

**THE CASE FOR NATIONALISM AND DECOLONISATION  
IN AFRICAN LITERATURE**

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**Abstract**

The modernist perspective on nationalism explores the ideas of how the nation is a synthetic creation reflective of its historical context and decolonization is part of that history in the African context. To this end, this paper explores the nationalist tendencies in African literature with the aim of decolonizing Africa and the Africans; making them to see themselves in their uniquely true African identity. To further buttress on this point, the paper explores the relevance of language use in writing African literature and the debate emanating there-from. It also attempts to define African literature and subsequently her culture and worldview.

**Keywords:** Nationalism, Decolonization, and African Literature

**Introduction**

Nationalism (not to be confused with Patriotism) may be defined as a sense of belonging to and identifying with a nation. But what is a nation? A nation is not the same thing as an ethnic group or a country. Briefly, it is a political and cultural unit, i.e an ‘imaginary community’. A nation consists of people who speak the same language, have the same religion and are bound by a shared history. Most importantly, these people recognize and celebrate these shared characteristics. The ideology has become a significant topic within academic culture in the past two centuries; enquiry into the nature of ‘nation’ and subsequently how its existence affects both global and local cultures has become important. There are three primary schools of thought on what the essence of a nation is: modernist perennialist and primordialist; and an assertion by Anthony D. Smith of an ‘ethnosymbolist’ theory as an alternative answer. In exploring these theories on the nature of what a nation is and how it has come to fruition, there is an opening understanding how both individuals and communities operate. The argument of ancient, natural and organic formation and the eternal spirit of nations in the primordialist school, in opposition to the modernist perspective of imagined communities, synthetically created national cultures and “invented traditions”, is significant in the context of Africa, for until the early twentieth century the African world had no concept of the nation-state like Europeans did. This happened only after colonization and subsequent amalgamation of the different fragmented ethnic groups in Africa into nation-state. African literature however, followed in this historical sequencing.

**Nationalism and Decolonisation in African Literature**

The literature of nationalism and decolonisation sought to articulate a new African identity through the Africanization of the European languages. This was, according to Achebe, using the European language to express the African experience. In his essay, “The African Writer and the English Language”, he draws an example from the poem *Night Rain*, in which J. P. Clark captures the African experience of a young child:

Out of the run of water

That like ants filing out of the wood  
Will scatter and gain possession  
Of the floor.

(pg. 98)

To Achebe, the expression ‘like ants filing out of the wood’ is beautiful because of the imagery used. The use of this imagery brings out the authenticity of an African setting from the way he puts it: ‘Of course, if you have never made fire with faggots, you may miss it’ (pg. 98). His novel, *Things Fall Apart*, foregrounds the use of the English language to capture the African experience from the way he has used imagery. This form of writing has also been adopted by other writers like Wole Soyinka in his plays and also poets like Antonio Jacinto in his poem *I Wanted to Write You a Letter*.

Achebe does not see anything wrong with the use of the English language to express himself. He sees ‘a new voice coming out of African, speaking of African experience in a worldwide language’ (pg. 98). He does agree that an African can learn English well enough to be able to use it effectively in creative writing but he is quick to point out that the African writer cannot use it like a native speaker. This now brings about the question of competency in the use of the foreign languages in expressing the African experience. This incompetence in the use of the English language – which is by no doubt the most spoken language in the world – is clearly depicted by Amos Tutuola who was writing in the English language but could not express himself adequately especially in his novel, *The Palm Wine Drinkard* (1952). But many African writers including Achebe and Taban Lo Liyong have come to his defence with his use of non-standard English prose. Achebe argues that a ‘good instinct has turned his (Tutuola’s) apparent limitation in language into a weapon of great strength’ and he (Achebe) goes ahead to call this incompetent English as ‘a half-strange dialect that serves him (Tutuola) perfectly in the evocation of his bizarre world’ (pg. 101). Taban further espouses this by saying that Tutuola is not *sui generis* and that any grammatical errors can be made by anyone who is using the English language as a medium of expression as long as he or she is not a native speaker.

For Achebe, the justification for his use of the English language was simply because it is a lingua franca i.e. a worldwide language. He gives the example where he visited Shabaan Robert whereby he was given two poetry books by him. But since they were written in the Swahili language, Achebe could not read them until he has to learn Swahili – something which he never did. But to Leopold Sedar Senghor, the use of the French in his writing has made him to be rather lyrical. Unlike Achebe who says that he was given a language and therefore he has no other choice but to use it, Senghor admits the fact that the language has been forced into him and even if he was to opt between using the indigenous languages or French, he would still have chosen the latter. I am sure that Shabaan Robert would have proved him wrong with the lyrical Swahili poetry he has written and therefore in my case, his justification for the use of French language rather than an indigenous one is unfounded. It is a fact that any language can become or be made lyrical depending on the level of creativity of the writers. English might not be such lyrical, but the works of William Shakespeare, William Blake, and William Wordsworth among other poets have made it to be lyrical with their heightened use of the English language. I opine that Senghor could have made the indigenous languages lyrical if only he could have given them a second thought.

