



Mediation between Linguistic Hegemony and Periphery Languages in the Nobel Prize for Literature

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Abstract

This article explores the Nobel Prize for Literature as an embodiment of Western hegemony, despite its universal disposition. It demonstrates that the award is prestigious and canonises selected literary works as quintessential, as well as offering social and economic benefits to authors. However, the article contends that there are ideological and geopolitical considerations apart from quality that are addressed by the Swedish Academy to identify the winner every year, chief among them being the language of writing. The article demonstrates that literary works that are apt to win are generally those that are written in the dominant languages of the metropolis, especially English. It further casts doubts on the chances of winning for writers who use marginal languages, for example, African national languages, considering that even translations tend to misrepresent texts in the source language. The article avers that the Nobel Prize epitomises hegemony, language being a key component. Using postcolonial theory, the article further lays bare how writers use marginal languages to mediate with linguistic hegemony through appropriation, abrogation and evolution of argots. The article asserts that the Swedish Academy needs to rethink the question of language in awarding the Nobel Prize for Literature or else it can become displaced and parochialised as users of minor languages negotiate with it.

Résumé

Cet article étudie le prix Nobel de littérature comme une incarnation de l'hégémonie occidentale, malgré sa dimension universelle. Il démontre que le prix est prestigieux et canonise des œuvres littéraires sélectionnées comme quintessence, tout en offrant des avantages sociaux et économiques

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aux auteurs. Cependant, l'article soutient qu'en dehors de la qualité, des considérations idéologiques et géopolitiques sont, chaque année, prises en compte par l'Académie suédoise pour désigner le gagnant, le critère principal étant la langue d'écriture. L'article démontre que les œuvres littéraires susceptibles de gagner sont généralement celles écrites dans les langues dominantes des métropoles, notamment l'anglais. Cette situation a, en outre, jeté le doute sur les chances de gagner d'écrivains qui utilisent des langues marginales, par exemple les langues nationales africaines, étant donné que même les traductions ont tendance à déformer les textes de la langue source. L'article affirme que le prix Nobel incarne l'hégémonie, la langue constituant un élément-clé. S'appuyant sur la théorie postcoloniale, l'article démontre comment les écrivains utilisent les langues marginales pour faire face à l'hégémonie linguistique par l'appropriation, l'abrogation et l'évolution des argots. L'article affirme que l'Académie suédoise doit repenser la question de la langue lors de l'attribution du prix Nobel de littérature, au risque d'être supplantée et cloisonnée lorsque les utilisateurs de langues mineures négocient avec elle.

Introduction

The composition of literature occurs among a wide range of communities in different geographical regions of the world. Literary art is composed in a variety of tongues reflecting the approximately 7,000 languages in the world (Jager 2010). But the languages in question are not equal: they operate in stratification. A number of European languages such as English, German, Swedish and French are hegemonic, while many African languages such as Kiswahili, Amharic, Xhosa and Yoruba are not. Then there are languages which appear powerless in this hierarchy, and which are used by small communities in different countries. In East Africa, such languages would include Meru, Kisii, Suba, Alur, Acholi, Lango, Nyamwezi, Chaga and Iramba, to name just a few. There is abundance of literature in these languages, their tiered status notwithstanding.

Literary pieces are not always of the same quality: some may border on excellence, while others could be found wanting. A number of literary prizes have been initiated to recognise writers who produce pieces of exceptional quality when compared with other composers. Marc (2003) states that there are several factors that are considered when deciding which works are superior to others. These include reviews in literary journals, the opinions of experts in the literary field and academic journals, and the author's prestige; which all end up coming up with a canon that defines what makes a piece of literature high quality.

One of the most prestigious intellectual awards in the contemporary world is the Nobel Prize In Literature (Urde & Geysler 2014), awarded

annually by the Swedish Academy in line with the will of the Swedish philanthropist Alfred Nobel, who invented dynamite. Rollason (2016) says that the award is issued to literary pieces that are 'the most outstanding in an ideal direction'. Other Nobel Prizes are in the fields of Physics, Medicine, Chemistry, Economics and Peace.

A literary award presupposes that there is universality or globality of literature. It can be deduced that there is a barometer used across the globe to distinguish top-notch pieces of literature from those that are not as good. However, looking at the distribution of the Nobel Prizes for Literature in the last few decades, there are countries that appear to have an edge over others. European and American authors have been awarded the prize many more times than authors in the rest of the world. According to Statista (2019) the top ten countries in the world with the most Nobel Prizes for Literature are as follows: France – 15; United States and United Kingdom – 12, Germany and Sweden – 8; Italy and Spain – 6. Others are Poland, Ireland and Russia, all with four winners.

