

***Linguistic and Cultural Hybridity in Chinua
Achebe's
Things Fall Apart and Mouloud Feraoun's La terre
et le sang***

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The term ‘Hybridity’ has become one of the most persistent conceptual leitmotifs in postcolonial discourse and theory. It is intended to exclude the diverse forms of purity encompassed within essentialist theories. The concept is so recurrent and has not a unified meaning because its definition differs from a context to another, from a theorist to another, and can take political, cultural, and linguistic forms. Our paper approaches the concept of cultural and linguistic hybridity in the context of a comparison between the Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe’s first novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and the Algerian author, Feraoun’s second fiction; *La terre et le sang* (1952). To explore this contention, we shall try to show how both authors ingested and digested the coloniser’s language, selecting new ideas and reshaping them to construct their cultural identities. In so doing, they created something different, a kind of “third space”, to paraphrase Homi Bhabha. But, before dealing with the content analysis, it may be useful to explain what is meant by ‘linguistic and cultural hybridity’.

For the Russian literary critic, Mikhail Bakhtine, linguistic hybridity is: “ [...] a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousness, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation, or by some other factors”⁽¹⁾. Bill Ashcroft, for his part, maintains that cultural

hybridity can be used as a means of resistance because the power it releases may well be seen as the characteristic feature and contribution of the post-colonial, allowing a means of evading the replication of the binary- categories of the past and developing new anti-monolithic models of cultural exchange⁽²⁾.

However, if hybridity is widely referred to by many theorists, it is in Homi Bhabha's essays that it forms a major theme. The Indian-born British based critic's use of the word 'hybridity' aims to deconstruct the binary polarity (colonizer-colonized) in favour of a psychoanalytic ambivalence which is constitutive of the identities of the colonizer-colonized subject alike. Bhabha discloses the contradiction inherent in the colonial discourse in order to highlight the ambivalence of the colonizer in respect to his position towards the colonized 'other' through the creation of a new transcultural form within the contact zone produced by colonization⁽³⁾.

To make visible why we get a taste of the hybridized nature of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Feraoun's *La terre et le sang*, we should first and for most refer to the factors which gave birth to 'cultural and linguistic hybridity' in their respective texts. Feraoun stands with Achebe, with whom he shares certain affinities mainly on the ground that both of them were trained in the schools of their colonial masters, both have adopted and wrote in the language of the colonisers, and their creative writings have been stamped by a personal experience profoundly marked by the cultural and political traumas of colonial history. If colonisation is explicit in the complete domination and the total military control of the African vast geographical territories, it is also sustained by a series of concepts implicitly constructed in the spirits of the African peoples. The long years of colonisation left behind it bewilderment and confusion in Africans' minds. The European colonizers, either in the North or the South of the Sahara, did not contempt themselves with holding African peoples in their grips but used all the means to distort, disfigure and erase the history of these populations by emptying their brains of their own pre-colonial history. In an essay

entitled, “Colonialism and the Desiring Machine”, Robert.J.C Young discusses the way the European colonial practices inscribed both physically and psychically on the territories and peoples subject to colonial control. He refers, for instance, to: “the violent physical and ideological procedures of colonisation’s deculturation and acculturation, by which the territory and cultural space of an indigenous society must be disrupted, dissolved and then reinscribed according to the needs of the apparatus of the occupying power” (4).

Few Africans were then initiated to the coloniser’s history and traditions and the African cultures found themselves out of balance since the African “educated few”, as new products of colonial education, were taught and encouraged to turn their backs on their traditional native cultures and values. These elites lived a kind of non- existence and void. Their identities had been stolen by the colonial educational system which eradicated the already existing religions, customs and languages. It is true that the English domination stressed the economic dependence only while the French emphasised cultural assimilation and unsuccessfully attempted to make Frenchmen of Algerians. Yet, the French and English colonisations had some similarities throughout Africa because both of them tried to make Africans reject their native cultures.

In Algeria, the French assimilation policy tried to make French citizens of educated Algerians. The colonial imperative of producing Frenchmen out of Algerians presume that Algerian cultures were of an atypical and obsolete tradition when compared to the assumed superiority of the French imposed culture. In an article published in Le Monde newspaper, Jean Mouhrouche Amrouche makes clear the French colonial efforts to assimilate Algerians after they subjected them to the French laws and denied them the right of political citizenship. He writes:

La société arabo-berbère et musulmane était, en effet, dans la

perspective illusoire de l'assimilation ou de l'intégration, vouée à disparaître par un long et insensible processus d'absorption. Le rêve, l'alibi historique, le parfait achèvement de l'oeuvre coloniale c'était cela: la métamorphose, homme après homme, famille après famille, de la société arabe berbère et musulmane en société européenne et française ⁽⁵⁾.

Great Britain did the same thing in its colonies, but in a different way. Unlike France, Great Britain did not erase or destroy the cultures of its colonies, but rather tried to implant on them a colonial superstructure that would allow the convenience of indirect rule, gelling the original indigenous culture by turning it into an object of academic analysis while imposing the pattern of a new imperial culture. Although no official policy of assimilation was declared, it must not be imagined that the indigenous culture of the people was left intact. What the official British policy left undone, the missionaries helped to complete it by presenting the people's culture as heathen and wholly irreconcilable with the new "light". They frowned on everything original to the people; their names, dances and customs. As an illustration, Oladele Taiwo quotes Achebe who maintains:

when I was a schoolboy, it was unheard of to stage Nigerian dances at any of our celebrations. We were told and we believed that our dances were heathen. The Christian and proper thing was for boys to drill with wooden swords and the girls to perform, of all things, maypole dances. Beautiful clay bowls and pots were only seen in the homes of the heathen. We civilised

Christians used cheap enamel wares from Europe and Japan; instead of water-pots we carried kerosene tins. In fact to say that a product was Ibo made was to brand it with the utmost inferiority. When a people have reached this point in their loss of faith in themselves, their detractors need do no more; they have made their point ⁽⁶⁾.

Not surprisingly, the colonial erasure of the African cultural and personal identity urged nearly all African writers to admit a commitment to the restoration of their African values and put an end to the negative stereotypes perpetuated by a system of education which encouraged all the errors and falsehood about their continent and their countrymen. In their efforts to finish with the jaded portrayal of their continent, as Ania Loomba observes, “No [African] work of fiction written during that period, no matter how inward-looking, esoteric or apolitical it announces itself to be, can remain unaffected by colonial cadences⁽⁷⁾. Many African writers Chinua Achebe and Mouloud Feraoun at their head use literature as a medium to help their societies to regain belief in themselves and put away the complexes of the years of vilifications and denigration which they had met during their pernicious learning in the colonial schools. Both are among the first African writers to openly confront the world or publicly go against ‘the colonial system’”. As first avant-garde writers, they opened the door to freedom of expression in literature. Although their early works had little to no comment on the political life in their countries, the two authors present a series of binary “opposition”, two cultures and two languages. I think that Abdul JanMohamed is right to write in her essay entitled “Sophisticated Primitivism: the Syncretism of Oral and Literate Modes in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*”:

Faced by the colonialist denigration of his past and present culture and consequently motivated by a desire to negate the prior European negation of indigenous society, the African writers embarks on a program of regaining the dignity of self and society representing them, in the best instances, in a manner that he considers unidealised but more authentic images of Africans and manifests itself in opposition of forms as well⁽⁸⁾.

Achebe and Feraoun, then, sought to construct some unique personal traits by incorporating the African values in their literary works to correct the disfigurements and the misrepresentations of their respective societies. In so doing, they needed to transform the language, to use it in a different way in its new context, as Achebe says, quoting James Baldwin, make it 'bear the burden' of an African experience. Achebe and Feraoun impose the print of their background on their adopted language. At the basic level, they do it by introducing vocabulary items, particularly cultural terms into the ordinary syntax of French and English. The borrowed language becomes pidginised and creolised.

For Achebe, the English language cannot fully serve and can merely approximate the need to articulate his Igbo culture. The devices Achebe relies on to give form and pattern to his novel, are some figures of traditional African oral literature like proverbs, myths, forms of speech, many Igbo untranslated terms which illustrate the necessity of abrogation and appropriation. The use of words and expressions such as *ogone*, *gome*, *oradinwanyi* (old woman), *agbala*, *obi ndichie* of *umofia*(the elders of the village), *ekwe*, *udu*, *ogone*(musical instruments), *foo foo*, *uso*, and *ogbanje* do not only serve to make the novel greatly authentic and credible, but also give it an Igbo character and flavour. Sometimes,

Achebe inserts also some singular words in their plural forms and makes some omissions. As an illustration, he writes ‘a animal’ instead of ‘an animal’ (P.71), and puts a capital letters in the middle of a sentence: Had (P.105). Furthermore, Achebe changes the Standard English rules when he uses ‘And’ in the beginning of sentences after a full stop, and repeated many times. These changes are, according to Homi Bhabha, a ‘dissembling image’ or a kind of ‘sameness in difference’⁽⁹⁾. This ambivalent difference ensures that the appropriated English is neither inferior nor superior to the Standard English, but merely different.

In addition to the use of the untranslated terms and grammar deviations, Achebe creates some sentences, through the characters’ conversation, which are not thought initially in English. They are directly translated from his Igbo culture. For a native English speaker, these phrases have no meaning. For instance, ‘the sun will shine on those who stand on those who kneel under them’ (P.6); ‘when the moon is shinning the cripple becomes hungry for a walk’ (P.7); ‘a man who pays respect to the great paves way for his greatness’ (P.14); ‘here was a man whose Chi said nay despite his own affirmation’ (P.94); and ‘you can tell a ripe corn by its look’ (P.16). Achebe’s appeal to these complex expressions serve, as he himself maintains: “For me, there is no other choice. I have been given this language and I intend to use it [...] I feel that English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will be new English, still in full communication with its new African surrounding”. In subverting the coloniser’s language, as Taiwo observes, Achebe: “adopts the English language for his own needs in an intelligent manner. In him, we recognise the beginnings of a successful experiment. While refusing to adopt slavishly recognised English usage, he uses the language to put across ideas and concepts which are originally foreign to it. That he does, this fairly successfully is a great credit to him”⁽⁹⁾.

In Feraoun's *La terre et le sang*, the process of using the French language is strikingly similar to the interplay of Achebe's will to make his English language bear his African experience. Denise Brahimi, one of Feraoun's reviewers, notes that Feraoun's use of the French language is similar to the Moroccan writer, Abdelkebir Khataibi who sees that: "Une langue aussi forte que le français ne se laisse pas facilement détruire ni même modifier. Il préfère la considérer comme 'belle étrangère' séduisante, peut être à jamais insaisissable, mais avec laquelle peuvent s'établir des rapports d'amour»⁽¹⁰⁾. What Denise Brahimi fails to mention is that Feraoun in his *La terre et le sang* did not contempt himself to admire the French language, but succeeded to modify it. In our view, Feraoun's deliberately non-standard usage of the French can be viewed as a process of linguistic decolonisation, a questioning not only of the established language usage but also of French-ways of perceiving and interpreting reality. Feraoun achieves this purpose by re-examining the official colonial discourse and then breaking through it with voices from his own culture so long silenced.

Feraoun occupies a significant position among Algerian writers not only because of his remarkable talent as a novelist, but also by virtue of his linguistic resources and the possibilities his works offer. In particular, he stands out most distinctly as an accomplished writer who constantly draws on his rich linguistic background to enliven his imaginative re-creations of contemporary socio-political experiences of his homeland, Kabylia. He reproduces the rhythms and sentence patterns of the Kabyle speech, rural images, analogies and proverbs which come directly from his native

oral tradition, as Chritiane Achour notes: « La langue du romancier, comme celle de Taos Amrouche, mais avec plus de bonhomie rustique, se nourrit de la vieille sagesse des dictons, des proverbes, des images recherchées »⁽¹¹⁾.

In his novel, *La terre et le sang*, Feraoun inserts more than forty untranslated Kabyle words like tharoumith (Frenchwoman),

toub (red earth), mechmel (bare land), ouada (offering), achou(what?), achhal(how much?), ilha (nice) and thakhaounith (devout old woman). Feraoun also makes the characters of his novel speak in a usual nature and say things which are expected of people in their situation of life, in the way they naturally would by using some expressions such as “se sont vraiment des têtes”(P.97); “le sang a parlé” or “écoute ton sang” (P.101);” les rêves sortent” (P.166); “Madame s’est pas lavée ce mois” (P.167); “cheveux d’enfer”(P.211). Feraoun also shows his people’s spirit through language. All these expressions have no meaning unless they are put in their Kabyle cultural context. Some of the uttered phrases can have also a different sense for a Frenchman. For instance, to show her indulgence, Chabha, Amer’s mistress and Slimane’s wife says: “je suis large comme une plaine”; “elle veut salir une femme d’honneur”, ‘voiler le soleil d’un tamis’ (P.208). The language is sometimes crude as its user. As an illustration, Slimane says: “son ventre est plein de bille”, “Dieu a bien fait d’avoir privé l’âne de cornes” (P.83). In infusing the Kabyle material into the French language, Feraoun ‘deterritorialises’ the French language. Therefore, a Frenchman who reads the above expressions may find them unfamiliar and difficult to understand their meanings. But Feraoun uses them in a way that does not hinder or change his comprehension of the novel. In his use of these complex phrases, Feraoun also imposes a sort of a Kabyle thinking on the French language. Therefore, the reader needs to know what is said in the original Kabyle language to understand the meaning and connotations appropriately.

As a conclusion, we may deduce that for Achebe and Feraoun, as for many other African writers, writing becomes a means of constructing an identity which had been rubbed out by the western literary texts which equate knowledge, modernity and development to the West, while they describe Africa from the perspective of the antithesis of positive qualities ascribed to this West. Achebe’s and Feraoun’s experiences of colonialism has defined them and shaped

the hybridity of their works. Both offer some additional varieties and use them as expressive deviations from the standard French and English, a way and a method, for both writers, to make of the borrowed languages their own. For this reason, those who do not speak the two authors' mother languages may not get the maximum enjoyment from their novels.

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