

Research Article

Weaponizing Language and Asserting Identity in the Plays of Derek Walcott and Bate Besong

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of language in postcolonial literature and argues amongst other things that language was a veritable weapon for colonial oppression and domination. It also focuses on the attempts made by Derek Walcott and Bate Besong to reassert their cultural identities through the innovative and experimental use of language. To effectively impose their dominance over the colonized people, language became a tool for the spread and propaganda of the colonial agenda. This paper uses Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of language to stress on concepts of hybridity and heteroglossia and how they manifest themselves in the plays of Derek Walcott and Bate Besong. The analyses stress that the playwrights' successfully recreate, through language, the sensibilities and fractured postcolonial outlook of the societies they represent. Also, the playwrights both make a conscious attempt to indigenize and contextualize their plays through their use of language. Thus, the paper holds strong to the thesis that for any reader to better grapple with the different levels of meanings in the works of Walcott and Besong, particular attention has to be given to the playwrights' experimental, instrumental and innovative use of language which in itself becomes a veritable weapon and a counter discourse to standardize (colonialist) English. As revolutionary playwrights therefore, the Walcott and Besong adopt the colonial language and manipulate it consciously not only as a mean of cultural assertion but most especially, to project their individual and collective experiences and identities.

Keywords

Language, Weapon, Hybridity, Heteroglossia, Besong, Walcott

1. Introduction

Cultural imperialism was a very destructive element because it completely distorted a people's vision of history and in its place planted that of the coloniser. In the process, language became a very important element because, in their attempt to maintain dominance over the postcolonial societies, the colonialists imposed their languages on the colonized. Stephen Jikong considers language as a vehicle through which culture is transmitted. [14]. What this pre-supposes is that language is a veritable instrument

of culture. As postcolonial writers therefore, Walcott and Besong believe that the cultural emancipation of the post-colonial society cannot be complete without a thorough examination of the language problem. As such, their use of language is design to serve as a weapon not only in confronting colonial narratives but in asserting their national and cultural identities

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Received: 15 February 2025; **Accepted:** 3 March 2025; **Published:** 28 March 2025



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2. The Language Question in African Literature

As far as African literature is concerned, for a relatively long time now, there has been three schools of thought as to what the language of African literature should be. The first school, with Bernard Fonlon and Wole Soyinka as its major exponent, argues that foreign languages should be used at their best in the production of art. To them, English, French and any other colonial language could be used well if the speakers understand them. The second school, championed by Achebe argues that the effort to decolonise black literature is important. They reject the idea of respecting the rules of the colonial language which the first school proposes, and emphasize the Africanization of colonial languages to suit the writer's context. This, to Achebe, is because the White man's language cannot carry the weight of his African experience [1].

The third and most radical school is that which proposes a complete abandonment of European languages and the use of African national languages. This group is championed by Ngugi wa Thiong'o who argues that writing in foreign languages perpetuates neo-colonialism and that all African Literature in English is Euro-African and not African Literature.

He argues that:

African writers of the 80s have no choice but to join in the people's struggle for survival. In that situation, he will have to confront the languages spoken by the people in whose service he has put his pen. Such a writer will have to rediscover the real language of struggle in the actions and speeches of his people, learn from their great optimism and faith in the capacity of human beings to remark their world and renew themselves. He must be part of the song of the people [18].

In the lines above, Ngugi emphasizes the need for African writers to use African languages in the production of literature. He equally considers language here as being part of the African struggle for emancipation. Ngugi has for a long time made it his duty to resist the "spiritual subjugation" that English represents. He believes that the colonial language still holds embedded colonial values, thereby acting to constrain expression and perpetuate cultural inferiority complexes. Ngugi highlights the displacement suffered when literature fails to reflect local reality and when a foreign language defines local reality. The choice as to the kind of language a writer uses has implication, of course, for the nature and extent of their audience. As Ngugi points out, the choice of a language already predetermines the answer to the most important question for producers of imaginative literature; "For whom do I write? Who is my audience?" [17]. And this in turn, as he insists, has implications for what they write about and what attitude they take to their material. In any case, though the African writer can hardly avoid issues of language and the ambivalent and often contradictory feelings attached to it, what needs to be stressed is the richness with which

