

Hegemony through language in the post colonial Africa

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Abstract

Hegemony is a central question in determining one's recognition in a society. In the current political scenario language is no longer a communication medium. It now becomes a tool to establish hegemony. The politics behind it is, one group needs to enjoy superiority by deliberately denigrating other. The politics of language is relevant today because in the Post Colonial world certain vernacular languages of the colonized especially in the African continent began to decline and new languages, creoles, began to emerge. When one follows the so called hegemonic language, he or she is recognized. Hence, hegemony is established in the form of language. Further native people of the colonized regions are made to believe that they are primitive and if they want to be civilized, they should follow the European manners. European Language and Literature misrepresent the people of colonized world and their traditional customs and practices. All these contributed to the imitation of the European languages and their cultures and the decline of native language and culture.

Key words: Hegemony, colonialism, creoles, racism, universalism, cultural bomb.

Introduction

When we go through the history of mankind we can see hegemony playing a crucial role in determining its way of life. How hegemonic power emerged and maintained in societies is a question to be debated. We believe that by birth one is given the status of elite while others are getting marginalized. As the social hierarchy is determined by birth one does not have a choice in it and hence it becomes an established system. This racial superiority/inferiority becomes the yardstick in measuring the greatness and success of a person.

During the course of time, language also becomes a criterion for establishing hegemony. Though all languages are meant for communication purpose certain particular languages enjoy privileged status. Social birth, language, colour and geography turned to be the criteria for evaluating greatness and success of people; thereby they are being marketed in establishing status.

At the present context, it is particular languages that play the politics of hegemony. Whose language one should use to get recognition? In the modern era certain languages are labeled as uncivilized which primarily comprised of languages of colonized and semi colonized world. Consequently colonial languages emerged as the language of privileged. It is also propagated that great ideas and thoughts can only be expressed through European languages especially

English. Those in the colonized world who spoke English began to be treated as gentle or refined among the aborigines.

With the establishment of colonial administration this language criteria is used to distinguish the colonized people in the African continent. In order to carry out the colonial administration colonizers made the colonized believe that civilization is possible only through colonization through which colonizers could effectively sell their authority which one should not question. As a result many people began to imitate the styles of colonizers especially their language.

As part of this plan colonial schools were established and native people were discouraged to speak their mother tongue. Colonial languages were imposed and students were humiliated for expressing things in their native language. One of the demerits of this education system is that native students were taught to become European instead of becoming African. Achimota college, Fourgh Bay College in Sierra Leone, Makerere College in Uganda, and Lovedale in the Eastern cape of South Africa are some among them where the European text books were used. Students, as a result, were unaware of their local stories, mythologies, customs and the history of their countries.

A lot of deliberate attempts were made to make a distinction between East/West, black/white, rational/irrational and so on in colonial Africa and the native people were made to believe that this distinction was natural. Further, they were made to feel ashamed of their birth in such a barren region, the color of their skin and their odd customs. All their customs and practices were termed as rude and savage. The imitation of European ways and manners started from this inferior thought. When the seeds of inferiority were planted, it brought great damage to native languages, and the denigration of traditional culture.

The result of the colonial schools was the loss of identity of indigenous people who were neither native nor non-native. In place of mother tongues, creoles took the place. Moreover many erroneous beliefs spread among the people that there was no system of education in the continent before the advent of the Europeans. The thought of being an African is inferior was really annoyed them.

Educational activities as part of evangelical mission started in Africa in the late 15th century. However, missionaries could not establish Christianity as a religion in the continent. Though they failed in the attempt to convert Africans to Christianity, they did not give it up and the centuries' old effort was successful to an extend towards the close of the 18th century. Many evangelicals dedicated themselves for the act of converting as well as 'civilizing' the so called 'primitive', 'cannibalistic' races. By all means, the European hegemony in the form of education, language, religion and culture was established systematically and the "Others" got tactically

moulded in the European fern. It provided an ideological base for the European conquest of Africa.

