

# Writing Literature in the Mother Tongue: Challenges and Complexities Facing Native Intellectuals

Zakarya Aldukhayil<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of English and Translation, College of Arabic Language and Social Studies, Qassim University, Qassim, Saudi Arabia

Correspondence: Zakarya Aldukhayil, Assitant Professor, Department of English and Translation, College of Arabic Language and Social Studies, Qassim University, Qassim, Saudi Arabia. E-mail: z.aldukhayil@qu.edu.sa

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## Abstract

Indigenous intellectuals have been facing a dilemma when discussing the issue of writing literature since the decolonization of their nations. In Africa, for example, this issue has been discussed since the 1960s until this time. Which language should be used to write African literature? While some intellectuals have proposed using the native language of the writer, other intellectuals have argued for the opposite position: African literature should be written in a European language. This paper examines the chronological evolution of this debate between African intellectuals since 1962. In this complex and lengthy debate about writing in indigenous languages or European languages, Chinua Achebe argues that using a European language unites the diverse components of the nation. On the other hand of this debate, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o argues that the use of European languages instead of an African language in literature is a form of subjugation.

**Keywords:** African literature, culture, domination, identity, indigenous, language

## 1. Introduction

Even though five decades have passed, the debate about writing African literature in European or indigenous African languages is still a discussed topic to this day. The debate over colonizer/colonized language had significantly evolved since its beginnings until recent years. The African Writers conference at Makerere University College held in 1962 generated much of the debate about which language to use in writing African literature. Chinua Achebe argues that English is the national language of Nigeria and adds that it keeps the people united as they can communicate in one language. However, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o believes that the use of European languages in African education is a form of subjugation. His argument stresses that colonial powers attempt to colonize the mind in order to control the culture which carries the tools of self-identification. Wa Thiong'o discusses the role of the native intellectual in Africa and what should be done to reach the people. Since Wa Thiong'o's essay in 1986, many critics have contributed to the debate about this issue. Chronological examinations of the debates between critics since the beginning until 2010 show that none was able to scholarly refute Wa Thiong'o's argument. Critics who have opposed Wa Thiong'o mostly repeated Achebe's point of view which Wa Thiong'o had already disputed in his essay. Other critics used personal attack on Wa Thiong'o in order to discredit his argument. Despite the complexities of this debate, Wa Thiong'o proves that it is the native intellectual's responsibility to write in his/her mother tongue in order to break the lingual hierarchy of the colonizer/colonized languages and to preserve the content of the native language which carries within it the indigenous culture, history and identity.

## 2. Early History of the Debate

Many debates made about the complex issue of which language to write African literature in start with three aspects which are considered as the history and root of the debate. The first element of the debate begins in 1884; the decision to divide the African continent into colonies for western capitalist powers was made in Berlin. Thiong'o (1986) says that Africa's "submergence from self-governing communities into colonies was decided in Berlin; her more recent transition into neocolonies along the same boundaries was negotiated" in the west as well (p. 4). The second element occurs in 1962, which is the conference 'Of African Writers of English Expression' held at Makerere University College, Kampala, Uganda. This most important agenda of the conference was to discuss 'What is African Literature'. This conference quickly ignited a series of responses from African critics and writers, which leads to the third element of the debate in 1963; Obi Wali's critique of the conference in his article "The Dead-End of African Literature" (1997). Wali, the Nigerian critic claimed that: "Perhaps the most important achievement of the conference ... is that African literature as now defined and understood leads nowhere" (p. 13). Wali's Stance was clear: "until these writers and their Western midwives accept the fact that any true African literature must be written in African languages, they would be merely pursuing a dead end, which can only lead to sterility, uncreativity and frustration" (p. 14).

Chinua Achebe promptly writes his essay "English and the African Writer" (1965) to refute the critiques made about writing in a European language. In response to Obi Wali's claim that writing in English leads to a dead end, Achebe argues that to the contrary, he

does not see the sterility Wali mentions, in fact, what he sees “is a new voice coming out of Africa, speaking of African experience in a worldwide language” (p. 60). Achebe bases his argument on the fact that there are two kinds of literatures; national and ethnic. He explains that literature written in the national language of the country is literature which covers audience from the whole nation. However, ethnic literature is available only to one ethnic group in the country. Therefore in the case of Nigeria, he sees that the national literature is the one written in English (1965). In Achebe’s opinion, national literature is more inclusive than ethnic literature.