Geographic regions aside, it is apparent that the award has mainly been won by writers who write in the hegemonic languages of the world. These are languages that have been foisted on the world as Very Important Languages (VILs), as opposed to marginal tongues. Writers from outside Europe and America who have won the prize either wrote in the dominant languages or had their literary works translated into them. This article contends that winning the Nobel Prize for Literature may not necessarily be informed by the compelling nature of the work, but rather by as a result of ideological and geopolitical factors, language choice being paramount.

Busting the Lustre of the Nobel

Literary prizes are prestigious and many writers yearn for them. An award legitimises a literary production, while those who miss out are deemed not worthy of recognition. Awards are covered widely in the media and some authors have their works identified as school networks. The awards are recognised in the author's country, and all over the globe. Poyner (2009:1) for example, argues that the literary prizes won by J.M. Coetzee, including the Nobel, made him one of the most important writers of his time.

In addition, an award can boost the author's book sales internationally. Authors are also likely to earn prestigious invitations as keynote speakers in conferences or be appointed as adjunct lecturers. They also receive wide acclaim in terms of academic dissertations and critiques of their works as seen in Gokalp (2010). Publishers and literati search out award-winning authors, sometimes with contracts to sign.

Kiguru (2016) asserts that winners receive large sums of money, manifesting the economic return on creative writing. The prize money attests to the fact that writing can be lucrative, contrary to claims in African countries that the arts – including literature – do not bring reward. (This is more so when artists have to contend with piracy).

He says that when authors win awards for their literary works, they are legitimised as the best in the strata of writers. Their genius is validated and acknowledged as quintessential. Kiguru (2016:27) further argues that:

The award body, therefore, becomes an institution that confers a mark of excellence on a literary text and in the process, it influences not only the consumption of literature but its production as well. Writers compete for that stamp of approval and acknowledgement that prizes bring. In this way, the award industry becomes an important agent of literary canonization.

Other writers, and upcoming writers, regard award-winners as role models, and some try to emulate them in their writing. However, what such writers fail to understand is that the winners may not necessarily receive awards owing to their fecundity in creativity or skill in writing, but simply because they fitted the parameters of the awarding bodies. The parameters could include the language used to write, geographic locations and political interests. Such considerations may have little to do with the quality of the work, but simply indicate the author's acquiescence to the demands of the awarding institution. Ponzanesi (2014:129) states:

Literary awards help to exponentially increase the visibility and the sales of nominated authors, magically equip them with unprecedented publicity which their predecessors could only have dreamed of, and maybe provide them a place in the short-term canon. The question remains whether this canon is not contaminated by the old imperial regime evaluation. In between there is the whole publishing industry, with its annexed complicity with the literary award system. This has to deal with the limits of translation, the exact criteria for eligibility and the composition of the juries for awarding prizes. The readers, reviewers and academics receive what could be an ephemeral and at times purely provocative selection to what the literary awards world offers.

The criterion for selecting literary prize winners is shrouded in mystery. Marc (2003:1) is concerned that the parameters for measuring the best literary works are void:

In the field of literary studies, the notion of classification by quality is not only one of the most frequently applied notions; it is generally also one of the least explicated. Some authors are considered more important than others, but it is left unexplained on what grounds this hierarchy is based. Many literary

scholars claim to objectively investigate and establish the literary quality of an author, while describing, interpreting, and evaluating his or her texts.

The author further claims that there exists no explicit standard to measure aesthetics and quality, a matter that renders measurability of such artistic works methodologically shaky.

While the lack of a methodological criterion for measuring avant-garde literary works is a serious matter of concern, the fact that the awarding juries could be articulating hegemonic causes is disturbing. The verdict that they issue on winning literary works could be fraught with dubious undercurrents that have nothing much to do with the quality of the piece. Referring to a literary seminar that she once attended, Kiguru (2016:1) demonstrates that the literary awards may not always be looking for excellence, but for parameters that perpetuate the hegemony of some cultures and languages:

The aspiring writers were guided in creating a literature that would fit into the market demands: writing stories that would appeal to different literary magazines and prizes. For example, the stories had to be in English and the length remained between 3,000 and 15,000 words. The facilitator also guided us in writing stories that represented 'African sensibilities.'