English Language, a tool for establishing hegemony

It is popularly believed that English language is the most courteous language in the world. It is the language of gentlemen. This erroneous belief works out in some of colonized people. Each language has its own pronunciation, syllables and grammatical structure. One language is differentiated from the other and certain languages carry more vocabulary than the others. While some languages are complex in nature to be expressed, some can easily be spoken. Their structure is varied. This difference is a fact and not a weakness. Yet many believe that the English language is the only perfect language in matters of vocabulary, pronunciation, structure and literary expressions. When a non-native speaker of English, especially an African origin, speaks it the difference can easily be pointed out and he feels himself degraded for not pronouncing it properly. Consequently, he blindly imitates the English style. He feels perfect and elevated when he is able to speak like an English man. This is common in some of the British colonies in the African continent.

Another important factor that contributed to the greatness of English language was the fame Britain had as ‘the Empire on which the sun never sets’ and the popularity and acceptance of English literature. The concept of ‘Universalism’ was worked out through English literature. By universalism it means, reality is similar everywhere in the world irrespective of regions and cultural boundaries. It didn’t consider social, cultural, political and ethnic differences. Though difference is a fact the English literature generalizes reality. As a result ‘the Dark Continent’ was misrepresented and misinterpreted through literature and it became a place ‘not to be lived’. While colonialism in oppressive manner was successfully carried out, a bad image of Africa was spread across the world. What we can see on the one hand is the flourishing of the Colonial Empire and on the other hand ‘primitive’ and ‘uncivilized’ activities of the race continued to be spread through literary works. It is from this context many Black writers began to follow the English language to get a universal recognition. Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Wole Soyinka, Ama Ata Aidoo are some among them. Ngugi later bade farewell to English language as well as the European manners. Though colonial regime came to an end, the same system continued even without the white man’s presence.

How it can be countered.

Achebe in his “image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s Heart of darkness” effectively counters many of racial prejudices against Africa. ‘The Dark Continent’ was always misrepresented and the native people were termed as ‘Others’. The European hegemonic construction was done in such a way where there always exists a binary for their domination. The native students were

taught that the continental history started with the advent of white man. Achebe here held that many of these racial prejudices must be questioned: "ignorance might be a more likely reason; but here again I believe that something more willful than a mere lack of information was at work". This ignorance about the colonized regions was the contributions of the European Universalism.

The depth of indignity is that, Achebe observes, the work of the racist Joseph Conrad, who is masquerading as a novelist, entitled *Heart of Darkness* is numbered as among the half-dozen greatest short novels in the English language. The way Conrad introduced the European's Thames River and the Africa's the Congo River in the work further sharpens the prejudice that forms a bad image about the region. 'A whirl of black limbs', 'the prehistoric man' the racist continues to ridicule not only the native people but the wild landscape; 'the earth seemed unearthly'. Of course, they are ugly in the eyes of a self proclaimed civilized Conrad:"Fine fellows-cannibals-in their place".

Racial discrimination retains throughout the novel where Achebe observes Conrad's bestowal of human expression and the withholding of it from the other. The prejudicial author's agenda is not to confer the merits of language on the 'uncivilized' Africans: "Language is too grand for these chaps; let's give them dialects". However, the same author on other occasion deliberately makes them speak the same English language in order to show his readers that they are cannibals:"Catch'im"..."Eat'im!" Achebe clearly exposed the double standard of the Europeans whose historical and literary works misrepresent the whole race of Africa. Language here becomes a tool to demonstrate the dichotomy between civilized/uncivilized, European/non European, white/black, colonizer/colonized etc. When one is get privileged the other is marginalized.

Ngugi wa Thiongo, the Kenyan writer also reacted sharply against the colonial system on similar ground. His book "Decolonising the Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature" is a farewell to English language which examines the role of language in combatting colonialism. When Ngugi faced a dilemma whether one should use native mother tongue or the so called hegemonic language as linguistic medium to engage in combat against colonialism, he offered the resolution in the book.

