

GLOBALIZATION, LITERATURE AND LANGUAGES: THE ALL-KNOWING SUBJECT AND THE INSENTIENT OBJECT

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Abstract:

This article critiques the concept of globalization, arguing it often masks a Western-centric monologue rather than a true multicultural dialogue. Examining literature, language, and power, it contends authentic global culture emerges not from imposed homogeneity but from the unfettered expression of diverse national experiences, whose intrinsic artistic merit allows them to resonate universally on their own terms, beyond economic or political coercion.

Introduction

One of modernism's premier antecedent questions and its propositions in developmental studies and issues relating to the psychology of culture and the production of culture used to be universalism. It was an omnibus word with pretensions, which supposedly fixed all human bridges if they were broken, and erected new bridges where there were none. It was something agreed upon as the standard, the representative best, the acceptable to all nations and peoples and cultures. The things or issues involved were associated to verities which could not be questioned. Their logic and reason and utility were beyond question. Application was without fail, as was any danger of miscarriage across the board. The danger in the agreement was that the parties involved were nebulous, yet all items were supposed to be binding. As an African undergraduate and graduate student, I always winced under the torment of being lectured to by my teachers about the problems of the modern man. The torment became most intellectually excruciating during readings of T.S. Eliots "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". Prufrock's multi-foliate ennui represented a universal crisis. I did not find myself in any of the many precincts of those crises. Whether I did or not, the understanding was a given, if Prufrock was suffering or not suffering, as different as we are, I must also be suffering or not suffering. The spurious umbrella of modernism has since been suspended or abandoned. It seems that the post-modern sensibility and the propensity for a world of multi-vocalities and multi-perspectives have buried all that and resurrected this new and convenient replacement called globalism.

Globalism makes a lot of sense only as a pragmatic geography with implications that cover a spectrum stretching from the quotidian to the eschatological. The original cartography upon which nations and their various histories were founded is now clearly decidedly flawed. Like its philosophical predecessors, it carries the germ of the Prufrockian binary. It was an aggressive conquistadorial geography which devolved on the cartography of internecine cultural cannibalism. It is conquered me if I cannot resist or until I am able to re-conquer you. Today, there is no one else to conquer, at least not in the old manner. And even when we do talk of conquest, we often forget the interior violent re-mapping or resisted mapping which creates problems for those involved in the psychoanalytical reading of the human condition and its inscrutable destiny. The

nature of the planet we live on is such that we have all realized that things could have been, and could still be better. The history of humanity could have been different if the conduct of nations toward each other had been a hypothetical give and take. This is what I have. Let me see what you have, and see if business could be done with what we both have. It was not so, and the price for that error is still being paid. If it is not being paid, devouring each other needlessly has remained chronic and recidivistic.

I have half facetiously and half seriously challenged my students, my friends, and my colleagues to ponder over the alternative trajectory of humanity. Would global circumstances not be near utopia today if there had not been wars for territory and wars for colonization. Suspend the notion of wars and simply contemplate the total character and destiny of the so-called New World and the Caribbean, Australia, New Zealand, Tasmania, Africa, the Middle East and so forth. Aboriginal, native, other, and all jargons of alterity and subalternism would not exist. Unfortunately, and sadly for us all, the whole complex of the politics of nations, the apparatus of international business, the epistemologies beneath the formations of cultures and their productions, and the psychologists and ontologies defining the patterns of life and death of everybody return to the foundational errors of our collective histories. We seem today to believe or at least play with the idea that if we could all globalize, that is, act in a certain kind of concert based on the fact that since the planet belongs to all of us, all our sorrows could be reduced to one sorrow and all our joys would translate into one joy. That way all the problems suggested above and others unmentioned will be blown away with great ease. This we all know is a very grand illusion . It is a grand illusion behind which lurks the old monocular visions of Aristotle ; his notion of God as active reason powers the West's notion of history as some sort of unfolding of a deistic fiat. Heraclitean flux in combination with the projects of Kant and Hegel and Marx bolster a singular ontological reading of human destiny. Philosophically, the Christological vision which was exploited by colonialism and imperialism survives blemishes and hiccups with Kierkegaard's self-serving leap of faith. When God dies for Frederick Nietzsche, everybody is supposed to buy into that nihilism and all those contested visions of the relationship between the nature and the actions of God and man and their bearings on human destiny.

