

## **NATIONALIST SENTIMENTS IN SELECTED AFRICAN LITERATURE**

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### **Abstract**

*The national sentiment in African literature reflects a conviction in the superiority of one's culture, traditions, or heritage over others, often as a response to colonial powers. Rooted in resentment and discontent, nationalist sentiment is a recurring theme in postcolonial discourse. While many studies explore this sentiment, fewer examine Commonwealth literature as a medium for both supporting and opposing imperialism. This research critically analyzes selected African texts within the framework of postcolonial theory, focusing on the linguistic strategies employed by writers to navigate the paradox of language. Specifically, it examines how binary oppositions manifest through expressions of antipathy toward colonial languages while using those same languages to articulate resistance. Language emerges as both a unifying tool for national consciousness and a weapon of systemic subjugation in multilingual societies. The study highlights the challenges of asserting nativist identity through an alternative language and uses English as a case study to explore its dual role in countering imperialism and perpetuating dependency. By exposing the contradictions inherent in employing English to resist colonial influence, the research contributes to understanding Commonwealth literature and its role in postcolonial identity formation, offering a foundation for future scholarly inquiries.*

**Keywords:** Nationalist sentimentalism, binary opposition, post-colonialism, multiculturalism.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Nationalist sentiment is a multifaceted concept that encompasses various dimensions and influences. It is not an innate quality but rather an acquired disposition shaped by emotions and perceptions. Sentiment, in this context, encompasses sentiments of kindness, love, and sympathy,

all of which contribute to the development of nationalist attitudes. This sentiment is malleable, influenced by external factors such as education and socialization, which explains its propensity to vary among individuals. The history of nationalist sentiment reveals its evolution into a formidable force in modern times. While people have long held attachments to their native soil, familial traditions, and territorial authorities, it was only in the latter part of the 18th century that nationalism emerged as a widely recognized and influential sentiment that permeated both public and private spheres. In fact, it stands as one of the preeminent determining factors in modern history due to its dynamic and pervasive nature.

Benedict Anderson's seminal work, "Imagined Communities" (1983), underscores the universality of nationalism, asserting that every individual belongs to a nation, each of which is distinct from others. Nationalism, as a concept, is powerful enough to inspire individuals to make significant sacrifices for their nations, yet it remains elusive in terms of precise definition. To understand nationalism, one must also explore the identity of the nationalist and the concept of a nation itself. A nation is defined as a sizable collective of individuals who share commonalities in culture, language, history, ethnicity, and territory. It represents the collective identity of a group of people defined by these shared characteristics, often with a more overtly political dimension than an ethnic group. Benedict Anderson characterizes a nation as an "imagined community," highlighting the role of shared connections and a sense of belonging. Paul James similarly views a nation as an "abstract community," emphasizing its impersonal, yet collectively binding nature. Scholars concur that nations are socially constructed entities, shaped by historical contingencies and contextual influences. While people have historically held attachments to their kinship groups, traditions, and homeland, nationalism as a prominent and influential ideology did not emerge until the late 18th century.

From the foregoing, nationalist sentiment is a complex and evolving phenomenon, shaped by emotions and external influences. Its emergence as a pivotal force in modern history highlights the significance of understanding the concept of a nation and the role it plays in shaping individual and collective identities. This scholarly exploration underscores the multifaceted nature of nationalism and its enduring impact on societies worldwide.

### **An introspect on African Literature**

The discussion of nationalist sentiment and the concept of a nation can be extended to the context of African literature, as African literature has played a significant role in exploring and expressing various facets of nationalism and identity on the African continent.

African literature has been instrumental in shedding light on the complex relationship between nationalist sentiment and the formation of post-colonial nations. Much like in other parts of the world, African nationalist sentiment is often an acquired disposition, influenced by emotions, historical legacies, and external factors. African writers have portrayed the diversity of sentiments, from pride and love for their countries to the struggle for political independence and the quest for identity.

In the realm of African literature, the idea of a nation takes on particular significance. Many African countries are composed of diverse ethnic groups, languages, and cultural traditions. African writers have used literature to explore how these diverse elements come together to form a nation, emphasizing the role of language, history, and shared experiences. For instance, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), explores the clash between traditional Igbo culture and the imposition of British colonialism, highlighting the impact of these external forces on the concept of a nation.