Enmity between two groups is usual and it happens everywhere, but when it comes to the African context it is termed as the enmity between tribes. Western media and literature have exaggerated this enmity, thereby creating a fake reality about the continent. While imperialism made use of intellectuals, academicians, and journalists to get a momentum, the only way to defend it was through native, traditional cultural ways, Ngugi believes. As there is a chance to combat imperialist agenda these forces propagate the idea that the colonized did not have a

history of their own, nor language, unity and civilization. What existed before the advent of the Europeans was only a wasteland, what we achieved today is the contribution and generosity of their ‘civilizing mission’. This unquestionable belief in the European’s hegemonic tradition is what Ngugi termed as ‘the cultural bomb’ which continues to wipe out African identities and their histories from their minds. Ngugi observes that the native people began to believe that ‘Theft is holy’, thereby colonialism is justified.

Those who imitate or follow the Western languages and their styles began to get attention. Consequently native tradition and language got annihilated. If you want to be noticed, be a European in all ways, otherwise you may be ignored. “A Conference of African Writers of English Expression” held at Makerere University discussed only the subject matter and themes of the works of the writers who attended it, never had it focused on the criteria and nature of the African literature.

Being a European becomes an asset and that can be marketed everywhere especially in academic spheres. The inferior feeling as an African made the native people embrace the European ways. The English language becomes official in literary, media and academic circles. Even a great writer like Chinua Achebe expresses his helplessness: “But for me there is no other choice. I have been given the language (the English) and I intend to use it”. A language can influence and make changes in the attitude of a person and people are made to believe so. Hence the European colonial agenda is deeply imprinted the minds of the people.

The colonial education in the continent is designed to make the native students pursue the Western culture. Therefore many intellectuals in the region believed that through the English language the English culture could also be assimilated. As many of them were infatuated by the white man’s culture they believed that the hegemonic status could be achieved when one used the colonial language. The role of ‘cultural bomb’ is obvious here. Unaware of a nation’s past and glory the new English users write and learn in the European ways. Consequently ‘a fake reality’ is formed through the language among the native students and they looked at the world in this distorted way. However these people are unable to realize the fact that they are given a subordinate status as English users. This is called the politics of language. A black is always a black even if he is educated in the Europe. When comparing a European with a non-European, the former doesn’t want to prove his merits because his geographical background and the white color are an advantage. On the other hand the latter has to take strenuous effort to prove that he is equally talented. This dichotomy exists even in academic circles.

Conclusion

Language in the colonial context ceases to exist for communication purpose; it now becomes a tool for cultural identity. The non-English speaking communities are under the impression that

they are inferior. In fact, it is not an impression, it is a reality. This is manifested in the treatment of Robinson Crusoe to Friday, two characters in the novel *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719). The character was given the name as Friday by the protagonist Robinson Crusoe and asked the former to call the latter ‘master’, the 18th century novel tells us the politics of language. This game is not a recent one, or happened accidentally, but a well planned one.

The language of Caliban, a character from *The Tempest* written by William Shakespeare, who uses English language for communication, is not an inherited one. Caliban was taught to speak English and to be obedient and submissive before his new master Prospero, who conquered the former’s island. Caliban was not civilized even after he was taught to speak the Master’s language, because of his state of being a slave. The language here is used to show the rank of superior/inferior and no other technique except the language can effectively work out. When he was continuously humiliated, Caliban in a fit of anger shrieks out: “You taught me language; and my profit on’t is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you for teach me your language”.

Of course, the master’s language one should use to strike back for the centuries’ old humiliation. It can be an effective weapon which many post colonial thinkers realize today. Both Friday and Caliban are not mere characters, rather they are constructed for the existence of the masters. Even in the 21st century many people from the post colonized world still carry the relics of colonialism that is the master/slave relation continues to exist. A master can enjoy mastership only at the cost of slaves.

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