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Politics of language use: A postcolonial study of raja Rao's *Kanthapura* and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract

Language and empires have always gone hand in hand. The impact of language on a culture or community has been immense since time immemorial. So this paper is an attempt to look at the politics of language in literature and also a postcolonial study of Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. *Kanthapura* is a novel by an Indian writer, Raja Rao. He sets his novel in the contemporary Indian society itself. We get a clear depiction of the socio political condition of India in 1938, the year in which the novel was written. While on the other hand, *Things Fall Apart* is a novel by a Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe written in the year 1958. He never refers to the contemporary situation of the Igbo community directly but sets his plot in the time when missionaries were arriving in different small towns of these communities to spread their own religion, Christianity.

Keywords: Language, politics, postcolonial, community, missionary, literature

Introduction

An important landmark in Indian fiction, *Kanthapura* is basically the story of how Gandhian struggle for independence came to one small village in South India. The novel even celebrates the triumph of the human spirit- the shedding of narrow prejudices and of uniting in the common cause of the non-violent resistance to the British Raj. The voice of Achakka, the old woman who narrates the story is still fresh, seventy years after Raja Rao created her. In style and substance the novel is epoch-making. While, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is basically a portrayal of the breaking up of traditional Igbo society during the colonial period. The protagonist of the novel seems to be cold against the white missionaries. Say for instance, Okonkwo criticizes the activities of the missionaries and shows a deep inclination towards his own culture, tradition, rituals and customs. We should also note that, he was man of high stature in his own community whereby he earned his high position by proving his masculinity in a wrestling match as a part of traditional Igbo trails of strength.

Language

Language is the means of communication and vehicle of culture and both share an intricate relationship. When two different cultures are in contact, the linguistic domains of the two respective cultures are bound to be affected in one way or the other. If one of the two languages is the colonizers and the other language belongs to the colonized people, then the chance of the latter being dominated by the former is great. This contact affects the shaping and emerging of culture specific language like 'pidgin'- the colloquial English in Nigeria prevalent among the Ibos and Creole in West Indies.

India was a colony of the British Empire for about two hundred years from 1757 to 1947. While on the other hand, Nigeria was a colony from the year 1906 to 1960. There were lot of similarities in the colonial policies launched by the British during their rule. One of the significant ideas was the introduction of the so called English speaking 'babus' in India. This was almost similar to the creation of a group of educated Africans, who in Nigeria were the 'Ibos'. The policy of the Indirect Rule of the British required a group of people who could speak the native tongue and English well so that communication between colonizer and colonized is smooth for convenient rule. It is also important to know that before the arrival of the English language, scripted languages existed in India but not in every parts of the country.

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The lower classes had no access to any form of scripted language. But the class who learnt English did have access to a documented language. While in Nigeria there was no literary language. It was completely an oral world and the different communities were named after their specific language. Thus English spread uniformly in most parts of the country which led to the development of a culture specific English language due to the contact of cultures. In India the colonizer's language was received and practiced as Queen's English. In India English is associated with 'status' and 'power'. In Nigeria too it is the similar situation

Language in Kanthapura

If we look at *Kanthapura* considering its linguistic aspect we can visualize that Raja Rao to a certain extent has succeeded in his use of Indian flavour keeping in mind that he is writing in a language which is not his own. The novel can basically be regarded as an experiment whereby he tried to evoke a sense of Indian feeling amongst the readers. Never in the text have we got instances of the so called standard British English as it is found in text by other writers of the colonial period. Even the certain norms belonging to the coloniser's language is subverted to a certain extent. The use of language in *Kanthapura* gives an insight that any Indian text written by an Indian writer should be supposedly 'Indian'. The language in the novel showcases as to how Indians used the English language in their speech patterns. Also it is noteworthy, that the general syntactic structure or order of SVO is being used as it is used in other Indian languages. Generally, in Standard English proper nouns appear at the beginning of any sentence. But in the novel we observe that Rao breaks the syntax of the Standard English language and forms his own by using the proper nouns in the middle of the sentence or at the end, for instance,

- a. "She was a pious old woman, Narasamma, tall and thin", (Rao, 39)
- b. "She has never failed us, I assure you, our Kenchamma"(Rao, 65),
- c. "From that day on they never spoke to each other, Narasamma and Moorthy"(Rao 48).

For any native English speaker it might feel strange, but for an Indian it sounds absolutely normal.