Moreover, the concept of an "imagined community," as discussed by Benedict Anderson (1983), is highly relevant in the African context. African nations, like others, are often imagined communities with citizens who may be linguistically, ethnically, and culturally diverse. Writers like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o have explored the role of language in shaping national identity, advocating for the promotion of indigenous African languages as a means of strengthening national bonds.

It's important to recognize that African literature is not a monolithic entity but rather a diverse landscape with writers from different regions and cultural backgrounds offering unique perspectives on nationalism and nationhood. While some writers may focus on the struggles for independence and the formation of modern African nations, others may examine the complexities of identity, migration, and diaspora.

In a nutshell, African literature provides a rich and multifaceted lens through which the study explores nationalist sentiment and the concept of a nation in the African context. It allows for a deeper understanding of how historical, cultural, and linguistic factors contribute to the development of national identities in a continent with a complex history of colonialism, independence movements, and post-colonial nation-building.

### **The Dynamics of Language in Shaping Nationalist Sentiments**

The role of language in nationalist struggles encompasses a multifaceted and critical dimension. To contextualize this discussion, it's essential to explore various perspectives on nationalism, such as Primordialism or Perennialism, Ethnosymbolism, and Modernization Theory.

Modernization Theory posits that nations are essentially "imagined communities" where shared sentiments create collective identities and foster political solidarity (Wikipedia, 2022).

According to this theory, a nationalist is an individual deeply connected to their nation, vigorously advocating for its interests, often to the detriment of other nations. Nationalism, in this sense, is an "invented tradition" where nationalist sentiment is cultivated rather than an inherent quality. It is a sentiment driven by emotions, including kindness, love, and sympathy, and its nature varies based on how it is nurtured and acquired. However, it's important to note that nationalist sentiment can sometimes take on dangerous forms.

The idea of national superiority underpins nationalism, rooted in the unproven belief that one's own culture, ethnic group, traditions, or history are superior to others. Nationalist sentiment also encompasses the emotions stirred by violations of core principles, often stemming from individual attitudes grounded in a belief in national belonging and the perceived superiority of one's own nation. In the context of colonialism, it manifests as the anger experienced by colonized people toward their colonizers and how they employ the English language to express their grievances, pain, and anger.

National sentiment represents individual apprehensions, attachments to, and understanding of one's nation-state. However, it's crucial to recognize that language plays a pivotal role in this dynamic. Language is not merely a tool for communication but also a vessel carrying the spirit and cultural experiences of a people, as well as their cosmology.

As Nwadike (as cited in Olaoye, 748) succinctly puts it, "Language is the key to the heart of people." Losing this key means losing the connection to the people, but preserving and safeguarding this key can unlock doors to wealth and affluence, ultimately contributing to national development. National development, in this context, signifies the growth of a nation in terms of internal cohesion, integration, unity, economic well-being, increased citizen participation in governance, and educational progress.

In essence, language stands as the most potent weapon employed by the occident to exert dominance over the orient. It transcends mere communication, serving as a vessel of cultural identity and a means through which nationalist sentiments are expressed and shaped.

### **Multilingualism as an Offshoot of Nationalist Sentiment**

Multilingualism is prevalent in the country, as it is in most African countries. The issue of "forging forward," which causes every language to compete with one another for national recognition or official status, whether indigenous or alien, is always brought up. The English language has developed as that favored language, either by accident or purpose, thankfully or

sadly, without which the unification of countries is highly implausible, if not outright impossible. Nigeria for instance is a multilingual nation where an estimate of about 516 languages is spoken of which Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba are the major languages with about twenty million speakers each.

With the introduction of trading ties on the West African coast in the 16th century, the British introduced English to Nigeria; nonetheless, it was not until the middle of the 19th century that English was systematically studied in Nigeria. It has now spread like wildfire throughout the country as it is used predominantly in all formal settings and even as a lingua franca in social interaction among the educated elites; additionally, it is treated as the official language of the nation, despite the fact that there is no government written law or decree spelling that out. In order for the British to manage their colonial authority, the English language was adopted in Nigeria as a necessity. The missionaries were the first to establish schools in Nigeria in order to spread the gospel, but the British took over school administration and standardized the subjects taught in the various missionary schools. In the 1882 and 1887 education ordinances, they also established a policy that made English language a core topic as well as the language of instruction.