The quotation demonstrates that the shortlisting and awarding of literary prizes may not be necessarily guided by the quality of the work, but by the political and cultural demands of the awarding institution. Gokalp (2010:172) holds that when Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2006, the Turkish public and media reacted with both love and anger. Many people were convinced that the author had instigated a global crusade against Turkey for the sake of the award, and that he won the prize for belittling his motherland. But there were those who celebrated his award as an honour bestowed on the nation of Turkey.

Klein (2016) demonstrates how Mo Yan's 2012 Nobel Prize was received with condemnation especially in Europe and America. He was condemned for defending the Chinese Communist Party and the ruling regime in one of his novels. However, in his home country, he was revered as a hero who had ensured that China earned the elusive Nobel for literature. Klein goes on to say that some of those who cast stones at the book had never read it, saying that Western scholars condemned Mo Yan owing to their 'West-centric' positions, and not because his Chinese novels were wanting. The awarding of 2016's Nobel Prize for Literature to Bob Dylan was also controversial because it was argued that the author was a songwriter, and the award should have been won by 'real' writers (Rollason 2016). These criticisms of the Literature Nobel Prize, whether justified or not, show that the awarding body is influenced by dogmas, and not necessarily by ingredients of quality.

Linguistic Hegemony in the Literature Nobel Prize

The art of literature is produced and practised by people the world over. The art is used to inspire people, for self-expression, for identity-making, to celebrate, mourn, teach and entertain. It is composed in written or oral form. Various forms of art use various raw materials. For example, wood is key to a sculptor, a pen is fundamental to an artist, colours are prerequisites for painting, while soil is key to pottery. The chief raw material for the art of literature is language (wa Thiong'o 1986; Wellek & Warren 1984). It is language that is moulded and manipulated by the composer of a literary artefact to realise the artistic product.

Carlucci (2013) asserts that language is not a single object but a culture and philosophy. Similar observations are made by Ngũgĩ (1997), who argues that language is a carrier of a people's culture. Suffice to state that every community in the world has a language through which to craft and practise its literature. Considering that there are about 7,000 languages in the world (Worldatlas 2017), one can presume that there are literary works composed in a similar number of languages all over the world. Not all quality pieces may end up receiving attention from the Nobel Prize jurists since they could be authored in constrained languages. The jurists do also consider literary works that have been translated, but as Klein (2016) argues, translation can cause misrepresentation of the language as it stands in the source text. He cites Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* which was mistranslated in Arabic and related languages. Klein further asserts that Mo Yan was castigated by the metropolis, but his Chinese works were knowingly or unknowingly misrepresented in English translations.

It has already been mentioned that the awarding institutions are not always driven by objectivity in the quality of work when identifying winners. As Ives (2004) argues, other considerations play a part. Among these are the language used to write. For example, English has been privileged from the time of colonialism, while the languages of the people in the colonies were marginalised (Ashcroft et al. 1989:3).

By focusing on the life of Gramsci, Ives (2004) argues that language is a potent tool that can be used to galvanise and sway populations, especially by the elite. It has been used to consolidate or fragment populations in all spheres of life. A good example is language standardisation which can be used to consolidate people into a nation state. Language policies are also expected to realise a standard in education, politics, health, social, cultural and in the economic spheres (Ives 2004:15). The people behind language policies and standardisations are normally the ruling elite who have goals which may

not necessarily be in the interest of the masses, who are coerced or consent to the goals of the elite. However, as Ives (2004) points out, consent is in most cases suspect, taking into consideration that the masses do not have options when it comes to the policies of the ruling class, and are therefore left to begrudgingly accept them. For example, some people may not want to use languages that have been chosen for standardisation because they are still attached to their mother tongue and dialects. In addition, the populace may be averse to the question of foreign languages being declared national or official, instead of their own mother tongues. In the final analysis, they accept the standards of the elite, which are simply hegemonic, while their own voices and interests are swept under the carpet. The ruling class is wont to claim that they rule through the consent of the people, but the end result is the organisation of society in terms of hierarchy by the elite.

The Nobel Prize for Literature suggests that there is universality in literature, from which the canon is judged. Despite the globality of literature, Ahluwalia (2001), postulates that where there is globalisation, there is localisation. Taking our cue from the standardisation of languages and the enactment of language policies by states, we can deduce a language hegemony that is nurtured and perpetuated by the Nobel Prize for Literature. The choice of language for candidates for the Nobel Prize for Literature is hegemonic since it divides writers in hierarchies. Ives (2004) opines that language status can either be vertical or horizontal. The horizontal axis implies that language varieties coexist and help people to transact their obligations on a daily basis. However, the vertical plane assumes that some languages are more prestigious than others, resulting in social stratification. In respect to the Swedish Academy, the language status inclines to the vertical axis. This corroborates Mazrui and Mazrui (1998), Phillipson (1992) and Bisong's (1995) assertion that there are dominant and minor languages in the world. Thus, there are preponderant languages which are the preference of the elite, and minor languages which are mainly used by the marginalised.

