Ethnocentric Perspectives in Literature

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The theme of this conference, takes me back to the themes of my own work from "Weep Not Child" to the latest. In "Weep Not Child", I was talking about the struggle of Kenyans to have a view of their own in national and international affairs. And this theme covers most colonial literatures because they reflect the struggle of former colonized peoples to have the right to have a view of their own in national and international affairs. As I said this is what unites the writing of so many in Asia and Africa. It is also an expression of a certain relationship with the West. It’s very important that the theme does not stand in isolation. There is our own definition of historical relationship with the West, and in the past, that definition was different from the colonial.

But the post colonial world, a world that brings in visions of a global community continue to be marked by consequence of that colonial past. A discussion of a view of our own must then inevitably bring in questions of our relationship to the West, even today.

Sometime ago I wrote the book called “Decolonizing the Mind”, and today arising from the theme of this conference, I want to talk about decolonizing the means of imagination which I see as the necessary first step towards a people-centric view of literature and scholarship.

Imagination, the process of making images, physical images with our eyes or mental images with our mind might be thought of as a simple physiological act and it is. But a person who is ill or dying of hunger or physically impaired in any way, may very well find that his capacity to visualize the world is handicapped by the very conditions under which he is living in society. These conditions are not only natural in the physical sense, they are also economic and political. I was interested in the Deputy Prime Minister’s comments about the relation between culture and commerce. For instance the technology of production of images be it the simplest pen, pencil, parchment or the printing press has affected the production and distribution of books and the entire print media. Anybody therefore who controls economic and political environment of our imagination is already beginning to affect the process.

The encounter with the West as a whole, or more precisely, Euro-America and Africa-Asia over the last 400 years or more has meant among many things the distortion of the self-assertion and perception of the Other. This has been achieved through Euro-America’s near total control of the means of production, distribution and consumption of images; and the degree of this distortion has depended on the extent, of Western control over the production and distribution of those images. This is manifestly clear in the 20th century or in the post-colonial era with the West’s near total control of the mass media so that the entire world is made to look at themselves and at the West through mirrors clearly made in the West. In the print media, the major news agencies affect or select the news which we have about the world, even about our own society. The quality and quantity of dissemination of the news about ourselves is often determined by agencies located in the West; the state of the world, if you like, according to Reuters. You can also see it in visual media. Again here we are talking about the state of the world as seen by CNN. The same is probably true in terms of who controls electronic media, who controls the information highway, who controls in other words, the knowledge, the entire system, in all the technology, in the information highway.

It is perhaps clearer in the case of the promotion and distribution of cinematic and television images. The sheer economic resources necessary to acquire the equipment and the material to make, print and distribute films have resulted in what could have been the most democratic art form in terms of accessibility, being controlled by very few in the West. The visual image is the most “democratic” you don’t necessarily need to know how to read or write to understand. The visual image would have been a great equalizer. But in actual fact this most democratic of images is tightly controlled by those who own the technology and the finance.

It is not so different probably for the music industry. Once again the control of the means of the printing, distributing and advertising on a global scale is dominated by the West. Whether we can see certain images, the angle of seeing them and the industry that follows may very well be controlled by the one who controls the technological means. For example, early this year in Kampala, Uganda, a fellow African and I, attended what we thought was a very important conference; the 7th Pan African Congress. It brought in delegates from all over Africa, Europe, America and so on. Gaddaffi of Libya could not physically make it but he was supposed to address the gathering via satellite. At this crucial moment that image was not available. Somebody somewhere who controlled the technology or the satellite transmissions had switched it off. So, although we had come from all corners of the world that image was not available to us that particular day. In other words, somebody else who was not an active participant in the conference controlled what we were able to see and hear during that conference.