According to Njoku (218), for the nationalists to express themselves and be heard, they had to use English language so that their message would be able to reach the centre because when the nationalist expressed their sentiments (racism, displacement, lost of identity, nativity, migration, multiplicity in language et al.) in their indigenous language, their voices were not heard, that is, it could not get to the centre due to lack of autograph, in the sense that their native language were underdeveloped; with the help of the arrival of colonists, those languages were able to come out strong and all.

### **Analysis of Nationalist Sentiment in African Literature**

The nationalist sentiment is all about the violations and anger the natives experienced by the colonizers and how they decided to use English language to challenge the colonizers. These natives wrote in their native languages but because their audience was limited, they had to get those texts translated into English, because writing in their native language could not get them the attention of the colonizers. For example, making textual reference to Okot P. Bitek's *Song of Lawino*, he wrote the song in his mother tongue (Acholi) but the song could not reach the bigger audience, so he had to get the poetry text translated to English language so it could get to the centre. However, with the emergence of the anti colonial movements toward the end of the 20th century, the field known as postcolonialism evolved. It included writings from various scholars

and critics from the ‘third world’ countries whose aims were to liberate the occident from what had been attributed to it through the Eurocentric depiction.

Making reference to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, he portrayed Africans as ‘barbaric’, Asia as ‘savages’ and ‘uncivilized’, etc which led to the publication of *Things Fall Apart* (1958), in response to Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. We also have Ngugi wa Thiong’o; Ngugi writes that the issue of language use in African literature is of great importance to the post colonial writers. While some see the necessity of writing African literature in the indigenous language, others view that taking it to the next level by writing it in ‘world languages’ such as English, French et al., to have a wide readership, would be the best option. African literature cannot be written in an imperial language and still claim to be African. And this makes one of the reasons why Ngugi reverted to writing in Gikuyu after seventeen years of writing in English. Making reference to *Decolonizing the Minds*, Ngugi made mention of a boy who had distinctions in all subjects but English; the boy was pronounced ‘failed’ by his teachers because he failed English as a subject and, on the other hand, Ngugi who passed English language but failed some other subjects was able to proceed to the high school. This pinpoints the fact that Africans have been made to believe that having knowledge of English language is a measure for intelligence. The understanding of this paper is likened to that of the translation process. Interpretation of works into another language rather than its original language cannot be accurate and thus it cannot convey the original message. This is because during translation, some cultural and connotative features might be lost; the message derived from the interpretation might not be as real as the message inscribed in the indigenous written text.

The nationalists are fighting against racism, cultural subjugation and imperialism. In a bid to project their indigenous language to gain autography in the mode of expressing the nationalist sentiment, they end up using English language as a lingua franca for communication. This contradicts the original intent—fighting for your language to gain autography but you still use another language as your weapon instead of the language you are fighting for. Why does it always have to be the occident to compromise with the colonizer? Why can we not have the colonizer also compromise with the occident? This is evident in Soyinka’s *A Play of Giants*; the writer portrays how some bad African leaders ruled over their people in an unjust manner.

These leaders are dictators; they are not worthy enough to be called leaders. It is set in a fictional International Embassy called Bugaran Embassy. This serves as the meeting point for the Heads of Government in Africa’s independent countries. It serves as a place to boast of the unquestionable power they exercise in their countries. Their people are described as suffering

and at a worse state of development than the colonial masters left them. Soyinka made it known that even after independence, these African leaders still had a way of paying homage to the colonialists and these colonists still had a way of meddling into African affairs. He just portrayed the African leaders as clowns who just come together to boast of power though in reality powerless and more like a toothless dog, and he was able to use English to reflect the issues happening in Africa simplicity of the language and the conscious use of errors to reflect the personality of a particular character being not that learned and all.