Achebe believes in living in reality and avoiding a utopian mind of how African literature should be. It seems that he does not want to chase dreams of what a perfect African literature should be like, but to “to look at the reality of present-day Africa” (p. 57). According to him, this reality makes the national literature of Nigeria written in English. It seems fairly true that the present day scene of Nigeria lies in the use of English. Regarding the reality, Achebe continues to argue about the unity of the Nigerian nation created by the colonial powers: “colonialism in Africa disrupted many things, but it did create big political units where there were small, scattered ones before” (p. 57). He asserts that after there were hundreds of autonomous communities in Nigeria, now the Nigerians stand as one nation because of colonialism. The language of the colonial powers gave the Africans what Achebe describes as a means for “mutual communication” (p. 57). To support his claim, he insists that the only reason why Africans “can even talk about African unity is that when [they] get together, [they] have a manageable number of languages to talk in—English, French, Arabic” (p. 57). Moreover, Achebe asserts that most people cannot learn all the Nigerian languages, and therefore one common European language is better as it enables Nigerians to communicate with one another (p. 58).

Finally, Achebe argues that an African writer should write in English in order to occupy and change the meanings of English to reflect the perspective of colonized peoples. He considers it important that African writers do not use English in the same manner as native speakers of English would use the language. According to Achebe,

the African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience. (p. 61)

In this manner, the African writer will be able to occupy the English language and claim it as his/her own version of English. This will not only free African writers from the colonizer’s domination and compulsion to follow any specific guidelines of the English language, but it will allow African writers to control the process of writing in English.

### 3. Discussion

Achebe’s article focuses on how the African writer can use the English language and still be advancing and flourishing African literature. He finally raises the query of whether or not the African writer ought to write in English. Admittedly, he agrees that writing in English rather than the mother tongue brings about a feeling of guilt: “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” (p. 62). English gives African writers a means to communicate with the whole Nigerian nation, and Achebe will not let this uniting opportunity go by without taking advantage of it. Achebe continues, stating that English can carry his African experience, however, this English “will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surrounding” (p. 62).

The last issue which Achebe raises concerning the question of necessity to write in English or an ethnic language is precisely what Thiong’o believes to be a more important question. Thiong’o does not see the question of whether or not the African writer is able to write in English as an important matter to discuss. It does not matter to him if the African writer is able to produce fine literature in English; what matters most is the question of what language should African writers use in literary work. In *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986), Thiong’o writes a chapter about ‘The Language of African Literature’ which appears to be his reply to Achebe and his followers who encourage writing in English. In this essay, Thiong’o tries to show why African writers should not use English to write African literature. From his perspective, language is being used as a form of subjugation. Colonialism came to control the African continent using two methods which completed each other: “the sword and the bullet”, and then followed by “the chalk and the chalkboard” (p. 9). The European colonizers applied physical control of the people using military powers, and their second step, which leads to the complete control of the colonized, is the psychological control using different forms of education. Thiong’o explains that “language was the most important vehicle through which that power fascinated and held the soul prisoner. The bullet was the means of physical subjugation. Language was the means of spiritual subjugation” (p. 9).

Thiong’o’s argument in this essay is based on one important factor; the dual character of language. According to Thiong’o, language “is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture” (p. 13). To understand the consequences of abolishing the native language and “elevating” the English language, one would have to examine at length both language as communication and language as culture. Thiong’o says that language as communication has three elements; first, real life communication and links between people which can be done by hands or facial gestures. The second element is the verbal communication. The third element is written signs (1986). Thiong’o’s most concern is the vital importance of harmony between these three elements (1986). In his own experience, his ethnic language was spoken at home with family and friends, but written signs in reading and writing were in English. The use of English in the third element of communication broke the harmony of language as communication in Thiong’o’s childhood.