they have created the linguistic means to render their experiences and those of their people. Whether in their own indigenous languages, or in some inflection of the perhaps both loved and hated colonial tongue, the colonised artists have always found mediums to express themselves. Thus, in Africa as in the Caribbean, the suppression of native languages in favour of English was used as an instrument of imperial rule. To fight imperialism, Ngugi thus abandons the English language and publishes his first modern novel in Gikuyu entitled *Caitano Muthera-ini*, later translated as *Devil on the Cross*. He also wrote *Matigari ma Njiruungi* and *Ngaayika Ndenka* which were all only later translated into English as *Matigari* and *I Will Marry When I Want* respectively. It is for this reason that Crow and Banfield consider Ngugi wa Thiong'o as a force in African Literature for decades because to them, since the 1970s, when he gave up the English language to commit himself to writing in African languages, his foremost concern has been the critical importance of language to culture [13]. In *Something Torn and New*, Ngugi explores Africa's historical, economic, and cultural fragmentation by slavery, colonialism, and globalization. Throughout this tragic history, a constant and irrepressible force was Europhonicism: the replacement of native names, languages, and identities with European ones. The result was the dismemberment of African memory [19].

Commenting on the debate amongst postcolonial dramatist, their attitude to language and identity, Brian Crow and Chris Banfield argue in *Introduction to Postcolonial Theatre* that if there have been linguistic traps that colonised dramatist have been forced to negotiate, they have also been issues of class, ethnicity and nationality that could not be avoided. [13]. The general context informing these debates concerning identity and language is the desire for cultural self-determination and an integrated identity, what Soyinka calls "cultural certitude", and the attempt to achieve it through a kind of cultural "return to roots". Brian and Banfield further argue that this is expressed in different ways by different writers, but they seem to have something like the same in mind. Ngugi for instance, speaks of the fundamental aim of restoring the African personality to its true human creative potentialities in history, involving a return to the roots of our being. Ngugi's view here seems to have much in common with Soyinka's call for "the evocation of an authentic tradition in the cause of society's transformation process", which he also sees as a self-retrieval or cultural recollection. For Walcott, as Brian and Banfield posit, this process seems to involve the artist, and specifically the actor, in a "return through a darkness whose terminus is amnesia", if West Indian theatre is ever to express the authentic cultural being of its people. As he puts it in "What the Twilight Says", for imagination and body to move with original instinct, we must begin again from the bush. That return journey, with all its horror of rediscovery, means the "annihilation of what is known" [25].

From the look of things, such a return to roots will be a

creative and healthy process “if it rediscovers and interprets what that same writer calls those elements which render a society unique in its own being, with a potential for its progressive transformation, rather than an ideological convenient language or cultural methodology” [25]. This desire for a cultural identity justifies postcolonial dramatists’ different attitudes toward the use of language in their works because language, to them, is an indispensable vehicle for transmitting culture and identity. As far as his position on the language debate is concerned, as noticed in the discussions above, Derek Walcott falls in the same category as Wole Soyinka and to some extent Chinua Achebe. He is a writer who prefers (whatever his sense of ambivalence about it) to write in the imperialist language, forging distinctive and often striking powerful style of English with his Afro-West Indian cultural realities. As a counter discursive measure therefore, postcolonial writers continuously transform the English language to reflect their postcolonial situations and contexts and “to bear the burden of their experiences” [2].

The language situation in the Caribbean Island was a little more complex than it was in Africa. This is because language was inherently embedded in the history of slavery and slave trade. When Africans were transported from Africa to Europe, one of the greatest negative impacts of the institution of slavery and slave trade is that it encouraged the death of African languages. In the introduction to *Something Torn and New*, Ngugi wa Thiong’o considers Liguicide (a conscious act of language liquidation) as an equivalent to genocide. He goes further to argue that the encounter between African languages (Yoruba, Igbo, Twi, Kikongo, and many others) and Western languages (French, Spanish, English, Dutch, Portuguese) was perhaps the most subtle and most complex aspect of the cultural confrontation that the African slaves faced in the New World. Quoting Henry Louis Gates Jr, Ngugi stresses that “Radically abstracted from their cultural communities, and broadly dispersed from plantation to plantation, state to state, and country to country, the African slaves in much of North America soon lost the capacity to speak their own languages” [19]. Though specific reference is made to the North American situation, the above statements rekindle what took place in the Caribbean Island because Africans were denied the right to speak their native languages. The most strict and brutal forms of punishment were meted out to those Africans who insisted upon retaining their own language and calling their own names. Forbidden to use their own languages, and with families and communities constantly broken up and relocated, the New World Africans became, over time, disconnected from their linguistic base in the continent. What we might usefully think of as the Caribbeanization of the African slaves took place, most directly and forcibly, at the level of language.