Rectifying that situation is an integral part of the overall politics: struggle for a more even distribution of resources within and between nations and the struggle for democratization of the necessary technology for the production and distribution of images. What is symbolized by this conference is a question; once one has acquired the technology what stories does one tell with one’s pen? What pictures does one draw with one’s camera? What song does one sing with one’s microphone? Again very importantly this depends on the vocation of the vision, where and how are we situated in seeing and articulating the vision, where and how are we situated in seeing and articulating the visions of ourselves and the world. Once again this depends to a certain extent on the degree to which we decolonize the grammar of image-making, be it in it field of languages, or the language of sound, of film and so on. This depends on the degree of our control of the economies and technologies of image production.

One of the earliest and most primary means of the production of images is language human language. With our natural organs as the technologies for voice production, does not need a microphone to speak or to sing, one does not need to have money to sit or tell stories and no political power has ever managed to stop months from singing or telling stories anyway.

In the last 400 years or so, Africa has seen human beings enslaved, her natural resources looted and her labor power colonized and exploited in the most ruthless of ways. In a view, one of the worst robberies is that of the means of perceiving and articulating Africa has been robbed off of languages in the most literal and also figurative sense. That even today, Africa is still defining itself in terms of Anglicophone and Francophone linguistic zones. The West’s linguistic hegemony over Africa is nearly total.
One of the effects of colonization is the negative images that a dominated people can have and the veneration they can have of those that have power over them. And there have been so many books written on the portrayal of Africa in fiction, cinema and so on.

The colonization of the means of imagination by way of languages has meant that Africa has been alienated from one of the greatest productions of the mind i.e. the native languages and the imprisonment of its own mind in the linguistic maximum security prisons labelled, French, or English or Portuguese.

Africa was made speechless and those of its own sons and daughters who should have come back to free the imprisoned tongues came back as prisoners themselves content merely to be interpreters between Europe and Africa. On to bold dialogue between themselves within the prison walls of their language acquisition. They became what Joseph Conrad, contemptuously but unfortunately true, called reformed Africans.

Literature, deals with images. When I wrote my book "Weep Not Child" I was talking about the roles, inspiration, content and everything from the struggles of the Kenyan people to anti-colonial Kenyan people. But this work and many other works were written in the English language. So although the novel draw its actual sustenance, its life, its rhythm, from the experience of the Kenyan people nevertheless the experience is couched within the English language. When you think of it, with whom was I communicating (in relation to Kenyan people), having written the novel in English?

This is true of most African writers whether we are talking about those writing in French or Portuguese or whatever. In other words we are talking about the educated strata who are trained to work in images using words. We are talking about this very special group of people who should be the mind of the community but who gained knowledge and come back wrapping that knowledge or wrapping those images of the world in English, French or Portuguese.

One of the earliest dignitaries of this "reformed Africans", that is those "reformed" in their linguistic factories of Europe, were known as court interpreters in the colonial era. When a peasant or a worker is accused of murder in a colonial court of law, his own life is at stake. The judge and magistrate, most likely a white person, then spoke English. The prosecutor spoke English. The defence lawyer, if any also spoke English. The poor peasant accused of murder is entirely dependent on the interpreter. The peasant is denied the use of his language. In other words, in that court room where that was deciding his own life, he is actually a foreigner. If we view the whole country as one court room, the collective peasant has become a foreigner in his own country. Imagine the strain we all feel when we visit a foreign country and we have to communicate through an interpreter.

But in the case of Africa in the colonial era and even up to now, we are not talking about one or two visits by one or two people. We are talking of the majority of the people who have become foreigners in their own countries. In the colonial context, Kenyans were divided into categories; the speechless majority and the minority of general interpreters by virtue of their having been to school and colleges, and hence trained in English or French or Portuguese. The interpreter is in privileged position. He is in the same linguistic universe as the judge, the prosecutor and the defence lawyer. He can also hear the peasant in the dock. He, the interpreter, may develop the illusion that just because he can hear the language of the peasant, he is at one with him. But he is actually only representing him. We can also note the position of the peasant. He is not in a position to identify with his own representation, by the interpreter. In other words he is alienated from his own representation whether that representation is sympathetic or not.