This communication, in all or even part of its elements, when practiced in real life between people, it leads to the development of a certain

culture (p. 14). According to Thiong'o, the communication creates many experiences and new knowledge;

those experiences are handed over to the next generation and become their inherited basis for their further actions on nature and on themselves. There is a gradual accumulation of values which in time become almost self-evident truths governing their conception of what is right and what is wrong, good and bad... in their internal and external relations. Over time this becomes a way of life distinguishable from other ways of life. (1986)

People, any people, have a distinct culture and history which they can be identified with. This culture is what makes them unique from others; it is their identity. This identity is formed by the people's values, and as Thiong'o asserts, these values are carried by language (1986). The interrelation of language and culture gets more interesting: "language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history" and language makes it possible for culture to be "transmitted from one generation to the next" (p. 15). With Thiong'o's explanation of the relation between culture and language, we can see how writing in one language or another highly affects culture.

In order to better explore the idea of how language and culture are related, Thiong'o indicates in his essay that there are also three elements to language as culture. First, "culture is a reflection of human beings communicating with one another" (p. 15). Second, "culture as language is an image-forming agent in the mind" (p. 15). The third and final element of language as culture is that "culture transmits or imparts those images of the world and reality through" a specific spoken and written language (p. 15). From these elements, Thiong'o explains that a specific culture is only truly transmitted with the language of that specific community (1986). There are images for certain cultures which can only be accurately carried in the language in which these images were formed to begin with. Thiong'o affirms that a language usually conveys its images of culture by utilizing written and oral literature (1986).

What we learned from Thiong'o's perspective on language as communication and language as culture proves the strong and integrated relationship between the two. Thiong'o strongly believes that language as culture and as communication are actually products of each other (1986). He explains that "communication creates culture: culture is a means of communication" (pp. 15-6). Therefore, we can conclude the following: "language carries culture, and culture carries... the entire body of values by which we" can identify and distinguish ourselves from the rest of the world (p. 16). Hence, the preservation of a certain culture, with all the values it carries, highly depends on the use of its native language to produce oral and written literature.

Before I dive into Thiong'o's argument about culture and the process of mind domination, I would like to invite a quote from Frantz Fanon as an entrée to this section. In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1968), Fanon discusses the deceiving tricks played by the western colonizer to distort the culture and history of the colonial subjects:

colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it. This work of devaluing pre-colonial history takes on a dialectical significance today (p. 169).

Similarly, Thiong'o is convinced that the most important area of domination which the colonizer aspires to achieve is the domination of the natives' minds (1968). Thiong'o claims that once the colonizer gains the control of people's culture, it will be easy to control the subject's "tools of self-definition in relationship to others" (p. 16). And once the tools of self-definition are controlled, the colonizer will also be able to control how the native subjects perceive themselves. For the colonizer, these aspects of control were like killing two birds with one stone. According to Thiong'o, with one process, the colonizer was able to destroy or undervalue the indigenous culture, "art, dance, religions, history...and literature, and the conscious elevation of the language of the colonizer" (p. 16). Thiong'o adds that in order to dominate the mental universe of the indigenous people, it is crucial to dominate their language.

In reply to Achebe's argument which claims that the use of English unites the nation more as he considers it the national language of Nigeria, Thiong'o affirms that this is a false claim. He does not see the use of ethnic languages dividing the nation or even the continent. Thiong'o considers the ethnic languages as a "national heritage of Africa", which if it were not for the peasantry, they would have died the way Latin did (p. 23). According to Thiong'o, "the peasantry saw no contradiction between speaking their own mother-tongues and belonging to a larger national or continental geography" (p. 23). He accuses the petty-bourgeoisie and compradors who spoke the European languages of encouraging divisions between the people of Africa. This argument is a great rebuttal of the claim that English unites the nation which might put forward the idea that ethnic languages divide the nation.