From Gramsci's standpoint, as captured by Carlucci (2013), hegemony indicates how literary writers in constrained regions elect to adhere to the standards of the Swedish Academy, and by extension to Eurocentrism, to write literary works which could win the Nobel Prize. They are not coerced to undertake the exercise but do it for prestige and for socio-economic and political power. Yet, going by the history of the awarding jurists, one gets the impression that those who are likely to win the Nobel Prize for Literature are authors who write mainly in European languages, especially in English. Others who stand to win are those who write in their national languages, but have their works translated into the hegemonic languages.

There is a cohort of writers whose choice is to write in their national languages, including their mother tongues. The Swedish Academy is categorical that such authors can submit literary materials in any language since they have experts to review works in all languages (Chinaculture 2017). Washbourne (2016:57) contradicts the above postulation by asserting that only two members of the five-member committee have proficiency in non-European languages at any given time. The Nobel Committee advises the 18-member Swedish Academy, who are proficient in as many as 13 languages. Washbourne quotes Parks and Wastberg (2011), who say that when the five members of the Nobel Committee have a hunch about a literary genius in an unknown language, they solicit the services of expert translators and oath-sworn specialists to offer advice. But one can surmise that the Committee's lack of competence in many world languages compromises the outcome of the Nobel Prize for Literature. Washbourne (2016:58) argues that:

The reliance on expert informants for their qualitative valuations can very easily devolve into campaigning and logrolling that compromise any objective measures of literary qualification.

Washbourne further argues that while the Academy can source for expertise from gurus in languages in which they are not conversant, there is a question as to whether such works can ever be privileged in relation to the dominant languages which the five-member Nobel Committee understands. It is also not clear whether the Committee would pass the bias test by privileging a work that does conform to the canon because it is in languages such as Kiswahili, Luganda, Yoruba, Maasai, Luo, Kikuyu, Nyamwezi, and so forth.

It is argued that nobody is forced to write according to particular parameters in order to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, but instead, that people do it out of their own volition. But one cannot ignore the fact that the Swedish Academy has strong economic muscle, while many writers in the periphery may have little financial power. Because the award is prestigious, creative writers in the periphery are bound to the requirements of the Nobel, whether they deem it hegemonic or not. They know that by winning the prize, they stand to gain a fortune and global recognition. Bangha (2010:60) argues that the Nobel Prize can catapult an author from obscurity to instant fame. He says that Rabindranath Tagore, the 1913 Nobel Prize Winner, was an unknown poet for such a long time that when the award suddenly shot him into fame, the first treatises on him misspelt his name, misrepresented his age and even mistook him for a musician. He says that for the first time the European discourse acknowledged that the Orient had a living culture.

The choice to use dominant languages in the hope of winning the Nobel Prize for Literature may be driven by good intentions, and may appear innocuous. However, as Ives (2004:60) argues, the move could prove injurious to marginal consciousness and freedom. This is because the ruling classes are apt to levy their world vision and philosophies to the periphery groups. In addition as Kiguru (2016:62) argues:

International awards industries rating as gatekeepers of knowledge in African literature, continue to canonize works by Anglophones and diasporic writers at the expense of local writers publishing in African and other European languages.

Literary works written in other languages suffer neglect. This further leads to language exclusion, which impinges on the right to language as captured in different countries' constitutions and charters. The situation is decried by Bamgbose (1999:1), who argues that linguistic exclusion resonates with the Biblical tale of Shibboleth (Judges 12:4-6), involving the Gileadites who could pronounce /sh/, and the Ephraimites who could only pronounce the sound as /s/. Those who had challenges in pronouncing the sound were killed, while those who could pronounce it were spared.

Mediation with Linguistic Hegemony

Using postcolonial theory as espoused by Ashcroft et al (1989), it is important to analyse how literary authors of the periphery have dealt with linguistic hegemony in their writing as far as literary prizes are concerned. The tenets of the theory include appropriation, abrogation and evolution of variants. Appropriation is a situation where writers in the periphery use the language of the Centre (such as English) to articulate their otherness. In so doing, they do not have to use the Centre's English, but they can resort to Englishes lower case english is used to indicate variants other than standard English (Ashcroft 1989:77). This implies adulteration of English to ensure that the language serves the interest of writers and readers in the periphery. A good example is Gabriel Okara, who used Ijaw syntax and lexical codes akin to English in his novel *The Voice*. Chinua Achebe (1989) argues that this entails taking on board the dominant language and adulterating it to serve a purpose in the local situation. The move causes a hybrid where both the metropolis language and the variant find space together.

