

THE LANGUAGE OF HISTORICAL CHANGE IN THE GHANAIAN NOVEL*

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ASBTRACT

Recent Ghanaian history has been characterised by change and it is thus not surprising that the theme of change should feature so prominently in the works of Ghanaian novelists. R.E. Obeng, Ayi Kwei Armah and Kofi Awonoor are among Ghanaian novelists who accord this theme treatment in their novels and they are able to do this through a careful manipulation of the different linguistic resources at their disposal.

Keywords: standard English; pidgin English; borrowings; vernaculars; proverbs; metaphors.

INTRODUCTION

Eustace Palmer, an eminent critic of the African novel, has observed that "literature generally evolves out of a people's historical and cultural experience"¹ Ghanaian literature is no exception in this regard and, in this paper, I intend to show that Ghanaian novelists are able to portray the historical and cultural changes which Ghana has traversed in her recent past through a careful use of language, including standard English, pidgin English, borrowings, the vernaculars, proverbs and metaphors. The novels that will constitute my frame of reference are Obeng's *Eighteenthence*,² Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and Awonoor's *This Earth, My Brother*.³

Traditional Ghanaian society comprised ethnic groups, each of which was culturally homogeneous. There existed linguistic unity among members of an ethnic group who also had their own system of government, laws and traditions. The verbal arts played a significant role since the society's thrust was largely oral. As Oyekan Owomoyela has observed,

There is hardly any phase of traditional life that is not affected or regulated by some aspect of folklore, because it is the medium

through which the behavioural values of the community and the cumulative wisdom and technology devised by bygone ages are made available to the present generation and preserved for posterity.⁴

With the advent of European imperial rule, however, things started to change, for, imperialism imposed not only its system of government but also its laws on traditional society. It also introduced literacy into the society.

Obiechina has explained that

the imposition of a literary over an essentially oral culture could lead sometimes not to the obliteration of the former by the latter but to the recording, codifying and preservation of elements of the oral culture and thus to making it available to an ever-widening literate audience.⁵

This explains why proverbs and folktales, for example, are utilised by Ghanaian novelists in their novels.

Obeng's *Eighteenthence*

In *Eighteenthence*, Obeng presents us with a picture of the transition which the Gold Coast was undergoing during the second decade of the twentieth century through his portrayal of the two legal systems which were prevailing at that time, that is, the British colonial and the traditional Ghanaian. Though the two systems exist side by side in the novel, the British colonial system is portrayed as superior to the traditional Ghanaian and that is why anyone who is not satisfied with the traditional system can appeal to the British colonial. Indeed, cases of a certain magni-



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tude can only be handled by the British colonial high court in Accra.

The novel contains a cluster of titles of traditional rulers such as Omanhene, Adontenhene, Kontihene, Kyidomhene and Benkumhene not only because the traditional system of government is juxtaposed against the colonial system but also because it is these rulers and some elders who constitute the traditional court which adjudicates in the cases between the characters.

Proverbs are utilised in the traditional court because they embody traditional wisdom and are thus useful in jurisprudence. That a defendant can utilise proverbs in explaining his case is evidenced, for example, in Konaduwa's use of the proverb: "Then I find that I am a lamb who has fallen among wolves" (p.18) when she is arraigned before the Adontenhene's court. Her helplessness and distrust of the court are both suggested here. Proverbs may be used to draw a defendant's attention to a lapse in his behaviour before the elders. By telling Konaduwa during her appearance before the Omanhene's court that "a chicken is not wiser than the hen" (p.45) the speaker means that he as an elder is more knowledgeable in judicial matters than the younger defendant who must therefore give him unqualified respect. The gerontocracy which obtains in traditional African society derives from the notion that the elderly are repositories of wisdom. Konaduwa's over-confidence and boldness are regarded as unusual of a young woman before the court. That is why one of the elders warns her that "a woman sells tomatoes and vegetables and not flints." (p.34). Here, she is being called upon not only to act as a woman but also to be submissive to the elders.

We have a different situation in the British colonial court where a different linguistic usage reinforces the contrast between the traditional and the colonial. In the traditional system, we have the elders constituting the court, with the King or Chief presiding as the final authority. The defendant answers questions from the elders and proverbs are utilised by both parties wherever necessary. In the colonial court, particularly in the high court, we have the judge presiding, with lawyers making representations on behalf of both the defendant and the plaintiff. The lawyers, knowing the language of their trade, use legal registers associated with the British colonial court. That is why such utterances as: "your lordship"; "gentlemen of the jury"; "testimony of the witness"; and "evidence, personal or documentary" abound in the episode in which Akrofi appears against the Omanhene of Kwahu, before the colonial court. Here, the lawyer for the prosecution, for example, opens

his case in the following words:

Your lordship, and you gentlemen of the Jury!
It is well known in every corner of this colony,
that in the days of yore....(p.106)

Barrister Akotua, who represents the defendant, responding to the prosecution, says:

Your lordship and gentlemen of the Jury,
I crave your patience. I am not here to relate
fairy stories to waste your time, as my learned
friend has done. It still remains to prove those
facts by the testimony of witnesses. (p. 108)

In both cases, we have a special mode of address which is peculiar to the British colonial court. We also have the legal registers and the learned and sometimes archaic phraseology which provide a contrast with the traditional court.

The document which Akrofi's lawyer tenders in evidence is also written in legal language as the following passage shows:

Whereas Akrofi applied to us, four years ago,
for a piece of land for farming,
And whereas at first the land was given to
him freely because he is a free citizen of this
state.
And whereas he has farmed extensively and it
appears to us that he has become the possessor
of the land now in his hands.
Now therefore we the undersigned think it
expedient to transfer the land to him by
sale.....
Dated at Abene in Akuamoa Panin Fie, this
tenth day of September, in the year of our Lord
1918, in the second year of our reign (pp. 111-
112)

The document ends with the names of the signatories as well as that of the Registrar of the Omanhene's court who prepared it and their titles. This, appearing in the novel, provides a demonstration of the nature of such documents. Its usefulness resides in the fact that it provides a strong basis for the judge and the jury to give judgment in favour of Akrofi. It also demonstrates that British influence has begun infiltrating into the traditional court.

Armah's The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born

Having commented in some detail on some aspects of the language of Eighteenthence, I now turn to

Armah's first novel, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, a satire on the bribery and corruption which characterised the Nkrumah regime. The imagery of filth, putrefaction, odour and excrement with which the novelist presents his theme is not only meant to project his own disgust with bribery and corruption but also to concretise the decay that had engulfed the whole nation at that time.

Kofi Awoonor, commenting on this novel, has observed that

Armah's view of man seems to be limited to the anal features of his non-characters; *The Beautiful Ones* is a work in which defecation and farts seem to triumph; he presents the affairs of men from the womb to the end. He sees only a world in which we enter trailing dung and bow out through latrine trap doors.⁶

To say this is to suggest that Armah uses the images for their own sake which is far from the truth as many brilliant studies of the novel have made clear.⁷

The decrepit, decaying bus symbolises the misused nation. The banister coated with filth and slime, the refuse box discoloured with filth and garbage and the lavatory walls encrusted with cakes of shit all suggest decay resulting from neglect. In such a milieu, verbal abuse is resorted to at the least provocation. The conductor, for example, on finding that the man was after all asleep and thus not watching his corrupt practice, calls him a "bloodyfucking sonofabitch! Article of no commercial value!" (p.6). After more verbal abuse from the conductor, the man is thrown off the bus only to be called an "uncircumcised baboon" and "moron of a frog" (p.10) by an angry taxi driver who nearly hits him. In traditional society, verbal abuse of this kind is resorted to normally on provocation. In this changed situation, however, the men continue to attack their victim even after he has rendered an apology.

The inscriptions on the lavatory wall, mostly in pidgin English, provide succinct comments on aspects of this debased culture. "Money Sweet Pass All", an expression in the superlative, articulates the conviction of the people that money provides the greatest satisfaction. It is for this reason that the politicians engage in an insane rush after it. "Who Born Fool" is the pidgin for "who is born foolish?" This rhetorical question implies that everybody is wise and can thus take care of himself. Ironically, some prove to be wiser and are thus able to cheat the others. The next inscription, "Socialism Chop, Make I Chop", is a curt summary of the socialist philosophy: Live and let live. Everybody is entitled to a share of the chop.

Ironically, it is only the Koomsons who are able to chop at the expense of the others. The last two inscriptions, "Pray for Detention" and "Jailman Chop Free", refer not only to the fear that haunted Nkrumah's political opponents of being thrown into detention but also to the conviction of the ordinary man that the prisoner or "jailman" is better off than the man outside prison since, while life is unbearable in the country, the prisoner is fed free of charge.

Pidgin English is used also by Amankwa, the corrupt businessman, who has mastered it in order to carry on his trade. After influencing the allocations clerk to help him ship his logs, for example, he comes to the man who had the previous day refused his bribe and says:

Contrey, why you try to do me so? You don't want me to eat, contrey? Okay. Take your self. I get man who understands. Ei, my friend, why you want to play me wicked. (p.126)

Amankwa is surprised, rather ironically, that the man had refused to accept his bribe. For him, this means the man's refusal to help him get his daily bread from his trade. The man can now please himself since he has finally found an understanding person in spite of the man's earlier attempt to frustrate him, he says.

Apart from Pidgin English, Armah also uses proverbs to highlight the change that the society is undergoing. Change is the essence of the last proverb in the novel, as the following dialogue shows:

"You know what", Koomson said.
"Yes"
"You used to repeat a certain proverb", said Koomson. "When the bull grazes, the egret also eats". Do you remember?"
The boat man replied with a surly
"Yes", as if to indicate that time and change ought to modify all such proverbs.... (p205).

The coup has occurred and Koomson, who wants to escape arrest, has come to seek the boatman's help. If the boatman used to rely on Koomson for help, it is now Koomson who must rely on the boatman since the tables have turned. Indeed, "time and change ought to modify the truth of all such proverbs". In such a situation of change, metaphors deriving from the cultural background could be utilised to mock those whose outlook on life is supposed to be an aberration from the norm. For his continued determination to remain incorruptible in a situation where it is almost impossible to do so, the man earns the title chichidodo from his wife who provides the follow-

ing explanation for the metaphor:

The chichidodo is a bird. The chichidodo hates excrement with all its soul. But the chichidodo only feeds on maggots, and you know the maggots grow best inside the lavatory. This is the chichidodo. (p.52)

To Oyo, who is conditioned by the debased values of the present ethos, the man's detestation of corruption is not only unusual but also hypocritical since he has a desire for the things which only corruption can procure. It is only when she observes the plight of Koomson after the coup that she sees some justification in the stand the man has so far adopted.

Having provided some comments on aspects of Armah's use of language in The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born, I now turn to examine Kofi Awoonor's use of language in This Earth, My Brother.

Awoonor's This Earth, My Brother

Kofi Awoonor has said that his novel is about the total on-going historical process of fragmentation and decay⁸. He successfully carries this theme across to the reader through a careful use of language.

Awoonor has also observed that

talking about English, therefore, each of us will bring into the English language our own understanding, our own transmutations of our language into English. So when I write English it will be a bit different from Achebe's English. Achebe recreates Igbo in his English and, in a lot of my poetry, I recreate Ewe. And... Wole Soyinka creates Yoruba in very large segments of his novel, or even his poetry⁹.

This statement is germane to our understanding of the author's handling of language in the novel.

The dignified and rich language of the elder who presides over baby Amamu's outdoor ceremony may be contrasted with the empty rhetoric of the King's message read at the Empire Day Celebrations, whereas Mama's Pidgin English may be compared with that of the policeman at the Nima Police Station. We also have the language of Nkrumah's vain promises; the fragmentary dialogue between Amamu and Yaro's child; the dirges with their rich metaphors; the quotations from Latin, Ewe and Kierkegaard; and the names of traditional musical instruments connoting death all of which, together with other usages,

convey the theme of continuous degeneration and decay to us.

The language of the elder is replete with metaphors deriving from the Ewe language. Indeed, we can surmise that it is Awoonor's native Ewe that he is recreating here, as the following passage shows:

Take this child. He is your own child. Look after him. Be fire above his head. Guide his feet in this wilderness called life. Guide his feet, our fathers, guide him safely. (p.11).

The elder here is requesting that the ancestors protect and guide the newly-born child through this life. The metaphors reinforce the notion that man cannot make it without the guidance of the ancestors. The tone of the passage is incantatory because the words accompany a libation which is a ritual prayer.

Sharply contrasted with this is the learned but empty rhetoric of the District Commissioner's speech on Empire Day, beginning

Once more we send you warm greetings coupled with the earnest hope that the flame of loyalty to the crown and of patriotic devotion to our worldwide Empire burns as brightly as ever in your hearts and lives... (p.44).

The cliches reinforce the colonialist's lack of concern for the natives. Indeed, Awoonor recalls the colonial experience with irony, cynicism and contempt, for he is not one who will ever praise or admire the colonialists who came on their so-called civilizing mission (like Kurtz in Heart of Darkness) which turned into a tragedy for Africa.

The change is also reflected in the Pidgin English of Mama, the recruiting officer for the colonial army. The interesting linguistic situation we are presented with enhances the portrayal of the theme of fragmentation. Mama has acquired a knowledge of Pidgin English to enable him perform his duties as an illiterate colonial soldier. Because he has little knowledge of Ewe, he speaks through an interpreter, and this results in the following dialogue:

Next! What be your name?
Yawo Letsu
Wen dey born you?
Yawo didn't understand the second question. He turned round to the interpreter, who said "Gbekagbe wodzi wo?"
"Nye me nya o."
He dosen't know.
You must put 'sah' every time you hanser

ques. OK?
 Yes sah.
 He say edon't know when dey born am. Yes sah.
 What age e get?
 About twenty-five, sah
 You be im father?
 No sah.
 But how you know?
 I sabe im mother.....(pp.65-66)

Mama enjoys the power bestowed on him by the new scheme of things. That he wants recognition of his status is indicated by his order to be addressed as "Sir." The representative of the colonialist, he has mastered his method of interviewing people seeking employment. There is nothing strange about the demand for the name of the incumbent, but asking for the date of birth is abnormal to the traditional African, for such dates began to be recorded only when literacy had taken root in the society. The notion is thus as foreign as the money order in Sembene Ousmane's novel of that name, and Yawo Letsu's answer is thus in order. Mama's question whether or not the interpreter is the father of Yawo is irrelevant for, traditionally, one need not be the father of a neighbour to know his age. Mama has been so influenced by the bureaucratic habits of his colonial masters that he has forgotten his own traditions. A sad, almost tragic sense, underlies the gaiety provided by Mama's smartness and the humour of the encounter, for we are aware of the tragic fate that awaits the recruits, and the society from which they have been taken. As we are told elsewhere in the novel, some of the recruits died in the war and a few of them returned insane. The society was thus deprived of its able-bodied youth, some of who were traditional artists, like drummers, for example.

The snatching away of the youth produced pain and anguish. The following comment of the omniscient narrator and the dirge which follows it provide ample illustration of this point:

Wives and mothers and old women cried,
 some wailed, a few wept silently. An old woman was whimpering near the road side, her crying turned into a song, a dirge for the dead. I tell you do not go; stay and tend the farm, stay and feed me till I die. Ao, Ao, Ao, an animal has caught me.
 A snake has bitten me, to whom shall I tell it, to whom shall I tell it? (p.67).

The pain caused by the abrupt change is articulated here through the use of interjections and metaphors which objectify her loss, her loneliness and her lack

of support. Even before her son departs for the war,¹ the woman knows that he is lost to her. In the dirge, the singer usually emphasises the qualities of the departed one. Here, the woman who intones the dirge mentions specifically the tending of the farm and the provision of her needs as the reasons for which she mourns her son's loss.

The change is reflected also in the following dialogue between Amanu and Yaro's malaria-infested child:

Where is your papa?
 Eh. Ete polis tasen.
 Which police station
 Nima
 What is the matter?
 Amo n'onklo (p.155)

The condition of the child is not only a reflection of the general decay but also an indictment of the dispensation that takes little care of him. In the dialogue itself, the learned Amamu speaks Standard English which is both a mark of the change and of his education. The little boy, though of northern Ghanaian parentage, speaks Ga since he was apparently born in Nima. His Ga is interlarded, however, with borrowings from English which have been corrupted. His 'polis tasen,' for example, bears little resemblance to 'police station', the place where the police could easily be reached and where criminals are initially taken on apprehension. 'Amo n'onklo' means "They have apprehended my uncle" or "My uncle has been apprehended", 'n'onklo being the corruption of 'my uncle.' Amamu and the little child communicate successfully, but what is clear, even from the mere look of the printed words, is the lack of linguistic unity which, like the other linguistic features we have looked at, enforces a sense of a divided society, or one in the process of disintegration.

The use of proverbs in Awoonor's novel as in Obeng's and Armah's illustrates the change and the decay which form the subject of the novel. The disintegration suffered by Kodzo Dzide, though personal, is a microcosmic reflection of the general decay and fragmentation. If he had listened to his uncle's advice, he would not have suffered a broken marriage. He has himself to blame because "a goat who visits somebody's house should not weep because its head has been cracked with a club". (p.9)

The elders decide to attend the District Commissioner's rally as a means of whiling away the time. "When the moon is shining, don't cripples hunger for a race?" they ask. The levity with which they regard the occasion is indicative not only of their awareness of the harm colonialism has done to them,

but also of their realisation that no good will ever come of the colonial presence.

That Tailor's plight is also a paradigmatic example of the general decay and fragmentation is given expression in the proverb "The hands that have eaten with chiefs and become like this!" We are told that his fall from the position of a rich and prosperous person to a poor, ordinary one was caused by his arrest by the colonialists for smuggling *akpeteshie*, the locally distilled gin. The colonialists banned the distilling of this gin not only to stifle native initiative but also to create a market for colonial gins.

The various cases of madness in the novel, some of which are "the colonial contribution to the psychological disintegration of the African"¹⁰ and which form aspects of the general disintegration in the society also give rise to the use of proverbs. To the innocent children, it is a game to throw stones at the lunatics. The elders, who understand the pain involved in this sadistic practice, try to stop the children with little success because "you do not make a juju for a dog which forbids him to touch palm oil". The children love their game just as dogs relish palm oil. What is sad, however, is that pressures, particularly external, should cause the disintegration of the human psyche and lead to such perpetual pain and torture.

CONCLUSION

The novelists have thus utilised different kinds of linguistic usage to portray the historical and socio-cultural changes that Ghana has experienced in her recent past. While Obeng focuses on the language of the two legal systems as a means of commenting on the historical change at this time, Armah utilises the imagery of filth, putrefaction, odour, and pidgin English to highlight both the bribery and corruption under Nkrumah and the fragmentation that characterises the post-independence era as a result of the excessive love of materialism. Awoonor uses an English coloured with his native Ewe, proverbs, pidgin and other motifs to present what he sees as the general process of fragmentation, citing his examples from the colonial epoch, the Nkrumah dispensation and the military ethos following the overthrow of Nkrumah. One can say, from the discussion that has been presented that the language of the novels reflects the historical and cultural changes that have occurred in Ghana's past.

One can also sustain the view that the African novelist can still make use of the rich linguistic resources at his disposal to point the way Africa should go in the future.

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