It is thus easy to see how my hotel room in the Third World easily gives me CNN as it gives everybody else in the so-called Third World. The news from that source is according to how America and probably the Western world see and read the world. If the vision of CNN includes other visions and voices, nobody knows. It is still me, watching Alfred J. Prufrock with the same old presumption that the interior territory

which marks all consciousness obey the same signs and rules or operate in the same way. The assumption is that everybody is pleased with that arrangement. The other programs are not beamed into America. The other countries cannot beam back. Prufrock never needs to know what I feel. This is the general pattern of affairs in the relationship between the Western powers and the rest of us, if I may paraphrase the title of one of Chinweizu's books and thoughts. Globalization has become like the sun, powered by one source and shining down on the world from one fixed spot

in the heavens. Whenever I cultivate the inclination to join in the dream of Globalization, I am imagining the contrary. I am thinking of the possibility of a sun powered from a universal collectivity, and shining down on everybody with equal light and use.

Globalization will become real if we had a world in which for a start, the deliberations of the United Nations and the decisions of the United Nations evolve into more serious things than they are presently. This means that global attention will be dictated by the egalitarian principle of each nation always receiving according to the urgency of the need of that nation and in reasonable proportion to the population of that nation. It means that in the issues of resources, the principles of equity will be driven by the desire for justice and fairness. This means that we will be living in a world of a politics driven by a global caretaker instinct with rewards and punishment now appropriately handed down according to how faithful each nation is to the old golden rule principle of reciprocal accommodation. Here are a few elementary examples of what all this implies. If nuclear armament is good or bad in one country, it must certainly be found same for the rest of the world. Globalization should be extended to the decisions of the International Criminal Court for Justice. Its rulings must be good enough for everybody or be relegated as sham. Globalization must be extended to the efforts by nations to protect the environment. If the Kyoto Accord is designed to serve the world, then the signatories must sign and execute their commitment in the belief that it really serves the world, especially when the countries involved accept responsibility for the damage of the global environment by their chemically related industrial activities. If the flouting of democratic processes generate so-called global outcries in Ukraine, such transgressions in Nigeria should generate equivalent outcries. Compare the dollar to individual ratio in the West's aid to Israel and the Middle East with the aid given to Africa. Look more carefully at the whole complex of the geo-politics of strategic interest and explain how anybody could sign up credibly for delicate nurturing notions like the global desire for human rights. Compare the robust reaction of the western powers to the death of ex-Lebanese minister, Rafik Hariri with that of the assassination of Nigeria's sitting Attorney-General, Bola Ige. While Hariri's death was elevated to cosmo-historical

proportions, the death of Ige was a nondescript parochial Nigerian little noise. If the pollution from oil spills in Alaska or Norway attract instant condemnation and punishment, such spoilage in the South Pacific or littoral Nigeria should be treated with equivalent gravity.

The pandemic devastation of HIV/AIDS, some countries are better equipped to battle the scourge better than others. Why is it so difficult to extend a saving hand to the weaker, poorer nations in terms of the permission for the production of desperately needed generic retrovirals in those benighted nations? Recently, political pundits have been compelled to compare the devastation of Europe by the Second World War and the present nightmarish circumstances of life in many African countries. European reaction followed the passion of the speech by United States Secretary of State, General George C. Marshall at Harvard University at the end of the Second World War. "Europe's requirements for the next three or four years of foreign food and other essential products principally from America" are so much greater than her present ability to pay that she must have

substantial additional help or face economic, social, and political deterioration of very grave character. The world is still waiting for Africa to receive the same kind of rapid and concerted response later dubbed the “Marshall Plan” which Europe got from that impassioned plea. While that wait is on, South Africa’s Thabo Mbeki’s question when he addressed the European Union Parliament on November 17, 2004 remains a haunting and nagging question dredging up the detritus of past attitudes to Africa: “Why can’t we have the same aid and generous loans?” If the United Nations resolutions aimed at global disasters and order and peace, are designed to enforce order in the world, and if the various financial clubs run by the West are there for fiscal balances and measures to nurture growth and stability, then those organs must be seen to be doing exactly that for all nations and circumstances instead of the present situation where their activities are merely part of an elaborate tapestry of benign rituals and perfunctory gestures only malignantly potent when the big powers need is the issue. Clearly, the median of race and power remain dichotomous.