The fact that African writers were distancing themselves from writing in African languages and trying hard to associate with European languages is very upsetting for Thiong'o. He quotes David Diop of Senegal criticizing African writers who abandon their language who argues that because the African writer has been

deprived of the use of his language and cut off from his people, might turn out to be only the representative of a literary trend...of the conquering nation. His works, having become a perfect illustration of the assimilation policy through imagination and style...When [colonialism] can no longer keep its subjects in slavery, transforms them into docile intellectuals patterned after Western literary fashions. (p. 25)

As Diop and Thiong'o see this as a temporary but still necessary step in the evolution in the work of native writers, Fanon characterizes this evolution in three levels or phases. The first phase is what concerns us here as it goes hand in hand with Diop's claim. Fanon traces the evolution of the native intellectual in his book *The Wretched of the Earth*:

In the first phase, the native intellectual gives proof that he has assimilated the culture of the occupying power... His inspiration is European and we can easily link up these works with definite trends in the literature of the mother country. (p. 222)

One of the most important reasons why Thiong'o believes African writers should not use colonial languages is because this detaches the native intellectuals from the peasantry and working class. When intellectuals assimilate to colonial languages, they leave an unfilled gap for the peasantry and working class which will be filled one way or another. If this gap is not filled by the native intellectuals, someone else will come along to fill in this gap. Thiong'o argues that while native African intellectuals isolate themselves from these important components of the African people by writing in colonial languages, the ruling class and European missionaries direct the peasantry and working class by communicating with them in indigenous languages (1986). Thiong'o urges African writers to stop writing in colonial languages and reach to the ones who are in substantial need of intellectual help to challenge and fight false ideologies which are handed down by the ruling class and European missionaries (1986). What Thiong'o hopes for is what Fanon calls the third phase of the evolution of native intellectuals. For Fanon, the ultimate goal is reaching the third phase, which he calls the fighting phase. He says that after the native tried in the previous phase to lose himself with the people and in them, "will on the contrary shake the people. Instead of according the people's lethargy and honored place in his esteem, he turns himself into an awakener of the people; hence comes a fighting literature, revolutionary literature, and a national literature" (P. 222). Thiong'o considers writing in one of the indigenous languages of Africa as a form of struggle against imperialism and at the same time serves as a contribution to restore the harmony between all elements of language (1986). I believe that Thiong'o is searching for a revolutionary literature which represents Africa as a united nation against colonial powers. In this kind of literature, the native intellectuals will reclaim their genuine role as awakeners of their people.

The debate about which language to write African literature in did not stop there; many critics and writers interested in the subject partook in this complex debate in the years to come. In "Language in African Literature: An Aside To Ngũgĩ" (1992), Joseph Mbele argued against Thiong'o's standpoint which encourages to reach the peasantry and working class in their own indigenous languages. Mbele asserts that just because peasantry and working class only know ethnic languages does not mean that they should be left that way. According to Mbele, they should be encouraged to learn a foreign language and not keep them speaking their native languages forever (1992). Moreover, Mbele is critical of Thiong'o's suggestion to use translation from the native language to European languages in order to reach a wider audience because through translation many of the meanings and images are lost (1992). Finally, he adds Thiong'o's "struggle against English appears to be fueled by psychological conflicts, anxieties, and guilt feelings" (p. 150). In my opinion, the only valid argument in Mbele's article is his opinion about loss of meaning through translation. Judgments regarding Thiong'o's motives for the struggle against English and comments about his psychological state seem inappropriate. I have found these aggressive tones used by Thiong'o's opponents to be irritating but unfortunately found within many critical essays until recent years.

In 1993, Anthony Arnove wrote his essay "Pierre Bourdieu, The Sociology of Intellectuals, And The Language of African Literature". This article does not take either side of the problems, but only sheds some light on what the author sees as important issues to consider. Interestingly, Arnove is critical of Achebe's claim that colonialism gave the African people a means of communication with each other. Arnove claims that Achebe does not "address who specifically colonialism gave a means for communication, and who it did not. The conversations Achebe seems to have in mind are precisely those among the colonized elite" (p. 280). He argues that English is not a means of communication between many Africans who can be classified as being among the dominated classes. Arnove insists, "for a majority of Africans, English remains, like other colonial languages, a language of class domination" (p. 280). After Arnove assures in his article that a significant number of Africans do not speak English, Achebe's argument that English is a national language which unites the country seems somewhat feeble to me.