I deliberately put all that in the colonial era but the situation has not really changed in the post colonial era. With independence, interpreters spread out to fill the vacant places of white judges, prosecutors, defence lawyers in all walks of life. The peasant even when pleading the case for his own survival, whether economic, political or cultural survival, is still being denied the use of his tongue. He can only hear and be heard through an interpreter. He can only negotiate with power through an interpreter. This true for the majority of African people in the entire continent.

Thus once again in Africa the majority are still aliens in their own territory in this later half of the twentieth century. They have to negotiate their way through the market place, through the road system, the courts of law, and the administration through interpreters and it does not really matter how sympathetic the interpreter may be to the cause of those he is interpreting. The point still remains that the majority negotiate for their space through interpreters.

What does this really mean for the majority? They have been denied by both the colonial and the post-colonial state the right to name their world or rather the right to have how they name the world be heard either by themselves or by the world. In other words they are still suffering from the total colonization of the means of imagination.

The one area of decolonization that needs the most urgent attention is still the decolonization of the most basic means of imagination. In the case of Africa we have to redefine our attitudes to African languages. In general, people need to redefine their attitudes towards their own languages, and when it comes to relations with Africa, also their attitudes to African languages.

There's nothing so ridiculous in the world today as to hear about scholars in African History, Literature and in Music but who don't know a single word of any of the African languages. It is true whether one is in Europe or in Africa itself. I can go to an university in Africa and apply for a job as a professor in African Literature but in their interviews I don't have to demonstrate any knowledge of any African language. But I applied for a job at a Language Center a professor of French, and I proudly declair "I don't know a single word of French, I doubt whether I'd get the job. They might call the police or take me to a psychiatric ward. Schoole and colleges in Africa and abroad are peopled by expats who are not sympathetic, who will not have to know any African Language. So too at the United Nations and at all UN agencies, there is no requirement for an African language. In fact apart from Arabic, there is no other African language in all the agencies. So even at the international level, we are still in the days of the tongue tied peasant of the colonial courtroom. My own view is that African language have to fight back until they are no longer aliens in their own land. They must fight against the colonialization of their speech by the languages of Europe. And they must
also fight to find their place in the global community. Here all those who are concerned with the liberation of imagination whether in Africa or elsewhere, have a role to play because what I say about African languages can apply to many languages in Africa as well as Asia. The decolonization of the imagination must begin at the most basic level which is the development of languages. We have to start with our own languages, wherever we are, to use our native languages as the base, to work towards the liberation of these means of communication at the personal, communal, national and international level. In fact, we must kill the notion of the hegemony of one language over territories of a continent. There is no necessary connection between the growth of a notion with one language, and the existence and death of other languages. In the West, the notion has been that have one nation or one people, there must only be one language. We have to struggle against that notion. Languages can feed each other and it does not mean that if you know one language you must stop yourself from knowing other languages. But this is what we are told to do at national and communal levels.

So we have to use the languages nearest to us for the location of the products of our imagination. In the case of African and Asia we have to use Asian and African languages in this regard: the argument, the multiplicity of languages and so on. But we have to forge a dialogue between languages. I personally see more dialogues between Asian and African languages. I'd like to see dialogue between Africa-Asian and European languages on the basis of equality.

I reject our attitude towards languages be they African, European or whatever and the assumption that European languages are at the epicenter. There is no reason why we can't recognize the problems we have and use them as instruments that help in the dialogue. There is nothing inherently wrong about European languages in so far as they are languages. They are as important as any other languages, they are also a wealth of culture and should be accessible to many people in the world. But in their relationship to other languages, what I'm really attacking basically is that the relationship that automatically assumes their dominance and our acceptance of that dominance as a matter of course.

In a situation like this, we can use English or French as well as Swahili as an instrument that enables dialogue. But it doesn't have to be axiomatic that the language is English or French or whatever our historic inheritance is. But in the process, that historical inheritance has become almost axiomatic for us to assure the centrality of these languages and even their ability to be at the centre of our life. They are facts of quite basic attitudes. Take the notion of modern languages, particularly in the West and Africa, the department of modern languages - French, English, Italian, German and so on. Those constitute modern languages.