We cannot afford to manage a world in which the issues of justice and societal good are accidental. It is now a global gathering of shifting identities. The characterization of angel or rogue nation is generally protean and unstable, arbitrary and accidental. It depends on where each nation sits, at the right or left hand of the global powers. We have essentially fashioned out a new world order of surreal amorality in which you are amazingly cleansed or sullied, blighted or redeemed based on the expediency of loyalty and alignment and the pragmatism of national survival. The consequence of

all this is that for every nation, no move in politics and business and culture is deemed innocuous. Every move is a quest for advantage. Because everybody is looking for advantage our notion of equity is Orwellian, and every single move is hedged with suspicion. How does a writer function in this kind of global environment?

In the argots of current criticism of cultural productions, one encounters expressions which hack back to the so-called “great tradition” related to a unitary knowing and living and being, a pseudo-ontological ecumenism which masks so much about difference without speaking to its necessary mediations. In one extreme in literary criticism, we have propositions of some sort of “grand narrative” at the polar opposite of which are the other minor national allegories. The originators of such notions and opinions fail to see or understand that there cannot be any mode of transcendentalism without the mediation of difference. Even in technological terms, it is clear that systemic harmony cannot be without the recognition of the role of every constituent part, from the little bolts to the great engine block. There are so many reckless fallacies about nations and national identities out there, morally stupid books by very good brilliant men about this kind of subject. In the American scene, there are books which come to mind such as William Bennett’s hypocritical *Book of Virtues*, Justice Bork’s insensitive *Slouching Toward Gomorrah*, Robert Hughes chauvinistic *Culture of Complaints: The Praying of America* and Allan Bloom’s grain-and-chaff *The Closing of the American Mind*. In some of their rather unsympathetic dimensions, such books make it into my list of stupid books by very intelligent men. The main thrust of such

books is the wishing away of discontent with the necessity for the rejection of differences without comprehensively and satisfactorily proposing how to make people in the system comfortable and willing to abandon their discontent and differences. It seems that in the imagination or understanding of such people, subcultures perpetuating or protecting their heritages amounts to journeys toward Gomorrah and destruction. The fact remains that if in the world, we do not need marginalized and hyphenated nationalities, the only solution is to literarily dissolve all margins and national boundaries. How we get about that and the prognostications of success or advocacy is anybody's guess. For now we must stay with a fact that is insistent in its evidence. And that is that if such tall talk is part of the process of globalization, we all have a very long way to go. It is a good ruse to obviate it all with our ingenious hunts for accommodating tropes and periodic paradigmatic palliatives. Even without the wool of jargon from practicing coterie of this strange trickery, it is clear that if such shifts are good enough, there would have been no more.

Tired of the dignified and pretentious posturings of a universal modernity at a hallucinated endpoint of a universal history, we have shifted uncomfortably to a post-modern discourse, and then of course, to that of post-coloniality. By "we", I am referring to those of us working in the academe of the West either by ideational inclusion or via the exigency of exile, in the great metropolis from where all theories emanate or originate. It is either that sort of affiliation or trapped in what I call the anxiety to name, we are constantly looking for what to so-called contribute to the stream of world theories and methodologies. The point about the unconscious nature of most human creativity is all lost to us. Nobody ever sets out announcing that today he or she is going to write a globally acceptable piece or classic for all humanity. From the Greeks through Shakespeare to Soyinka or Achebe, artists or writers just write or create. African writers and thinkers had better just write and think volitionally in whatever language or form they are moved or inclined to and let history sort out the rest. The verdict of humanity comes much later. One wishes that all so-called Third World writers involved in cultural production of all kinds would bear that point in mind. A new mode is already probably in the offing or gestating in the rarified hallways of Western academe awaiting the opportune moment for birthing like a most certain prophecy. Some anxious producers are waiting to gobble up what is coming, afraid of being left behind, afraid of being out of date, as if cultural production is the same thing with technological production.