All African nationalists have the same sentiment towards the colonists as oppressors. Writing became a tool for protest against the system, though, as portrayed in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, he uses the text to tell history and reflect how the colonists came to Africa to disrupt the affairs of the people. He portrays how organized the system was before the colonists came and we could see the view of Eleshin Oba in the text; he was meant to die after performing the ritual after the king's death but the colonialists' deemed the practice as barbaric (why someone would sacrifice his own life for just a king). Eleshin Oba was ready to sacrifice himself when the District Officer, Simon Pilkings disrupted the ritual and got him arrested for trying to do something as barbaric as killing himself. Olounde, the son of Eleshin Oba, had a taste of the Western culture; he was sent to Europe to study medicine and on his return he went to meet Pilkings in his home but met his wife instead and Jane was commenting on how he had become a grown man; she remembered how passionate he was to become a doctor. But even with so much taste of the Western culture, he still believed in his own culture and tradition; he still condemned the Western culture and got into an argument with Jane that the Western culture was just overhyped and there was nothing special about it.

Olounde, knowing the calamity that would befall the people of Oyo if they did not perform that ritual, in order to fulfill the tradition, performed the ritual instead. And even though the story varies among the Yoruba people, Soyinka still used English to make it very clear and reflect the people of this period; he told the whole story of how the colonial masters have interrupted the lives of the people of the Oyo Empire.

Gabriel Okara's *Piano and Drums* is just the disagreement between African culture and the Western culture. It depicts the issue encountered by those who are faced with circumstances that force them to abandon their culture in favor of a Western one, in the name of globalization. Okara creates a contrast between the past and the present in the poetry. Though the poem's main theme is culture clash, it is inspired by Okara's disgust with the post-independence elites' decision to uncritically adopt Western cultural values at the expense of their traditional cultural

values, rather than redeeming the African continent from the shackles of colonialism. As a result, the African society's social system collapsed.

This was due to the fact that these African elites were unprepared to engage in the manipulation of the Western culture's intricacies. When confronted with two different and competing cultures, post-colonial Africans showed significant shortcomings in managing areas of difference. Making reference to the poem opening, the poet-commitment to his cultural background is highlighted in the first stanza before the incursion of a foreign culture. It exemplifies the traditional culture's inherent simplicity. 'When at break of day at a riverside,' the inspiring serenity of traditional culture is suggested, even with the imagery introduced by the drum in the lines, 'I hear the jungle drums telegraphing/the mystic rhythm, urgent, raw.' The poet-speaker elucidates Africans' relationships with nature. The last three lines of the first verse reveal that Africans' primary occupation is hunting.

The rhythm created by the drums reminds the poet-speaker of his childhood, when he enjoyed viewing wild creatures or, more likely, hunting. In the third stanza, Okara announces the presence of a seductive culture represented by the 'Piano'. Meaning that, a foreign civilization with vast intricacies enticed countless naïve Africans like him. Okara and others like him are seduced by Western society to adapt what it represents at the expense of their own culture and norms, despite their considerable ignorance. He is torn between traditional and Western civilizations and is unsure which path to take. The poem contrasts Africans' simple village existence with the complex Western society that emerged as a result of colonial occupation on the continent. The poem appears to provide an answer to the question of why a traditional society's heritage and identity have been lost to a foreign culture. Similarly, in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, Kimathi fought for the freedom of Kenyans, even when he gave up his freedom for his people and undergoes tortures from the enemies, we still see some Kenyans who gave up their patriotism [such as Hungu, Gati, Wambararia, Mwendanda and Gaceru] for some shillings.

### **Conclusion**

This study discusses nationalism and sentiments as separate words in an attempt to give a proper background knowledge into what nationalist sentiments really is before defining the term itself. It then further examines the contradictions between the nationalist sentiment and use of English in expressing those sentiments and in its findings, posits that sentiments are the muse which drives the nationalist creative works into putting out their heartfelt stances into writings, and the use of English as the communicative medium for passing across these sentiments as a necessity to reach a larger audience.



We can conclude that one of the most powerful forms of agitation or protest against colonialism is the use of language. Because most of these nationalists that fought against colonialism were writers they made use of writing and even the works of those who wrote in the native language were later translated to English so as to be able to reach their targeted audience. We can see that language is the major weapon used to fight European domination. With reference to the literary texts, this paper agrees that language has played an important role in documenting the happening in all the selected texts as exemplified with Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, a historical play set in the ancient town of Oyo. Despite the fact that the event happened in the old Oyo Empire, whose people are Yoruba speakers, Soyinka decided to communicate his characters in English to formulate, reflect and retract the situation so as to tell not only the whites, but the world that Africans are organized and cultured. This answers the question of linguistic sentiment in a nationalist attempt to use language as a major weapon in fighting against cultural subjugation.

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