The liquidation of African languages was clearly and consciously meant to deny slaves their languages both as a means of communication and as, sites of remembrance and desire. As an Afro-Caribbean writer, Walcott took upon him-

self the project of reconnecting the Afro-Caribbeans with their African ancestry by projecting in his plays, the complex linguistic realities which the institution of slavery and slave trade initiated in the West Indies. The liquidation of African languages in the Caribbean Island resulted in the emergence of Creole, which to paraphrase Ngugi, can best be described as the result of linguistic confrontations. In communities like Cameroon where the native languages could not be completely liquidated, colonialist promoted and encouraged the use of European languages.

2.1. Hybridity in Derek Walcott’s Drama

I who am poisoned with the blood of both where shall I turn, divided in vein? I who have cursed The drunken other of British rule how choose between this Africa and the British tongue I love? Betray them, both or give back what they give how can I face such slaughter and be cool? How can I turn from Africa and live? “A Far Cry from Africa” [25].

In the poem above, Walcott expresses in a very pathetic manner, the complexity of his on existence and by extension, that of the entire Caribbean. The question of the use of language in the Caribbean Island and the language of expression for the Caribbean artist has for a long time been a topic of controversy. This is partly because, like in most postcolonial societies, the English language has always been associated with colonialism and oppression. In the Caribbean Island for example, as Ashcroft et al observe, English had much more tainted historical role in the plantations because the slaves were deliberately separated from other members of their language group and to minimise the possibility for rebellion, forced to use the language of the plantation owners. For the slaves then, “this was a language of the plantation owner” [19]. Language in this context is an instrument of oppression and a weapon of cultural imperialism. As a playwright, Derek Walcott has more than colonialism to be worried about in his writings. His ability to embrace his Black West Indian identity and to accept, with the ingenuity of an artist, the language of his inherited culture, account for much of the genius and richness of his idiom. Using the English tongue that he loves does not preclude his moral outrage at the crimes that the Empire has committed against his people. Derek Walcott in his plays struggles between two cultural heritages to create a unique “Creolized” style. In *Dream* and *Ti Jean*, he develops a mature dramatic idiom which put an elevated dialect in the mouths of common West Indian folks. In “What the Twilight Says”, Walcott describes his desire to fill his plays with “a language that goes beyond mimicry... one which finally settle on its own mode of inflection, and which begins to create an oral culture of chants, jokes, folk-songs, and fables” [25]. Language is an element used by Walcott in asserting his fragmented identity.

Hybridity and heteroglossia are concepts that can appropriately describe Walcott’s use of language. As a concept, hybridity refers to things or beings belonging simultaneously

to two or more systems or groups. Mikhail Bakhtin sees hybridity as “the mixing within a single concrete utterance, of two or more different linguistic consciousness, often widely separated in time and social space” [8]. He goes further to state in the dialogic imagination that in the process of literary creation, “languages inter-animate each other and objectify precisely that side of one’s (and of the other’s) language that pertains to its worldview, its inner form, the axiological accentuated system inherent in it” [7]. If Walcott considers his aesthetics as “mulatto”, it is not just because of his mixture of multiple dramatic traditions, but most especially, his ability to knit together, multiple languages and dialects. Walcott’s plays perfectly exemplify Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia and hybridity. In almost all of Walcott’s plays, he draws upon his rich African patios, French, English, and classical Latin linguistic legacies, his St. Lucian and Trinidadian heritage, and his long experience in the United States to bring his mastery of heteroglossia to the peak.