Although Arnove questions the national identity of African countries from a linguistic point of view, Thaddeus Menang claims that there are multiple identity markers to be considered. In "Which Language(S) For African Literature: A Reappraisal" (2001), Menang argues that the complexity of the African identity lies in the linguistic diversity within each country, the many different religions, and the social differences between bourgeoisie and peasantry and working classes. But when these differences are examined, it is realized that some these differences, especially ones dealing with social structure and religion, are an imperialist creation. Interventions of the colonizer produced some of these differences within the African identity. Therefore, when trying to make Africans form one identity in terms of religion, economy, or language, it would be a sense of conforming to an identity structured by imperialism. That being said, there should be no shame in diversity; a pluralistic society makes a more tolerant and creative community.

Moreover, Menang supports Achebe's use of a European language because he believes it can reach a wider audience in and outside the African continent. He adds that there are whole young generations in Africa to whom European languages are the only means of communication and it would be a shame if African writers neglected these generations from their messages. I think that Menang's argument here is valid; it would not be right to neglect the generations of young Africans who only speak European languages, but it is also a shame to leave these generations lose their connection with their authentic African identity. As Thiong'o argued in his essay, a community's specific culture with its values can only be carried in that specific community's language. These young generations which Menang refers to will identify with these adopted European languages and whatever values they carry.

Peter Vakunta, an assistant professor of modern languages at the University of Indianapolis in Indiana, states that writing in indigenous African languages is very important to preserve the "cultural heritage" (p. 76) and "traditional values" (p. 80) of Africa. However, his critical essay "Aporia: Ngugi's Fatalistic Logic On The Position Of Indigenous Languages In African Literature" (2010) takes a rather offensive route discussing Thiong'o's points of view. First of all, setting his example with Cameroon's 200 indigenous languages, Vakunta

takes the same position which Achebe made earlier; that the one African country has many languages and writing in only one of them will deprive the rest from reading (p. 75).

Vakunta implies that it is pointless to write in African languages because we can only get to the text by one of the European languages. In fact, Vakunta believes that Thiong'o contradicts his own argument when he translates his work from his mother tongue to English in order to get a wider readership. Vakunta is critical of the fact that Thiong'o "is so terribly against writing in English, yet we are reading his books in English! Ngugi's stance on language is pretty inflexible, or too inflexible, in this era of globalization" (p. 75). It seems to me that Vakunta does not realize that the original text was not intended for him to read in the first place. Thiong'o had prepared translations especially customized for readers who cannot read Gikuyu. I see that literary works in many languages, even if a large number of readerships was not available, are better than having literature in one language which everyone can understand. If every indigenous writer wrote in his/her native tongue we would have a more diverse and beautiful collection of literary works instead of one form or shape which all literatures can fit into. Additionally, if native writers got to their own people in Africa, eventually the result will be wonderful. First, all Africans would be reached in an African language which has the ability to carry their culture and identity. The second advantage has a process of two effects at the same time: enriching and elevating African literature, and simultaneously undervaluing and decreasing the domination of European languages within the African continent.

Offensively, Vakunta accuses Thiong'o of hypocrisy because "after condemning writing in European languages, he still uses English to educate people about this. *Decolonizing the Mind*, his tool of combat is written in English" (p. 75). Then he continues to ask: "doesn't he see why it is somewhat necessary" to use European languages? To answer Vakunta's question, I say that Thiong'o does not claim anywhere that English is not necessary. Nor does he request that people stop writing and speaking in English. He only argues that a foreign language cannot carry (in literature) the cultural experience of a specific people. To leave European languages aside, not even Swahili can be used as literature to carry the Sudanese experience because Arabic would be more suitable. The same can be said with any language including Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa or other African languages. The situation gets more complicated when using a language of an oppressor. Moreover, concerning writing *Decolonizing the Mind*, Thiong'o specified his reason for the argument as to enrich the native African literature with native African languages, rather than doing the oppressor a favor and enriching their European literature. Therefore, writing theoretical work in English does not enrich English literature, nor does it carry any cultural values.

