: colonialism in Africa disrupted many things, but it did create bit political units where there were small, scattered ones before. Nigeria had hundreds of autonomous communities, [but] Today, it is one country. (English 344)

Thus, Achebe believes that the colonialism brought together many peoples that had previously gone their several ways, and gave them a language with which to talk to one another. “If it failed to give them a song, it at least gave them a tongue for sighing” (English 344). Thus, he looks upon the use of English in a positive way. He does not consider the writers using English unpatriotic. Instead he suggest that even while using a foreign language the African writers must have the dexterity to convey their ideas in the most appealing way that can stimulate the inner sense of the reader and raise empathy to re-thing about Africa and Africans who were subjugated for years by the Europeans. While reading Achebe the reader finds that there is no point of departure from *Africanness* and from the Igbo culture in his use of English language, especially in his most typical Igbo novels, like *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, which deal with the post-colonial issues. At the same time his works are not the translation of Igbo tone, but the transcreation of a new English language. We find “infusion of Igbo cultural patterns into English linguistic structure” (Madubuike 148), however, “Englishness of English” (Barrell 154) is maintained. The ancestral knowledge and the wisdom of Igbo culture can be felt in his expression of Igbo proverbs in English language. For instance:

- “. . . a man who brings home ant-infested faggots should not complain if he is visited by lizards ” (Arrow 61).
- “Whenever you see a toad jumping in broad daylight, then know that something is after its life” (Things 192).

The proverbs, mentioned above, are in the form of warning. The first is an indirect warning of Nwaka to Ezeulu who has sent Oduche to learn the art of the white man, while the second one is in the suggestive tone, that every event has a particular reason and one needs to go to the root why it has happened. Achebe blends the native languages like Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo with the new English. In *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah*, he depicts a class speaking Pidgin English to show the influence of English language on Africans and their gradual move towards it. Khairnar Bharati makes a detailed study of language in Achebe’s novels and concludes that Achebe has so successfully created a new form of English with an African coloration that “his Igbo characters establish their speech as the norms against which the language of the colonialists . . . seems bizarre and unnatural” and “African words and concepts have been rendered into English without losing their flexibility” (170-171). Thus, his works have presented the reader “with an aesthetic that critiques

the European, exclusivist connection of nationalism with language and literature” (Snead 247). Proverbs that Achebe has depicted in his works are not only the examples of his literary creativity, but they are enriched with his prudence as well. For instance,

- “We are like the puppy in the proverb which attempted to answer two calls at once and broke its jaw” (Achebe, Arrow 190).
- “You tied the knot, you should also know how to undo it. You passed the shit that is smelling; you should carry it away” (Achebe, Arrow 145).

Here, in the first proverb, Ogbuefi Ofoka, as a representative of the people, raises the voice against the double standard of Ezeulu. It was Ezeulu who once told them that it was foolish to defy the white man. However, the people went against him and as a result they lost their weapons. So later they stated following him. But now he wants them to challenge the same white man. In this sense Ofoka tells him that they are like that puppy who pays penalty in any way he follows. The next proverb is spoken by Nwaka, again opposing to Ezeulu. As the chief Priest of Ulu, Ezeulu summons the people of his village to tell them that the white man has called him. This actually gives an opportunity to Nwaka to go for an open revolt against him. He reminds the people how Ezeulu had proposed for the friendship with the white man. Now it is his own responsibility to solve his problem with him. Thus, in both the proverbs Achebe’s dexterity of playing with words is noted and along it the reader find how he artistically weaves his Igbo culture enriched with “the native proverbs in English [that] shows how he exploits native elements of speech to give authenticity to the language he employs” (Khairnar 71). In both the proverbs a decent taunting language can be noted. When we scrutinize Achebe’s proverbs we find the ample use of animals, birds, insects etc. For instance:

- “A man who brings ant-ridden faggots into this hut should expect the visit of lizard” (Achebe, Arrow 145).
- “The offspring of a hawk cannot fail to devour chicks” (Achebe, Arrow 129).

At some of the places in the novels, though the thoughts of the characters are expressed in English, they reveal the cultural and social norms of the male dominated Igbo society. For instance:

- “This meeting is for men” (Achebe, Things 25).
- “No, that is a boy’s job” (Achebe, Things 43).
- “Do what you are told, woman” (Achebe, Things 14).

The first expression is uttered by Okonkwo in a kindred meeting for Osugo who has not yet earned any honourable titles like Okonkwo has earned in his Igbo society as a successful man. That is why he insults him considering him a woman in the presence of so many successful men in the meeting. The second expression is also uttered by Okonkwo, but for Ezinma. Nature and behaviour wise Ezinma is like a son. Okonkwo is also fond of her because of her boldness and many times he thinks that she should be his son, but never forgets that she is a daughter. He scolds her when she sits like a son. He would immediately say, “Sit like a woman!” (Achebe, Things 43). Once she asks him if she brings him a chair for him and at this he says that it is a

boy's job. In the last expression the most senior wife of Okonkwo is reminded by her husband that she is a woman and expected to follow her husband's words. Thus, such expressions, though in English, reveal the gender differences and division of work in the Igbo society.

Achebe has combined many single lexical items from Igbo languages to refer the Igbo culture and by doing so he has introduces a new Igbo English to the world. For instance, "What will the heathen say of us when they hear that we receive *osu* into our midst?" (Achebe, Things 148). It is when the reader reads the novel comes to know that *osu* is the word used to refer the people who are outcaste in the Igbo society.

Achebe has also shown the influence of English language on the growing generation of the postcolonial Africa in his novels, like *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of Savannah* by introducing the characters speaking Pidgin English. For instance:

- "If you no come or you come late you de go answer for court, *kabisa*" (Achebe, Anthills 124).

These are the warning words of a police constable to Ikem. This expression in Pidgin English means, 'if you never come or you come late you have to answer in court, finish'. The single lexical word, *kabisa* meanse is a Yoruba word which means 'finish' and 'de go' means 'have to'.

- "'Big man, big palaver', said the one-eyed man", (Achebe, Man 13).

Here the 'Big man' means 'great man' and the single lexical word '*palaver*' means 'great trouble' or 'controversy'. Such use of English language introduces the reader with the semi-literate growing class of postcolonial Nigeria.

Thus, Achebe has used English language to reveal the social and cultural context which introduces the reader with the social festivals, rites, rituals, native religion, practices, their beliefs etc. This is how he has actually introduced a new African English by giving a touch of nativity, of Igbo language. And due to this dexterity of Achebe his expression of thoughts in English does not seem to be a kind of translation of Igbo cultural heritage.

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