Let me risk the charge of cynical negativist by suggesting that the fate of something like a qualitative globalization in cultural productions hangs on this realistic classic Latin fragment addressing the nature of all art. That ancient verdict rules that art is *id quod visum placet*, that which pleases to be seen. If art is that which pleases to be seen, globalists can all look anew at the great wisdom of the truism about beauty being in the beholder's eye. If beauty is in the beholder's eye, certainly, you can see there the logic and the illogic in the numerous prize-backed fists of either approbation or condemnation initiating from alien arbiters from various stations on our globe. If beauty is in the beholder's eye, you can appreciate the rectitude of the Nobel Prize committee in insisting that in their eyes Wole Soyinka deserved their prize and not Chinua Achebe. If beauty is in the beholder's eye, you can also appreciate the angry contrarily and rectitude of

Chinweizu's dismissive and disdainful reference to the eminent Nobel Prize committee as a gaggle of Swedes. There is indeed no greater rectitude in the organizers of the Commonwealth Prize for Literature proceeding in their own arbitration in regional formations, fully aware of the fact that the beholders of beauty from Asia, and Europe and Africa and so forth are quite likely to differ in their perspectives and qualitative judgments. There should be

more of such cautious approaches in dealing with difference in the cultural and political in the world. You would find instant ready answers to dreadful questions such as what religion is the best? Which ideology is better? And so forth...? For with our answers, we are all bound to begin to meddle with the so-called internal affairs of other peoples. Perhaps we probably all have one choice with such questions. Leave people alone with their national quirks or idiosyncracies and abide with the proverbial Igbo vision which insists that the fire wood of any people is always good enough to cook their foods. It is either that or parallax suspicion about our various motives in international relations.

Permit me to suggest that the international fiery crises generated by the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* fed on the flames of such inescapable suspicion. The *Satanic Verses* celebrate a reckless mongrelization of identities. Its narratology suggests that the globe is now a cosmopolis of trans-national and trans-cultural agents, and that the character of the emerging mongrels from the new demography is transcendental. Every being has a share of the warp and purity of that composite new whole. All the impulses and actuations of laughter and tears are the same as are the capacities to accept praise and insult. Hence the erroneous presumption that to lampoon what is regarded as sacred by one faith or sect would be seen in the context of the fallibility of all. In coming to this kind of rather hasty conclusion, the Rushdie's kind of vision skips the implication of the fact that the mongrels still have parents in abandoned homesteads with their sturdy foundations still intact. What we indeed have in such visions in literature should clearly be seen as futuristic fallacy. In addition to that, one is perhaps rather unkindly inclined to suspect that the reception of the West to such texts is because the deconstructive ire and barb of such criticism favor the human condition in the West than it does other cultural stations and targets. If those stations and targets are destabilized as a result of the criticism, the West stands to gain in many ways, especially economic with its strategic implications for global politics. That no station is perfect finds evidence in the number of fugitives, discontents, and dissidents from every nation. The complex character of places like Iraq after Saddam Hussein appears to be the best lesson in that regard for everybody.

I am inclined to believe that the literature which serves the world better is the literature which opens windows into different pockets of the world in a way that reveals for better understanding the uniqueness or particularity of that pocket. Before the mongrel, there were animals which mated to produce that new hybrid that fascinates us all. To overly celebrate the mongrel as if it is some ultimate find is like pretending that the branches of a tree contain the whole story of the tree. The mongrel