An aggravating part of Vakunta's essay is when he shifts from criticizing Thiong'o's ideas regarding writing in African languages to criticizing Thiong'o himself. He starts by criticizing Thiong'o for writing *Dreams in a Time of War: A Childhood Memoir* (2010) in English in order to discredit his argument against the use of imperial languages in African literature (p. 75). For fairness, I searched for Thiong'o's justification for writing his memoir in English, but I was unable to find any. However, I do not want to get into the habit of idolizing someone and looking for excuses for their actions or fish for lapses of another I despise. As academics, we should value a legitimate argument and challenge a spurious one regardless of the person who made either one. Therefore, until we learn of Thiong'o's motivation, I think it would have been more effective if Vakunta discussed Thiong'o's ideas, rather than what he does. Even if Thiong'o only writes in English and abandons Gikuyu, his previous ideas and theoretical work are not any less valuable. In terms of this debate, it does not matter if Thiong'o does not or cannot write in his native tongue for one reason or another. Only challenging an argument with another argument would contribute to this important debate.

Continuing the attack on Thiong'o rather than discussing his argument, Vakunta claims that Thiong'o cannot stop himself from writing in English or translating to it and believes "that he is merely resisting the psychological effects of the perplexities that arise from this ambivalence" (p. 76). Vakunta states that he is skeptic of Thiong'o's motivations regarding his argument:

I continue to wonder whether Ngugi truly even believes what he is saying and if so, why is he still writing in English? What are his motivations for circumventing this issue? Outrage, inspiration, or captivating an audience? I believe denouncing Africans who write in European languages (himself included); Ngugi is simply seeking negative attention. Is he trying to draw attention to his works? Hasn't he garnered enough notoriety as a dissent writer? I believe that Ngugi wants to be heard in the dissident tone of voice for which he is already notorious. (p. 78)

I think Vakunta's skepticism is ludicrous and irritating at the same time. The critical opposition to Thiong'o's perspective shifted from a debate about ideas to a debate about personal matters. It seems strange to me that Vakunta has left all what Thiong'o had said about the importance of harmony between the elements of language and the ability of a language to carry culture, and decided to dig into hypothetical motivations. But then I thought about Vakunta's motivation for writing this article and found him stating that "if you want to get reward for your hard labor (writing), you need a wider audience" (p. 77). Speculating into unannounced motivations could easily lead one to say that Vakunta wrote this article to defend his position of writing in European languages. If he is writing in order to receive a reward, then he is not being the intellectual which Africa awaits for. Africa awaits for intellectuals who are willing to put her needs before theirs, willing to sacrifice, and willing to take political and experimental risks for her.

#### 4. Conclusion

The debate about writing in indigenous languages or European languages is a rather complex and lengthy one. Achebe made strong arguments to defend his position of writing in English which according to him unites the Nigerian nation under one tongue. Achebe sees that even though African writers might use European languages, they are still in struggle with the colonizer. Achebe perceives language as a site of battle, and the fact that African writers use English does not mean they are conforming to the colonizer; to the contrary, they are

occupying the colonizer's language in order to change its meanings to reflect the perspective of colonized peoples. In Achebe's view point, it is very important that African writer do not write like a European, but use language in an Africanized way to carry the African experience. Despite the fact that Achebe's argument is valid and convincing, Thiong'o argues that the African experience can only be carried with an African language. He analyzes language as communication and as culture and then examines their elements to search for harmony among them. In his argument, when this harmony between the elements of languages is broken, a colonized child loses the tools of self-identification. This permits the colonizer to take advantage of the situation and step in to control the universe of the mind through control of culture. Unlike Achebe, Thiong'o does not see European languages as national languages of African countries, in fact, he thinks of them as forms of subjugation to dominate how Africans perceive themselves. After thoroughly examining both sides of the argument, I believe that abandoning the language of the native writer is a loss to the indigenous people, their language and culture, as well as an empowerment of the colonizers and their language. Writing in the native tongue is a form of preserving the language, culture, history, and identity of the natives, and therefore becomes a genuine struggle with imperialism.

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