In *Dream, Ti-Jean, The Sea, Malcochon* and *O Babylon!*, there is the use of Creole, English and French. This mixture is a vivid representation of the linguistic reality of the West Indian society. Although born of mixed racial and ethnic heritage in St. Lucia, a West Indian Island where French/English patois is spoken, Walcott was educated as a British subject. Taught to speak English as a second language, he became skilled in his adopted tongue as he speaks and writes English almost as a British citizen. It is for this reason that English is used mostly by the educated Mulattos, the blacks and those of the upper and middle classes like Lestrade. In *Dream*, Corporal Lestrade uses English when he says:

My lords, as you can see, this is a being without a mind, a will, a name, a tribe of its own. I shall ask the prisoner to turn out his hands. I will spare you the sound of that voice, which has come from a cave of darkness, dripping with horror. These lands are seeded with coal. But the animal, you deserve, it’s tamed and obedient. Walk round the cage! *Marchez! Marchez!* [20].

Lestrade’s speech presents him as one who understands his society and is conscious of the fact that he is superior to the down trodden whom he sees as sub-human. The symbols of the cave, darkness and animal mentioned in Lestrade’s speech all refer to Africa and the slaves. They equally highlight the inequalities that exist amongst races in the West Indies. This situation is what Walcott sets out to satirise.

In other instances, especially the court scene, Lestrade’s syntax consists mainly of verbose and legal jargon carefully chosen for their high-sounding qualities rather than any apparent conviction in the meaning they convey. In the following example, Lestrade seeks to convince his equally ignorant judges, Souris and Tigre that his frame of reference is correct and the prisoner cannot but remain mortified under the legal process that has accused and would soon pronounce judgement on him:

My noble judges, when this crime has been categorically examined by due process of law, and when the motive of

the hereby accused by whereas an ad hoc shall be established without dichotomy, and long after we have perambulated through the labyrinthine bewilderment of the defendant’s ignorance, let us hope, that justice, whom we all serve, will not only be done, but will appear, me lords, to have itself, been done.... (the judges applaud). Ignorance is no excuse. Ignorance of the law is no excuse. Ignorance of one’s own ignorance is no excuse. This is the prisoner. I will ask the prisoner to lift up his face. *Levez la tête-ous!* (Makak lifts up his head. The Corporal jerks it back savagely). [20].

This play-within-a-play and the use of language above becomes another sad commentary on postcolonialism itself, and the grotesque theatrical act through which a bewildered prisoner is arraigned by a confused and semi-illiterate prosecutor before applauding judges who are bemused at “how a man like that (Lestrade) can know so much law” [20]. This completes the comment that Walcott is making on this aspect of West Indian postcoloniality.

Similarly, in *Pantomime*, Walcott uses English language that is quite similar to that of classical drama. Harry’s use of language in the play portrays the position he occupies in society. For example, at the beginning of the play, he says:

We could turn this little place right here into a little cabaret, with some very witty acts. Build up the right audience. Get an edge on the others. So, I thought, suppose I get this material down to two people. Me and... Well, me and somebody else, Robinson Crusoe and Friday. We could work up a good satire, you know, on the master -servant-no offense-relationship. [22].

In the excerpt above, rendered in quite Standard English, Harry discloses the intention for the pantomime and the reference to Crusoe and Friday only shows the extent to which Walcott is familiar with or has been influenced by classical literature. While English is spoken by the educated and influential in society, Creole is spoken by the pauperised masses like Moustique, Souris and Tigre in *Dream*, the fishermen in *The Sea*, the Rastafarians in *O Babylon*, the three Jeans and their mother in *Ti- Jean* and the down trodden in *Malcochon*. In these plays, there is an enormous use of Creole. The native St. Lucian and the blacks are mostly those who use this language. A good example of the use of Creole is seen in the following lines by Moustique:

I see a sick man with snake bite, and a set O’ damn asses using old time medicine. I see a road paved with sliver. I see the ocean multiplying with shillings. Thank God. That was good, that was good. [mime the healing] By this power in my hand, by this coal in my hand. You ain’t playing you good, nuh. Here take what you want. [20].