It is not clear to what extent the Swedish Academy is ready to entertain appropriation of English. The institution is founded on the leverage of the Centre, so there is concern as to whether it is ready to accommodate other variants of English as used to pen literary works in the periphery. Additionally,

taking into account that there is already the asymmetry between the standard 'correct' English and 'incorrect' non-standard English as Pardoe (2000) would argue, the Swedish Academy may be averse to literary works that have been written in 'incorrect' English. It should not be forgotten that the standard English that is used in sections of Britain is different from the English that is used in countries like United States, Kenya, Canada, or Jamaica (Ashcroft 1989:8). It is within the ambit of the Swedish Academy to decide whether to open the contestation space for the Nobel Literature Prize by including variants such as English or to continue to buttress the Centre by considering works that are written in hegemonic languages.

Abrogation is another way by which people in the periphery continue to negotiate with linguistic hegemony as perpetuated by the Nobel Literature Prize. According to Ashcroft et al. (1989), abrogation entails the refusal to accept the dominance of one language, especially that of the Centre, over another language of the periphery. It also negates the metropole's hegemonic culture, which is articulated through language. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o has been at the forefront of this abrogation since he made a shift from writing in English to Gikuyu, his mother tongue. He explains the departure as an effort in decolonisation (wa Thiong'o 1986).

The question of abrogation, specifically where writers stop writing in dominant languages to write in any of the 7,000 languages in the world, poses a challenge to the Swedish Academy. While the committee is clear that it has enough experts to review works in different languages, it would be far from the truth to claim that it has experts in even one-tenth of all world languages in which literary pieces are likely to be written. In addition to the challenges of ensuring correct translations, waiting until masterpieces in minor languages are translated is a travesty since there is evidence that some authors have died before translation of their works has been completed (Washbourne 2016). Yet, limiting the number of languages that could be acceptable to the committee is counter-productive since it will create a limited canon, while the Nobel ought to be egalitarian if it is to be an award with global status.

Linguistic hegemony is also tackled through evolution. It was earlier mentioned that there is English of the Centre and there are variants of English (Ashcroft 1989). Ashcroft argues that the development of English happens in two ways: new vocabularies are introduced forming regional English or the variants produce local and regional manifestations that are different from English, thereby resulting in a new language. Considering that the hegemonic language may be beyond the reach of a good segment of the population, it pays off to borrow from it and evolve an alternative

patois. Such a version could be informed by local languages. This is exactly what has happened among the youth in Kenya who evolved Sheng (Swahili and English) and Engsh (English and Swahili) from the two main languages that are widely used in the country (Nabea 2009). Joseph Makokha, a Kenyan writer used Sheng to write poetry. Nigerian Pidgin and Creole in the Caribbean are similar. There's a strong possibility that the Swedish Academy has never heard of Makokha's poetry in Sheng, not necessarily because of inaccessibility, but simply because of the use of the argot, whose experts are only found among the youth in East Africa, and which does not fit in the Swedish Academy's canon. Yet, continuing to ignore english and patois that are evolving may end up leaving out brilliant pieces of literature, which may have won the Nobel Prize had they been crafted in any of the dominant languages.

Concluding Remarks

This article has focused on the Nobel Prize for Literature as an exemplification of Western hegemony. It has argued that the award earns winners prestige and economic benefits, but it is discriminatory since it privileges the languages of the metropolis, while denigrating the languages used by writers in the periphery. It has shown that postcolonial theory explored how capitalistic hierarchies were created with a view to presenting some authors from particular geographical locations as better writers than those from other landscapes, where marginal languages are used. To do this, the article has subverted the Centre by privileging ethnocentrism, the voice of the voiceless, undermining the universalist claim to literature, acknowledging and celebrating new literatures from the so-called less privileged regions, and reasserting the voices of the subjugated. The article has demonstrated that Nobel's linguistic hegemony is contested by underprivileged languages through appropriation, abrogation and evolution. It offers a prognosis that the Nobel Prize for Literature stands to get displaced and further parochialised, if the Swedish Committee fails to reflect on ways to consider works written in different languages of the world on equal footing.

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