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The question that one might be asking at the moment maybe is; what is Africa's lingua franca? Most people regard Swahili, Hausa and Afrikaner among other languages as the original African languages but then, are they spoken in the whole of Africa? Therefore the argument raging among the writers as Samuel Gyasi Obeng and Beverly Hartford (2002: 3) argues out, have failed to take cognizance of 'specific ideological pressures and motivations that have been placed on the shoulders of writers from particular locations.' What Obeng and Hartford are expatiating is the fact that the writers are facing major problems with regard to which language to adopt in their writing. In his essay, 'The Language of African Theatre,' Ngũgĩ argues that the language used for writing of any literary work should be understood by the target audience. But since Africa does not have lingua franca, is the use of English – which is rapidly becoming the African lingua franca – justified? With Africa, unlike the Western countries, being a multilingual space, the choice of the language of authorship signifies the writers' relationship with the people for whom they write and their broad assumptions about nature, meaning and function of language and literature. With the imposition of the colonial language and it being used as the medium of communication in formal education, the African writers are caught up in a linguistic labyrinth.

Ngũgĩ contribution to this language debate is unprecedented and therefore his stance about the debate is very important. However, it is of the essence that some of his arguments be criticised and be problematized in order to underscore the complexity of the debate and the challenges it creates for many African writers. With the issue of hybridity in place, a number of Africans are acquiring these European languages as their first languages and in doing so, numerous African writers continue to write in English or French despite the consequences that this has on the audience of their work as well as their relationship to writing and culture. Chinua Achebe's espousal of the English language looks like a riskier course at first. However, the perspectives through which he defends his stance brings about a certain pragmatic reality which views the dominance of these European languages in written literature as a fact of present day Africa and also as a way of unifying the Africans of different linguistic backgrounds. Apparently, Achebe's stance has its pros and cons and his arguments have some faults but then they (stance and arguments) remain the truer picture of the Africa today. Who knows, maybe they will be able to do (as Achebe puts it) 'unheard of things' – 'the recipe for the long-elusive linguistic-ethnic harmony' (Okafor 2001: 7) in the whole of Africa.

One of the most fascinating characteristics of the literature of advocacy of writing in indigenous languages is its frequent appeal to the adjective African rather to specific language qualifiers, Swahili, Hausa or Afrikaner for example, being promoted. Ngũgĩ (1994) explicitly cautions his readers against the adoption of 'ethnic' categories for the interpretation of the various crises on the continent. It is apparent here that Ngũgĩ does not appear to be agitating only for Gikuyu, his mother tongue, but for all African languages. While other African writers and critics associated with this movement do not necessarily adhere to Ngũgĩ's political agenda, they too conduct their advocacy primarily on behalf of Africa, and secondarily in support of their regional linguistic and ethnic identities. Therefore, Wali's critique does not address the challenge of writing in any one indigenous language distinct from those associated with European literature.

In the case of modern literature from Africa, it is this contested literature in European languages and the debates it has generated that have specifically contributed indigenising the idea of an 'African' literature an anthology of interrelated texts produced by Africans at

different times and in a number of different locations. By the most interesting bit of it is how this modern African literature has grown. Irele (1981: 25) affirms that ‘modern African literature has grown out of the rupture created within our indigenous history and way of life by the colonial experience, which is naturally expressed in the tongue of our former colonial rulers’. Appiah (1992) also shares the same ideology with Irele in which he notes that ‘African literature in the metropolitan languages ... reflects in many subtle ways the encounter between Africa and the West’ (pg. 20). Other than dramatising and reflecting the encounter between Africa and the Europeans, literature in European languages has created a space within which Africanness can be exemplified and elaborated. Therefore, it can be argued that literature in European languages replicated the encounter between the Africans and the Europeans to a greater degree. No critic has ever questioned the Africanness of the indigenous languages and for this reason, the later texts in African languages provided proof of African literature but did not become the centre at which Africanness countering the non-African issue was explicated and defended.

With the exception of Ngũgĩ, it is quite notable that few African authors and critics ever made the transition from writing in European languages as a result of this debate on language. Therefore, the recurrent dialogues about the language of African literature maybe considered one of the most important debates that have delineated the genre of African literature. As result of this, African literature as been defined in binary terms as the confrontation between the Africans themselves and the West. However, it is worth noting that this perspective of Africa’s language dilemmas is not necessarily shared by all African writers and critics, as discussed before, and particularly has less appeal to the ‘modern audiences’ whose cultural dilemmas do not always involve explicit opposition to the West. For the popular culture of this contemporary African, responding to the issue of language imposition is not an essential priority thus making the development of African literature to be closely interwoven with the use of European languages.

### **Conclusion.**

For the purpose of this paper, let it be enough to say that there is a diversity of literature in Africa, in different languages, different forms and different audiences. As far as language is concerned, my primary focus will be on the way in which the likes of Achebe, Soyinka, and Senghor among other writers of the European language expression have experimented and manipulated these foreign languages in their literary works in such a way they express the African culture and experience. I am taking this precedent position because Africa has multiplicity of languages and choosing to write in any of them might limit the audience to one’s literary work. If only Africa could have a lingua franca, then the language debate could be an issue of the past. If Africa has to salvage the situation, then there is a need of the educationists to adopt the African languages as their medium of instructions in schools. With this in place, I am doubtless that we will have more African writers expressing themselves in the African languages. This will help in defining the complete identity of African literature while at the same time upholding and preserving it. Again, it will provide the versatility, diversity and multiplicity of the African languages and consequently serve as a locus for the promotion of the use of them to the regional and international levels.

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