Derek Walcott uses Creole to explore the misery of the blacks and the poverty that plagues the people of St. Lucia. As a result of poverty, Moustique becomes a dupe and goes about exploiting his fellow men. Walcott therefore in *Dream* equally satirises exploitation by the poor like Moustique. In terms of language use, one realises that a character’s lan-

guage automatically defines his social status. While the educated speak Standard English, the uneducated content themselves with Creole which is the language of plantation labourers.

Another example of the use of Creole is noticed in *The Sea* when Afa tells Augustin about the destructive nature of the sea:

Since Bolo drown. Everybody say Boileau would never drown. And Habal, Habal drowning there last year. And in September is not Annelles, Gracia brother they find two miles behind Dennery, one afternoon a boy catching crab, walking, see him on sand, when all the maitre boat looking for him by Trou Pamphile, his body swell...and Boilleau, Ay, Augustin behind! Derriere, derriere. [24].

It is evident from above that even though the sea symbolically represents their source of existence, it equally symbolises destruction as many of the fishermen end up losing their lives in the sea. In terms of language, the excessive use of Creole justifies the extent to which Walcott masters the realities of his society and as we stated in the introduction, it is equally an attempt by the playwright to deconstruct post-colonial drama from the influences of the West.

Furthermore, the use of Creole is also noticed in *Ti-Jean* when Ti-Jean tells his mother of his determination to defeat Planter “Yes, I small, Maman, I small, And I never learn from book, But, like the small boy David. (Sings). I go bring down, bring down Goliath Bring down below. Bring down, Goliath, Bring down below...” [21]. These lines expose Ti-Jean’s determination to fight the Devil, and like the biblical David, he intends to use his wisdom to defeat the Devil. Again, Walcott’s strength as a playwright is not only exhibited in his mastery of his society but also, his mastery of canonical texts, justified by his extensive allusions to the bible and other world literary masterpieces.

Besides English and Creole, Walcott in *Dream* and *Ti-Jean* equally makes use of French. The interaction between Singer and the Crowd is a good example “C’est lui. C’est Makak... Makak. C’est Maka...” [20]. Also, in *Ti-Jean*, most of the Devil’s songs appear in French: Bai, Diable-la manger un’ti mamaille, Bai Diable –la manger un’ ti mamaille, Un, deux, trois... [21]. This exposes the Devil’s desperate quest to devour its victim. It is worth noting that, even when Walcott uses Creole as a means of authenticating and projecting his Afro-West Indian identity, there are still traces of Western influence as noticed in the following lines by Husband in *Malchochon* “Jesus Marie la vierge en ceil avec per sacula seculorum, woy! Look at the rain! Charlemagne, Sonson! You all lucky you get here first. I am deadly soaked. Bon Dieu, these grains of rain bigger than mine. Messier, messier, messier” [23]. This dialogue is a clear example of the concept of heteroglossia in Walcott’s drama. In it, one finds English “look at the rain”, Latin “Secular Seculorum” and French “Bon Dieu” all fused in a single dialogue.

From the examples cited thus far, it is clear that Walcott in *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, *The Sea at Dauphin*, *Panto-*

mime, and *Ti-Jean and His Brothers* chronicles a peasant fantasy of reflecting the white world and reclaiming an African heritage. These plays do not only make effective use of native dialect, but also satirises the bureaucratic idiom of colonialism. Language, thus, is a route to racial identity and a necessary resource for the survival of West Indian communities. The uniqueness of Walcott’s plays stems therefore from his ability to interweave British and Island influences to express what McClatchy calls his “Mixed State”. Walcott’s use of language re- asserts his Afro-West Indian identity while at the same time, serves as a counter discourse to Western canonical writings. Walcott’s plays equally challenge the fallacy that great literature is universal as he draws examples that reflect a specific reality in a specific cultural context.