is only a new identity that is part of an existing multiplicity of identities. Not to see it that way is to sell short the ideal of globalism. When you look carefully at writings which hold our imaginations and intrigue or inform us specially, there is no question about their special services to that multiplicity of identities. *Things Fall Apart* is a story of Igbo land as it collides traumatically with colonialism. It tells us the story of the Igbo spirit and will, and about the European incursion, but the artistic fulcrum is Igbo. That fulcrum raises other things to view, and in the end, we have the story morphing into an African experience in colonialism. The total experience then becomes a human story applicable beyond its original encasing pocket. In the best of Wole Soyinka's works such as *The Road and Dance of the Forests*, we have the same kind of process with the Yoruba world and experience. That experience, through its fulcrum of Ogun-ism rises beyond the African toward what I have characterized elsewhere as a confluence of ontologies with the West. Those two examples should suffice in fortifying my point. That point is that from the best literature of every nation or ethnicity, we can extract the telling lineaments which easily fit into the transcendental fabric of what we call the global family. That is, I believe, the foundation of the term we all regard as the classic, if we would willingly and apolitically collapse all national canons into one global canon.

The classic comes from the forge of the national spirit. It pulses with the sacred and the totemic. The mythic foundations of the polity draw from the national classic, and not even the polity can stop it. The load of national culture is heavy but the classic always vehicles it lightly beyond those national boundaries. The fine literature of all nations, in the end, will become part of global literature. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, racism or invidious parochialism, cannot stop it. The power of polity or the arrogance of despotism cannot stop it. Such forces might delay it. I make this point here because of a revealing little drama when I was a keynote guest at a reading somewhere in Nigeria with a good gathering of ambitious, young, and aspiring Nigerian writers. During the discussion and question time, a German "friend" of Nigerian writers began lecturing the audience of young writers on what to write to make their works marketable in Germany. I listened intently in some kind of shock and surprise, saddened by the implications of what I was hearing. Inadvertent or fortuitous or deliberate counsel, this is, as clearly and innocuous and well-meaning as the speaker sounded or intended, cultural imperialism masquerading as friendly globalism. I wondered whether any Nigerian dared go to Germany to tell young German writers what to write for the Nigerian reader...

No good national literature hits other shores by invitation. Perhaps it could happen as

part of an imperial imposition, a time-bound phenomenon whose ashen end is always predictable. No good national literature strains its voice for a foreign audience. The power of the work does the straining. If there is any existing organ out there preparing to orchestrate a globalization of

literature, that organ will work when it allows, apolitically, each literature to express and assert itself through its own intrinsic coercive aesthetic power rather than gimmickry. Again, in the end, the wings of good literature could be clipped nowadays by the ignorance of readers, a lack of visibility, or indeed by a slightly sluggish sense of aesthetics in the readership. Sooner or later, however, after the paid and organized town-criers of undeserved praise have gone home, the good work will cry itself into the hearts of peoples around the globe. A good work of art will, in the end, globalize itself.

Culture wars have remained unending in the battle over the use and preservation of languages, and their roles as vehicles of culture and in cultural imperialism. The fact of the matter is that a language is always as powerful as those who use it. Language may be an ontological vehicle assisting in the fortification of the myths undergirding a cosmology, but invariably, it cannot be wished in and out of any cultural space. To wish it toward either direction, its holy alliance with economic and political power must be firm and unshakeable. The people must also be comfortable and confident with their culture and nationalism to keep them stubborn, resolute, and willing to persevere whether they are for or against.

Whichever way the war over languages goes, to whatever pitch it rages, the ghost of the great seminal debate on African Literature at Makerere in 1962 will remain difficult to pacify. That was the conference in which Obi Wali argued that authentic African literatures must be written in African languages. That is a truth too potent for dismissal or silence. Theoretically that is excellent and unimpeachable perspicacity. Practically, at least for most African countries, it is as actionable as holidaying on the moon. The economic, political, and cultural difficulties for Africa are immense. There are lessons about this from other times and circumstances. For example, the relationship between language, literature and national or international politics was the focal point of the battle between the troika of Chinweizu, Ihechukwu Madubuike, and Jennie Onwuchekwa and their more liberal antagonists in the fight for the soul and direction of African literatures in the 1970s. In the end, the battle died a natural death. The troika pursued their foes with ideas which were powerful and relevant as centerpieces in the politics of decolonization of African literatures, but clearly the project foundered on the overkill of its ambition and its untenable and somewhat flawed pragmatic. Their ideological adversaries, with the growing culturally

recursive character of the globe had time on their side, bolstered by the perennial crises in African politics whose chronic peonage remains a baggage too heavy to be logged on to the puniest of battles against dependency. Certainly, that is what it is all about, a battle against dependency.