Raja Rao has also used many Indian phrases and proverbs in the novel to give it a quintessential Indian flavour:

- a. "Every squirrel has his day." (Rao, 77)
- b. "The policemen are not your uncle's sons." (Rao,162)
- c. "If you are the sons of your father." (Rao, 52)
- d. "We are the lickens of your feet." (Rao, 52)
- e. "You cannot straighten a dog's tail." (Rao, 140)
- f. "With his week's earning at his waists." (Rao, 140)

Moreover, the influence of his mother-tongue, Kannad is greatly seen in *Kanthapura*. His description of the village is typically Kannad: "High on the Ghats is it, high up the steep mountains that face the cool Arabian seas, up the Malabar coast is it." (Kanthapura 1) "Defend one must against evil."(Kanthapura 86)

Raja Rao's decolonization of English language gets an artistic manifestation in his use of Indian flavoured abuses in the novel. Venkama abuses her sister-in-law in a typical Indian style:

"If her parents are poor, let them set fire to their dhoti and sari and die. Oh, if only I could have had the courage to put lizard-poison into their food." (Kanthapura 10)

Typical Indian abuses have also been used in the following statements:

- a. "Then there is such a battle of oaths – 'son of concubine' – 'son of a widow' " (Kanthapura 59)
- b. "I'll sleep with your wife," "You donkey's husband." (Kanthapura 59)
- c. "Oh, you prostitute of a wind," "She is showing her tricks again," "Stop, you bitch." (Kanthapura 17)

Language in things fall apart

There has a debate over the use of language in Africa. Ngugi argues that writing in African languages is a necessary step toward cultural identity and independence from centuries of European exploitation.

Chinua Achebe's decision to write in English while keeping in mind his own native language Igbo as well as traditions is worth appreciation. This decision of his displays his strong will and determination whereby he wrote his very first novel in English, *Things Fall Apart*. His primary aim was to subvert the old prevailing notions of the Africans. He stated in reference to *A Man of the People* "I wanted the novel to be a denunciation of the kind of independence we were experiencing in postcolonial Nigeria and many other countries in the 1960s, and I intended it to scare my countrymen into good behaviour with a frightening cautionary tale". (Achebe 43). His writings mainly aim at guiding and moulding his countrymen to think before they allow themselves to sink into general stupidity.

Language always holds an important place in the Igbo community. It is because language gives them a sense of belongingness to preserve their own culture and heritage. Though language is important for them, it ultimately leads to the fall of their society. Igbo is a society that is very sceptical about change. They even refuse to send their children to school as English was the medium of instruction. Despite Mr Brown's efforts to educate the young children, the villagers still remain reluctant and refused to send them to schools.

The distinctive African style of narrative that the narrator used to detail the food and religion of the Igbo community and its tradition further confirms his native status. The details about yam food as being the chief food in celebrations allow the readers to envisage a realistic African ritual: yam foo-foo and vegetable soup was the chief food in the celebration. So much of it was cooked that, no matter how heavily the family ate or how many friends and relations they invited from neighbouring villages, there was always a huge quantity of food left over at the end of the day. The story was always told of a wealthy man who set before his guests a mound of foo-foo so high that those who sat on one side could not see what was happening on the other, and it was not until late in the evening that one of them saw for the first time his in-law who had arrived during the course of the meal and had fallen to on the opposite side. (Achebe 23)

The Africans praise for words, metaphor and figurative language is reflected in this passage. Oral traditions are distinctive tribal characteristics through which the history of the tribe is passed down the generations. In this passage,

Achebe captures the importance of the oral tradition in the Igbo society. The narrator is the mouthpiece of the author who speaks as a wise sage would speak to his young pupils and teaching them of the significance of food and relationships within the community.

With the use of the English language, Achebe to a certain extent is successful in depicting the life of Okonkwo who from the very beginning of the novel is a famous young man amongst the nine villages of Umuofia. However, as the novel develops and white missionaries starts arriving in Umuofia along with their government and institutions. The protagonist of the novel Okonkwo who tries to protest the change is at the end buried without any respect or dignity. Even his fame is soon forgotten as he committed the sin of suicide.

Moreover, Achebe's has also used a different method to explain the colloquial terms. In many instances he has placed the terms in such a manner so that the reader understands the meaning from the statement itself. Say for instance, "He played on *ogene*" (Achebe 2003, p. 6). This clearly conveys that it is a musical instrument. At times, the terms are explained in the following fashion "*Chi* or personal god" (Achebe 2003, p.25). In the context of '*Chi*' Achebe makes us aware of an interesting fact, which goes against the above mentioned definition of 'tribe'. In the Igbo community each person has got a different religious belief because they believe that since every person is different from the other so the personal god '*Chi*' is different from person to person. Sometimes, he has not felt the need to explain the terms like the address *Umofia Kwenu* (Achebe 2003, p.10) and the answer of the audience *yaa* (Achebe 2003, p. 10).