2.2. Heteroglossia in Bate Besong’s Drama

It was stressed at the beginning of this paper that literature especially when it comes to the use of language can be better interpreted when placed within a particular historical and geographical context. Heteroglossia as a language theory ensures the dominance of context over text. By this, it is understood, as Stephen Mforteh posits, that social, historical, meteorological and physiological considerations will ensure that a word (whether coined, borrowed or with a semantic extension) uttered in one context (time and place) will have a meaning or an effect dissimilar to other contexts [15]. Heteroglossia therefore stresses the perception of language as a product of a number of centripetal and centrifugal forces smashing together. To achieve meaning in such a case therefore, systematic linguistics must be kept aside and words and expressions interpreted with close reference and attention to the text in context. [8]. If there is one aspect in which Besong has confirm himself as an experimental playwright, it is in his ability to coin words which at times becomes easily recognisable within the context of postcolonial Cameroon. Examples include: Erooncam (Cameroon), Prancefraud (France), Nouayed (Yaounde), Ednouay (Yaounde), Adoula (Douala), Outaba (Kutaba) amongst others.

In Besong’s drama, there is deliberate attempt to Africanise or better still, Cameroonize the plays. Besong seems to belong to the Achebe’s school of thought because in his plays, he adopts the English language but incorporates national languages to reflect his local realities. The English especially of the down trodden is subtly mixed with words from the mother tongue, vernacular or local parlance. In the plays, there are words like “Wakenmbeng, Mmaninkim, Obasinjom, (secret societies), Juju (charms), Nyama Ngoroo, (Snails), Afoko (locally made drink), Timbanambusa, Achu and Eru (local Cameroonian dishes), Jigida (beads worn by women) amongst others. Most of the names in the plays are typically Cameroonian names. Names like Arrey Kaka, Bessem, Mma Agbor, Eyere and Ayukango are all drawn from Besong’s native Kenyang. All this is to achieve local colour, heighten the Cameroonian atmosphere in the play and most especially,

to fight neo-colonialism. Ngugi for example justifies his adoption of Gikuyu in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* when he says “I believe that writing in the Gikuyu language, a Kenyan language and African language, is part and parcel of the anti-imperialist struggle of Kenyan and African people” [6].

Commenting on Bate Besong’s style of writing, Ngwane opines that Besong’s vehicle of communication has been regarded as “sheer obscurantism” and that Besong has been accused of writing for the intelligentsia and not for the common man that he professes to defend. He classifies Besong among the Euro-modernist like T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and Hopkins; all writers that were prone to difficult language. This difficult style of writing was very prevalent amongst African writers in the University of Ibadan, partly because they wanted to prove to the Europeans that African writers were not inferior in literary capabilities. According to Chinweizu as Ngwane notes, they had been contaminated by the “Hopkins disease”, which was a style of writing involving a combination of atrocious punctuations, syntactic jugglery, blurred images and structural inconsistencies [16]. Being a product of the University of Ibadan, Besong’s plays to some extent display these Euro-modernist tendencies. From the nature and manner in which Besong writes, Ambe insist that in terms of aesthetic, the trends in the literary tradition of modernism, especially the style of Bertolt Brecht and Samuel Beckett seem to inform and influence Besong’s artistic work [5]. This insinuation is tenable because when one reads through Besong’s plays, there is enough evidence to prove that his drama makes extensive use of the new and unconventional forms and techniques of dramatic writings, symptomatic of the modernist literary tradition: compactness, formlessness, plotlessness, episodic structures and multiple set scenes. This argument is further buttressed by David Chou Wanki in “Politics and Arts in Anglophone Drama” in which he argues that the shocking technique in Besong’s style, the breaking of conventional dramatic roles, and above all, the introduction of unfamiliar and absurd character are all dramatic techniques that are very akin to “Brechtian Epic Theatre” [26]. Alfred Matumamboh on his part concludes that Besong’s style is the brainchild of the Modern Period’s literary practices. To him:

The ideas and revolutionary demands of European literary tradition have a tremendous influence on Besong. The German Marxist dramatist Bertolt Brecht and the Irish existentialist writer Samuel Beckett are among the notable influences on his art. [4]

Even though there is a lot of supportive argument to classify Besong as a modernist writer, or at least to have been influenced by modernism, he punctuates modernist tenets with excessive experimentation in an attempt to adequately express the traumatic realities of his postcolonial Cameroonian society. One is therefore not surprised when Hilarius Ambe commenting on Besong’s style in *Change Aesthetics in Anglophone Cameroon Drama and Theatre* concludes

that:

It will be inadequate and even elusive to grasp the different levels of meanings in Besong’s theatre by concentrating exclusively on the works’ formal attributes. To appropriately comprehend the images in his work, a necessary sociological and ideological search and reading imposes itself, because his works are both thematically and formally construed around the historical, economic, political, aesthetic and ideological experiences of contemporary time. [5]

Very few Anglophone Cameroonian writers have been able to use language to expose the multi-linguistic nature of post-independent Cameroon as Besong does. Nowhere else has Besong’s heteroglossia been so brilliantly expressed as in *Requiem for the Last Kaiser*. (Henceforth *Requiem*) In *Requiem*, throughout the play, one is conscious of a vexed attitude of language, and of an incriminatory use of idiolects. As George Nyamndi elaborates, Besong causes lexical boundaries to yield under his inquisition, and so reveal areas of meaning and metaphorical association that is much enrichments of the central concern of the work. Besong’s artistry is a moving one with the goal of conscientising the oppressed masses of post-independence Cameroon. In a bid to drive home his point, Besong uses English, French, Pidgin and Beti. Through these languages, the playwright vividly exposes and satirises the class structure of Cameroon. For instance, the leaders and intellectuals who use language to show their superiority over their subjects speak English and French. Pidgin is the language widely spoken in Cameroon by the less privileged and the uneducated, as observed amongst the Night-Soil Men in *Beasts of No Nation*:

First: Which kind gendarme?

They go form line

In front Prof. Him door Every evening to get Their daily Kola. [12]

The ethnic group which speaks Beti from the Central Province of Cameroon are those who will politically power in Cameroon. In *Requiem*, a fine example of Besong’s use of language occurs on page one where Akhikirikii presents himself:

I’ll be in politics still I die.. I give small bonai power...One small bonai power..shege dan bonzaar. I go come. Amot, Za-a di money Ma-a ding Sonara money-oweh, money Mbeng... wa ding money? Bebele Zamba-a... la tricherie, la demagogie, la traquerie... all mixed together... Le vandalisme...cooked together, then you know me! Essamba! Essamb! Essamb! [10]

The above speech may sound like the wordings of a mad man to a reader unfamiliar with the realities of present-day Cameroon. Nevertheless, with a careful analysis of the speech, an informed mind easily identifies the code on which the text is built. The text can be linguistically and contextually identifiable. Linguistically, the codes originate from standard English (I’ll be in politics still i die), Hausa (shege dan banzaar), Pidgin English (I go come day), Beti (ma-

ding Sonara money), and French (la tricherie, la demagogie, la traquerie). Contextually the codes refer to present-day Cameroon, a country rife with ethnicity, greed, falsehood and inter-tribal hatred. The illustration equally very vividly, expresses the manner in which postcolonial dictatorship not only perceives power but how they appropriate it. Besong reveals through language, the ugliness of arbitrary power and it is through language that the playwright begins to weave a revolutionary ethos that should lead to the liberation of the masses. Reference to oil money is made in Beti and reference to cheating demagoguery and harassment is made in French. From the manner in which Besong uses these two languages, one can conjecture that French language represent the French colonialist and Francophones, while the Beti expressions represent the Betis and Francophone Cameroon. These two groups are made to shoulder responsibility for the ills they articulate. The Betis are accused of embezzling SONARA funds, while the French colonialists are to be held responsible for the overall decay of morals in Agidigidi. The English expression, which represents the Anglophone Cameroonian, is a mild mockery of Anglophones, who despite their presence in the political arena, only waste their energies pursuing political ideals while the real substance of political struggle, power is held in quiet enjoyment by the Francophones and their French counterparts. The Francophones decide their place on the political arena "I give small bonai power" [10] Here one realises that through the use of language, Besong succeeds to make bitter commentary on the ills that characterize post-independent Cameroon. It is a society defined by greed, oppression, exploitation, corruption, marginalisation and above all, tribalism. To better interpret and analyse this play as the concept of heteroglossia stipulates, the reader or critic is expected to privilege context over content. This is because as an experimental playwright, