

BABELIAN REFLECTIONS IN CRITICAL TRANQUILLITY

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Abstract

This essay examines a literary, sociolinguistic condition of Africa in a reflective telescopic view that pans cultural experiences in temporal phases which are represented by tropes of the biblical Babel. Pre-Babel and Post-Babel are linguistic indices of speculation on either side of Babel in a notional Babelian linguistic continuum inhabited by experience that is in a state of flux. The discussion is speculative but based on observable findings indicating an emerging community that seems headed for a linguistic spot where it transforms into a polity without a language as languages go. English has grown on the back of literature, colonialism and technology to occupy the world stage as a global language; but the computer has proved noxious to the acquisition of language and communicational skills in newer generations of language users and has had a deleterious effect on a book reading and writing culture. Indigenous African languages are caught in a similar postmodern web but seem more threatened than English because of official nonchalance. African languages have been vulnerable since colonialism but newly emergent policymakers appear mostly unwilling to address and attempt to redress the situation. This essay contends that urgent deliberate drastic official pragmatic intervention is required to arrest and reverse the unsettling trend.

Keywords: Babel, tropes, linguistic, literary, postmodern

1. Preamble

An essay topic can serve as only a peg on which to hang a swirling piece of meditative discourse in a postmodern age of theory which scholars have come to recognise as an age of “thinking about thinking”. But twenty-six centuries or so of literary theory and criticism also encourages an avoidance of presumptions. It will be presumptuous to assume, in starting, a semantic innocence of signifiers. What follows here initially is an attempt to unpack the label. Postmodernist disdain for meaning and meaningfulness notwithstanding, it behoves this particular attempt at discursive pensiveness to try to sift through a semiotic maze of suggestions waked by some of the signifiers which have pressed themselves into play in the topic of this essay. That there might be an essay at all is in itself a problematical proposition. What there might be should seem to be closer in character to “thinking aloud” on reflection than to the rigid fare and regular register of dissertationese. “Reflections” and “tranquillity” in the above label come in with a rusty semantic baggage going back to the Wordsworthian/Coleridgean era of Romantic solitude –

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which condition famously gives out as a catalyst for the creative impulse. “Babelian” – a qualifier that derives from Babel – presents morphologically, bedecked with connotative and denotative embroidery, dulled, but spiteful of whether or not semantic embroidery is a web of discursive materials that cohere or inhere systemically. The biblical tower, as a trope, is virtually hackneyed in creative, critical, and much other discourse, apart, perhaps, from journalese which does not have much patience for morphological embellishment. There is an insightful study by Ali A. Mazrui and Alamin M. Mazrui with the telling title: *The Power of Babel*. Still, Russian Formalism posits it is possible to free such morphemes as “Babel” of their automatic braces: clichéd items may be defamiliarized with profit and pressed into fresh connotative and denotative semantic servitude.

God split the language of the Tower of Babel for a purpose: to disperse the crowd and get the same to broaden its perspective: “There are, it may be, so many kinds of languages in the world, and none of them is without significance” (1 Corinthians 14:10). The infallibility of divine adjudication is unassailable. This theoretical “discussion” reflects on the saga of language since Babel.

2. Pre-, Post-, Babelian Space

The idea of space features prominently in literary theory and criticism, from Plato to Michel Foucault. The Foucauldian heterotopology separates between heterotopia and utopia, none of which tropes represents a fixed, unchanging universe, but are changeable, frequently changing “fixtures” of cultural, economic, socio-political sites of power in binary combinations such as self/other, male/female, centre/margin, black/white, metropolis/periphery. In the present reflections, Pre-Babel, Babel, and Post-Babel serve as chronological and spatial discursive counters. Pre-Babel is prelinguistic and utopian from a cultural standpoint; it is a label for space inhabited by linguistic innocence: a pristine condition where sat “sense” without “sound”. In Saussurean linguistics the jumble of sense data of Pre-Babel was unrealised and unrealisable until the appearance of sound: language cut up the jumble of reality into signifying sense data (signified, concept) in a complex tangle of relationships (differential, oppositional) with sound items (signifiers, signs) having a smallish spinning core/vortex of langue (rules/grammar) and a swelling infinitude of parole (utterance) which the eminent scholar Noam Chomsky reconceptualises/modifies into competence (rules, conventions of language imbibed by native speakers without formal education) and performance (actual utterance of specific sentences).

Babel is a site of fragmentation: linguistic and cultural harmonies and unities giving way to cultural and linguistic disharmonies and disunities. The sundering of language has yielded bizarre linguistic and cultural contiguities within the same space in a new surreal linguistic bowl that may be named Post-Babel. For example, in Africa Nigeria is the most ethnically and linguistically diverse site/country with over two hundred different languages; while Africa, having in excess of three thousand different languages and dialects, is the most culturally, ethnically diverse

continent – with twice as many languages and dialects as the Indian sub-continent. On a wider canvas, the global politics of language in Babel/Post-Babel has been quite fascinating. We recall the creative, intellectual and social roles played by the languages Greek, French and Latin at various times in European history.

A review of the ascendancy of English to its present position as a global language reveals an extraordinary phonic protagonist. The diachronic chronicle shows English as a fighter with an unusual capacity for doggedness, resilience and opportunism:

How, then, could English be made more eloquent so that it could take over from Latin in the writing of poetry and literature, and so that a “national” literature could be created which expressed the emerging cultural identity of England? There were three principal means of creating new vocabulary: words could be invented, using existing principles of word formation, words could be adopted from Latin or Greek; or obsolete English words could be brought back into use, perhaps with new meanings. English writers enthusiastically supported the project to increase the English lexicon. It is estimated that during the period 1500-1700 over 30 000 new words were added to the English vocabulary. The process reached its peak in the early 1600s when, on average, over 300 new words were recorded each year (Graddol et al, 1996: p.142).

While the creative writers of the “early modern” period of English (Shakespeare, Dryden, Samuel Pepys) were so engaged, the Reformation, Renaissance, the rise of humanist science, etc., facilitated the process. English profited tremendously from such other epochal events as trans-Atlantic commerce and colonialism, as has been well discussed and well documented by several scholars. English has been and is still voracious and untiring in its gargantuan appetite for new morphological and grammatical acquisitions and enrichments as it bestrides the world linguistic stage/space in sundry linguistic costumes tagged “varieties of English,” “Englishes”, subject of David Crystal’s engaging attention in *The Stories of English*. The remarkable developmental chronology of English as a whole since its Anglo-Saxon beginnings reveals that the attempt to Africanise English (Amos Tutuola’s *The Palm-wine Drinkard*; Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*; Gabriel Okara’s *The Voice*) in the postmodern age remains perhaps cosmetic and a linguistic paradox. Exciting though the Africanising effort may be, the result has returned a sameness of outcome: English. The experimentation has not yielded a brand new language. That English is tolerant of such experimentation in the first place is testimony to its linguistic adaptability and resilience.

Some strains of postcoloniality, the theory and criticism of African literature, have argued for a repositioning in Post-Babel of the indigenous African language in the post-colonial cultural space. The attempt to foreground the indigenous language is a position that accords with the biblical assertion that every language is significant. A strand of postcoloniality has canvassed greater Afrocentricity in

“African literature”, which theory assumes a monolithic cultural landscape inhabited/dominated by the writing in the former language of colonisation. A counter-discursive variety of postcoloniality contends that “African literature” is a signifier on the loose signifying nothing much and attached to no clear-cut signified. The floating signifier is helpless when confronted with the mass and variety of indigenous African writing in polyglot Post-Babel and the African literary landscape.

Constrained by historical and cultural circumstances “African literature” as a label has striven, without much success, to remain all-inclusive; but the indigenous language literature to which the likes of Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Okot p’Bitek and a growing number of indigenous language authors are contributors relates to that signifier as a semantic misfit. For Afrocentricity to make sense, it should move more decisively, argues the position, from “African literature” to the indigenous language terrain and find a signifier that would include an indigenous language as tool/sign: Setswana literature, for example, written in Setswana, a dominant language of the Republic of Botswana. Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s summation of the situation in an interview of him in 1986 is relevant:

It is obviously a large question with many possible problems. I for one do not think it easy or simple. You cannot just wake up one morning and decide not to work in a language you’ve been working in. We have been educated in European languages and our attendant conceptualization of ideas, art, politics and economics is articulated in them. There are few publishers presently willing to invest money in good quality books in African languages and explore market possibilities within and between linguistic communities. The state of translation in African languages is also underdeveloped. But all things said, I see the issue essentially as one of political choice. We as African writers cannot wait till our governments develop the right language policies. Writers have always been pathfinders. I should hasten to add that the tradition of African literature in English, French and Portuguese is a minority tradition. It has no right usurping the term “African literature”. It is also a tradition in transition. In years to come it will be in footnotes when people talk about literature. African literature should refer to literature written in African languages (Sander & Lindfors, 2006: p.234).

Foucauldian heterotopias are nothing if not baffling. New Post-Babel is a study in proto-linguistic absurdity. The novel postmodern cultural space is inhabited by an interesting paradox: it is a “soundless” heterotopia in the making. New Post-Babel is a label for space devoid of language, futuristic, and in process in its shaping as a full-blown cultural disaster. Research reality and common observation show in Sub-Saharan Africa a progressive loss of grasp of language, indigenous and others, on the part of newer generations of language users. In varying degrees of incidence across continental Post-Babel, linguistic communities are losing competence in

both the language of colonialism and the indigenous African language. (The word “competence” is used here to mean reasonable/respectable/functional grasp/mastery of a given language as a native speaker and/or a non-native learner/user of the language – in a more general sense than it occurs in Chomsky’s linguistics). It is this kind of development in the language acquisition patterns in Africa that makes Ngugi’s prediction as quoted above seem rather optimistic, reasonable though the argument by Ngugi. Perhaps with the exception of Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, South Africa and Swaziland there is scarcely any other country in Sub-Saharan Africa with a carefully considered, pragmatic official policy in place that invites the populace to treat its indigenous African language with decency and respect. So the indigenous African language remains trapped in a historical and cultural contradiction thrust upon it by the arbitrary carve up of Africa by European powers in 1885. 1986 Literature Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka has remarked pointedly that the post-independence African political elite have been unable to find the will to confront and rectify the central political and cultural problems that have survived colonialism in Africa in their Pan-Africanist pretensions and groupings under whatever label – Organisation of African Unity (OAU) or African Union (AU). Official policies, in the eloquent absence frequently, by omission and commission, action and inaction, continue to marginalise the indigenous African language.

Protagonist English exploded out of the side-lines and obscurity during the early modern period of English into national prominence with the active collaboration of its creative writers of poetry, drama, prose literature, essays. The literary activity together with other factors, as has already been noted, propelled English from national to global pre-eminence: modern technology is today the main carrier and propellant of English globally. There is at the moment an interesting irony: whereas language depends on the creative input of literature as a tonic for user-competence and language growth, official policies of nonchalance and neglect have relegated literature to the background in many parts of continental Post-Babel, with the possibility that Post-Babel is transforming into a linguistic vacuum. Also noteworthy: the same technology on whose back English has ridden in its more recent frolicsome globetrotting has become Post-Babel’s albatross: a vigorous reading public has circumstantially converted into a growing tribe of limpid “couch potatoes”. Post-Babel has bidden adieu to a vibrant reading culture in both African (English, French, Portuguese) literature and the indigenous African (Edo, Igbo, Setswana, Yoruba, Zulu, etc.) language literature.

Post-Babel has floated a number of half measures designed to correct the unsettling development; these are half measures because the central issues seem insufficiently apprehended by stake-holders. While officially according literature an optional status in the high school curriculum, after neglecting it altogether at an earlier elementary/primary school level, there is a rash of literary prizes instituted by mostly non-governmental organisations in the attempt to recover a healthy reading culture. But this is Post-Babel where knowledge is treated increasingly with cynical disregard. The poets, dramatists, short-story writers, novelists, etc., continue to write; but for a receding reading populace that is on the verge of

extinction. In the absence of a reading culture, significant cultural activities get threatened: writers have difficulty getting published because publishers are unwilling to take on new works since there might not be the readership to purchase enough copies of a new work of literature to make publication worthwhile; as should seem obvious, the publisher is basically an entrepreneur who is desirous of profitable returns on investment. Writing suffers; publishing declines, because reading ails.

Post-Babel also evinces a curious attitude to the issue of examinations which manifests as an unsettling overvaluation of paper qualifications. A university degree seems to have lapsed into merely a ceremonial badge: because the entire chain from primary school, through secondary school, and up to the tertiary level of education has defaulted on knowledge. Examinations and certificates enjoy an unfair amount of attention compared with the negligent attitude to knowledge. In Post-Babel, pupils at primary school level are spoon-fed with information by their teachers and are left with not much opportunity to exercise and so to develop their creative and critical faculties. The pattern is repeated at secondary school level, such that when the pupil comes into university (s)he is ill-equipped for the intellectual requirements and academic rigour of university education. The heuristic skills of self-application and the ability to extract information by oneself are poorly developed, giving room to neurotic and fearful expectations in matters appertaining to tests, assignments and examinations.

Owing to the side-lining of literature in the school syllabuses, increasingly, language use/training is being presented/taught without the help of literature. Such that, in Post-Babel, many a student of language in a department of language(s) encounters poetry formally for the first time at university level and so tends to become jittery, attending lectures in a state of funk and unremitting confusion. The student's fretful condition is aggravated by the character of the undergraduate course syllabus. In the average course syllabus the emphasis is metalanguage: the technicalities (linguistics) of language without the language itself; the technicalities (dissertationese) of language without the literature. To complete the bewilderment of the student, a few books are recommended and the student asked to read them: the assumption by the syllabus is that the student can be weaned from over-dependency on a few classroom notes and be placed on a more mature diet of self-application to additional sources of information such as books, academic publications, etc.

3. Return to Babel

The global ascendancy of English returns the language's historical sociolinguistic bearings to Babel: potentially. Full recovery of a culturally monolithic Babel is a doubtful proposition; but of Pre-Babel before it seems to be history-in-process and the supposition of its possibility prognostic. But English is not immune to some of the sociolinguistic factors of Post-Babel which hinder language acquisition and competence in any language, indigenous or otherwise. The self-negation of language is, as has been argued, contained in its relegation of literature.

In the case of English, whereas literature boosted its growth during the early Modern Period, the focal point of interest today in Post-Babel is a spot vacated by English, the full-bodied language, and taken over by mere metalanguage which is insufficient to advance the competency or skill of the learner of English. At post-secondary school level, a steady bombardment of the student with the linguistics of English to the exclusion of literature in the language has not been able to yield an acceptable mastery of the language by the learner, although in the examinations the learners tend to pass the “subject” all the same. This is so because the learner has been encouraged during earlier stages of the formal education to believe that a language can be mastered without adequate exposure to the literary products which are the main sites of creative usage of language. But protagonist English remains resolute, resilient and relentless in its imperious march towards hypothetical linguistic Babel.

Again paradoxically, the indigenous African language must play the proverbial sedulous ape to English in its own African space, as a linguistic way forward. The threatened African language(s) must co-opt the effort of the poet, dramatist, novelist and other writers through official policies that return poetry, dramatic and prose literatures to the classroom right from very early on the educational ladder. The reading of literature by pupils must be backed by some form of coercion/compulsion that should be aimed at the alteration of a hard-boiled mind-set that is averse to belles-lettres, a consequence of living in an overwhelmingly intrusive/seductive/consuming technological/computer age. The enforcement of a reading culture in this way might appear to be a harsh method of redressing the condition; but the point must also be admitted that drastic diseases need drastic cures. Such a formal strategy will start a cultural nursery bed in which to grow a new crop of language users who have also developed a healthy reading culture. First, the expertise of the new users of language will be groomed by initial and regular exposure to the fresh creative input of literary language at morphological and grammatical levels especially. Second, the exposure will translate into increased demand for more literary works, leading to a greater output by the publishing industry. As the publishing industry is in the doldrums, on the wane, in much of Babel, the new pressure occasioned by higher demands on literary works will cause it to regroup and revive, and will in turn place a demand on new works by the creative writers. This development should serve as an impetus/morale booster to the writers and a means to recover sagging creative inspiration which had accompanied falling demands for literary works, the result of a reading culture that is in a bad way.

The alternative can only remain an ineffectual strategy; that of trying to recover a disappearing reading culture by investment in publicity such as the organised fanfare of a book launch and the advertisement of new published works in journals, on radio and television, etc. It is observed that whatever the amount of publicity given to a new literary work the attitude to reading in Babel is such that only a negligible quantity of the work will be sold. Moreover, it is being noted that if copies of a book were given out free of charge to prospective readers, regardless of its quality, few of those who receive the book gratis will actually go ahead and read

through out of curiosity. Also pertinent to the issue is the role of the book prize in an attempt to recapture a disappearing reading culture. Quite a number of book prizes have been introduced in the Babelian space, a few of them quite prestigious: the Nigeria Liquefied Natural Gas (NLNG) Prize for Literature, for example, with a prize money of fifty thousand United States of America dollars to the winning entry. Prizes have always served as a means of recognition of genius in cultural spaces that have had a long tradition of letters/reading of literature and book publication. In those literary cultures few writers begin to write because they want to win a prize; rather they write because they feel strongly, are inspired to write, following the creative impulse to write. Some write because they want their ideas/thoughts shared by a large reading populace: the awareness of and possibility of a potentially large clientele of readers and admirers provides for them sufficient impetus to commit to paper the product of their creative imagination. So the ability of the literary prize to kick-start and sustain a literary culture is somewhat prone to exaggeration. This is not to suggest that the book prize is useless; the thought of winning one can serve as an incentive to some writers who would not write otherwise, but fortunately they fall into a minority class – the real creative enthusiasts survive without it in a good reading culture and are the majority more often than not.

There are extra-linguistic benefits to a concerted attempt to re-introduce into society a healthy reading culture. The opportunity cost to the mental stupor that is the “occupational hazard” of the couch potato whose attention is said by researchers to be taken by the computer/television screen daily and without much intellectual benefit will be the salutary alert outcome of engagement with decent literary products. A time spent by a young reader with a well-written novel will be socially profitable in that it will give training to the impressionable mind in the cultivation of values of behaviour in society that are respectable and less prone to delinquency. A harvest of cultured citizens by this means will be far more cost-effective than a negligent attitude that allows a generation to be weaned on indiscriminate Internet material without guided introduction into the world of literature, aesthetic taste, and life. This may sound like a Classical/Neoclassic submission right out of Roman Horace’s *Ars Poetica* (first century B.C.). Still, the sense of correctness and graces taken into the construction of art in the Classical and subsequently retrieved in the Neoclassic age should find urgent relevance in a Postmodern Babel. Despite that the realist novel has made short shrift of Philip Sidney’s notion of poetic justice (“The Defence of Poesie”, 1595): the world of literature no longer smells more sweetly; it is not anymore more beautiful than the real world. Literature has with fidelity captured the absurdity, angst and ennui of living in a “fallen”, “disintegrating” post-World Wars world that has partially returned linguistic experience to Babel. In spite of this turnabout in the ideational equation between the real world and the world of fictional creativity, there survive some redeeming features, as has been pointed out. Babel’s official policies must dredge up these threatened virtuous items from the sociological turbulence and postmodern cultural chaos and drive them into the rather tranquil consciousness of

the Babelian body polity of predominantly lame couch potatoes while there seems still a chance of succeeding in the attempt.

4. Conclusion

Pre-Babel, Post-Babel and Babel are tropes/indices in this essay with which changing linguistic patterns of experience in Africa have been examined. The speculative tour shows that some parts of the cultural space named Africa have continued as linguistic victims of sociological developments in a postmodernist age of the Internet. The computer, despite its many benefits and the convenience and comfort it has delivered, has proved rather toxic to the centuries-old healthful and pleasant habit of reading literature by separating new users of language from literature through inordinate attention which is devoted to intellectually unprofitable matter coming via the television/computer screen. Using the remarkable history of English as an example, literature is shown to have collaborated in this language's phenomenal growth and spread (together with other factors such as colonialism and technology) until its attainment of the stature as a global language.

A part of the instrument of the rise of English – computer technology – also constitutes its nemesis in the postmodern age. But English is not alone in this predicament; the indigenous African languages are similarly threatened as they seem headed in the direction of Pre-Babel (pre-linguistic Babel) because younger people are mastering neither the indigenous African language nor English. The disconcerting pattern seems unrelenting because of the nonchalant official attitude to the issue, which allows young people to go through early formal education without proper exposure to literature in both available linguistic options. A lack of sustained contact with literature has aggravated the condition of language because of the domino effect of its consequences on reading, writing, publishing and other aspects of the book trade and culture. The long-held assumption by scholars and some creative writers that Babelian society is headed for Babel (mono-linguistic space) seems weak-kneed and revisable; the pointers seem hitched more towards a Post-Babel (multi-lingual space) that is surreal and ontologically the equivalent of Pre-Babel in a postmodern setting, unless carefully considered quick action is taken to arrest the national and continental linguistic slide. Postscript: The phonic chimeric socio-cultural development outlined above is at odds with a sense of ease, a state of tranquillity, a routine of complacent torpor, whether in an ivory tower or in the corridors of power.

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