Even Igbo vocabulary is also merged in the text so that the reader understands the meaning of most Igbo words according to their context. Say for example the concepts represented by *chi*, *egwugwu*, *ogbanje* and *obi* so on. The Igbo terms like *chi* and *ogbanje* are essentially untranslatable, but by using them in the context of his story the writer gives a glimpse of the complex Igbo culture.

Postcolonialism

"Postcolonial as we define it does not mean post-independence or 'after colonialism' for this would be to falsely ascribe an end to the colonial process. Post-colonialism, rather, begins from the very first moment of the colonial contact. It is the discourse of oppositionality which colonization brings into being." (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 117). Post colonialism is the theoretical wing of Postcoloniality. It refers to a mode of reading, political analysis, and cultural resistance or intervention that deals with history of colonialism and present neo-colonial structures. Post colonialism, in sharp contrast to colonial approaches, pays attention to the differences among the native peoples. Post colonialism seeks to understand how oppression, resistance and adaptation occurred during colonial rule.

Postcolonial literature mainly explores the role of language in the process of colonisation. The main arena of Postcolonialism's study of language in colonialism includes-

- The domination of native languages by European languages
- The hybridization of both languages and
- The politics of language, literature and translation.

Kanthapura as a post colonial text

First and foremost it is important to note that, *Kanthapura* is a novel which is written during the colonial period but can be viewed as a postcolonial text due to its various aspects. Considering *Kanthapura* as a postcolonial text it can be said so as Rao in the text very fairly deconstructs the pre-constructed myth of the power of the foreign ruler. He also uses resistance as an enabling strategy and examines in detail the meaning and practice of *ahimsa* and *satyagrahas*. *Kanthapura* also portrays as to how two different cultures assimilate and also depicts as to how while countering the imposing culture the weaker one redefines and reinterprets its tradition while it seeks its identity.

The aspect of Indianization of the novel, *Kanthapura* makes it a postcolonial novel. Also when it comes to Raja Rao, the decolonization of the English language is worth mentioning. According to Rao, English is never an alien language but is the language of "our intellectual makeup like Sanskrit and Persian was before but not of our emotional makeup... We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which someday proves to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American. Time alone will justify it."

Kanthapura can even be regarded as an experimentation which is rich with Indian sensibility and flavour. He even employs various literary techniques like Indian imagery, metaphors, phrases as well as proverbs to evoke a sense of Indianess among the readers. Coming to style, the novel is a written in a very enchanting style. It is basically the story of a small village of South India caught up in the whirlpool of the independence movement under Gandhian principles and ideals of 1930. The novel also foreshadows several important historical accounts of the time it was written. Say for instance the struggle for freedom, Gandhi's role during the Civil Disobedience movement and ultimately resulting in Gandhi- Irwin Pact of 1931, followed by Government Act of 1935, so on and so forth. *Kanthapura* even portrays the scenario of rural India whereby the commoners were oppressed and considered marginalized. Mahatma Gandhi even mobilized them to realize their strength and instigated them to fight for freedom of the country. The post colonial text also focuses as to how two different cultures intertwine and mingle to a form their own identity. Rao to a certain extent tries to resist against the foreign ruler and in a way tries to deconstruct the prevalent myth, which can be viewed as the beginning of the so called decolonisation.

The Gandhian principles and ideal in *Kanthapura* is embodied in the character of Moorthy. He fights against the orthodox ideologies against the British at both the social as well as the political sphere. Moreover, there is a sense of identity crisis whereby there is a deep postcolonial inclination to go back to one's root. The role of Moorthy in exploring the importance of religion for shaping the people's mind is worth noting. The caste ridden society was greatly engaged in the observance of religious rituals like Kartik Purnima, Sankara Purnima, Dusshera, Ganesh Jayanti, so on and so forth. But Moorthy never supported or encouraged the hierarchical distinctions. It is noteworthy that inspite of the Swami's threat of excommunication he went to the pariah quarters.

Things fall apart as a post colonial text

Nigeria was a colony of the British once upon a time. The British imposed their culture upon the innocent people whereby they tried to convert the people into Christianity. As a consequence the Igbo community was duly threatened. Nigerian writer, Achebe took the courage to write in a language which was not his own in order to educate his fellowmen who were most uneducated. So, his text *Things Fall Apart* can be regarded as his contribution in the field of postcolonial literature. As a postcolonial text the novel draws a clear demarcation line between the colonizer and the colonized. Even the text to a certain extent can be regarded as a response to the traumatic events of the Western colonialist rule. Achebe even portrays a clear picture of the Igbo society before the arrival of the white missionaries. He even encouraged his fellowmen to take advantage of the education imparted by the missionaries so that they could imply it in their lives.

Achebe can be praised for his strong will and determination to take African literature to great heights so that he can prove its worth along with other European form of literature. In the novel he depicted the perfections as well as imperfections of the Igbo community which largely differ them from any other culture. For instance, he brought in concepts regarding their beliefs of ancestral Gods, the killing of twins, oppression of women and even sacrifices of young infants, so on and so forth. No doubt the arrival of the missionaries was beneficial for the Igbos but their ill impacts cannot be overlooked at any cost. They even faced numerous challenges and threat.

Similarities

Now after analysing both the novels we can trace the similarities. When it comes to language, the impact of colonial cultural policies can be observed in both the texts written by people of belonging to two very different languages.

First of all, both the non- English writers wrote the novels in English. Raja Rao and Chinua Achebe's are using the English language which is alien to the cultures and communities they are talking about. In both the novels we get instances of a lot of local vocabulary which is used to retain the original flavour of the communities. Raja Rao, one of the first generation of Indian novelists in English, in a much quoted formulation expressed the linguistic and narrative anxiety of the post colonial writer:

"One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word 'alien', yet English is not really an alien language to us... Our method of expression therefore has to be dialectic which will someday prove to be as distinctive and colourful to the Irish or the American". (1963: vii)

Even Achebe states, "I think it is part of my business as a writer to teach that boy that there is nothing disgraceful about the African weather..." That is the reason why in his work he portrays the actual lifestyle and social system of the Igbo community. His primary aim is to break the so called pre-constructed norms and ideas about his community. He wants to depict the truth exactly as it is. Moreover, he was never in favour of 'art for art sake', but he believes that art might have a purpose or aim. Say for instance according to the Oxford pocket dictionary, the word 'tribe' means

"...group of families or communities linked by social, religious or blood ties usually having a common culture and dialect and a recognizable leader." Regarding this he clarifies that people of Igbo community are not primitive.

Also it is noteworthy that most of the African languages lack in script. So the imposition of the colonizer's language was much easier. Moreover, it was easy for them to convince the colonized that anything other than the written documents. Thus it was easy for them to convince the colonized that anything other than the written document is not authentic. The colonizer taught the colonized to negate the orality. In Africa most of it was the imposition of the foreign language. While in India most of the languages have got their own script rather than written documents. So it was not easy for the colonizer to impose its language completely on the existing Indian languages.

Conclusion

English, the language of the colonizer to a great extent is regarded as the language of the so called elites. When it comes to politics of language, it focuses not on the power of the language, but mainly stresses on the power behind the language.

After a close analysis of both the novels we see some permanent impacts of the respective communities due to colonization, discussed in both the novels respectively-

The novel *Kanthapura* can be linked to the postcolonial period though it belongs to the colonial period. In fact, this is where the novel appears more appealing to us. Even its modern approach links it to the post modern counterparts. The narrative of the text is a beautiful assimilation of fiction and reality. The smouldering boredom and horror shaking the people of *Kanthapura* are depicted for giving us a visual picture of the surrounding which is followed by worthwhile activity through the encounters of men and women. Gandhian philosophy which is a process of decolonization is presented through the ironic, confessional and objective mode. The delightful dimension is added through the idealistic character of Moorthy. Moreover the colonial transformation has been depicted so faithfully in *Kanthapura* linking the colonial with the postcolonial.

On the other hand, in *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe through the protagonist Okonkwo is trying to save his position in the society. Okonkwo is a person who has spent his life making and retaining a respectable position in his society. All his activities from the wrestling match to the killing of Ikemefuna are nothing but steps towards his establishment of himself as a respectable "man" in his society. Thus, for Okonkwo his society was the freedom loving and brave. It has demolished every power, which has shown the audacity to come into its way or has tried to capture it. But when the same society gave up to the white man, Okonkwo could not tolerate. So he fought against the foreign occupants till the end of his life as a representative of the freedom loving and brave society he knew.

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