In the 1980s, celebrated Kenyan author, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, revived the battle. That it was hitched rather awkwardly to his Afro-Marxism did and will not produce a different result. The fact remains for African leaders, thinkers, and countries that want to re-tread that route is that the battle will always be doomed even before it takes off. To ever succeed, economic independence will always be first. Otherwise, exercises in the preservation and use of specific languages will remain

palliative psycho-cultural games, distractions from the main game against dependencies of all kinds.

Let us draw lessons from other histories. Shakespeare wrote for Elizabethan England. Despite imperial baggage from France and Rome and old vandalistic challenges, there was no recorded Shakespearean grandstanding on behalf of the English language or culture and England.

What should be the attitude of African countries to the threat posed by globalization to indigenous African languages? Like technology, language should be approached by selective application; it should be used like cars or antibiotics and other technological productions from other countries that have become inescapable commodities for a normal day-to-day living. In deed, instead of looking at it from the negativity of a deleterious globalization or from the dangerous perspective of its being a weapon for cultural imperialism, languages and literature should simply be seen as instruments for positive social change. If for no other reason, the attitude should be the attitude applied to the pragmatics of only choosing to fight winnable battles.

The acceptance or rejection of Foreign Languages should depend on both utility and not simply the politics of implementation. While encouraging or promoting their own indigenous languages as internal conditions permit, African countries should also be looking at the foreign language through the selective prisms of language planning organs.

There are countries whose language policies are clearly part of their international diplomatic initiatives. Such countries and their programs should be welcome and

encouraged as part of clearly thought out culturally symbiotic relationships. The principles of international business should be there to guide decisions for participation. In all spheres, what to gain should always be in the fore of such arrangements and should of course prevail over what to lose.

There is an untapped and abiding lesson in the best systems of education in the African continent. Globalization of any language may well come to Africa with the same unintended benefit with which colonization and Westernization hit many African countries. The destruction of weakened autochthonous foundations gave way to new epistemological structures which combined into hybrids stronger than both old and new. These were clearly reflected in the character of the best African secondary schools and universities and the stamina of the new breed of African minds, post-independence, before the present rot and atrophy. Products from African schools knew not just their own world very well but also the world beyond them. They competed abroad against the best and held their own, successfully and triumphantly. The testimony is there in the works and legacy of pioneers in all fields and areas of human endeavor from governance to education.

It is possible for what we call globalization to affect Africa the same way. If what happened in the past was fortuitous or inadvertent sans any sense of equity, what should happen today should be more deliberate and programmatic, mutually satisfactory. Care should be taken to make sure that globalization is proceeding as the march of civilization ought to have proceeded. Whether it is in

the sharing of literature from other places or in the use of languages, the principle should always be guided by the abiding cliché of give and take, the golden rule principle of reciprocal accommodation. It is either that or the grave and ominous amorality of one presumably all-knowing subject giving and taking at will to and from a presumably insentient object. When, therefore, we hear or teach students about the Purfrookian invitation “let us go then you and I...”, the honest teacher of that deceptive coaxing for commiseration must situate the detangling hermeneutic in its appropriate alien universe with its differences in the experience of history and ontology and the total pedigree of thought. It is still too soon to presume a leveling unity of subject and object on one global platform.

Conclusion

The article concludes that true cultural globalization cannot be an imposed, Western-centric monologue but must emerge from a respectful, equitable dialogue among diverse national literatures and languages. Authentic global culture is built when unique national experiences, expressed through their own intrinsic aesthetic power, resonate universally on their own merit. For Africa, this means writers should create from their volition and cultural contexts, not tailor work for foreign markets. Ultimately, good literature transcends borders itself. Real globalism requires reciprocity and justice in political and economic spheres first, rejecting the paradigm of an "all-knowing" Western subject acting upon an "insentient" non-Western object.

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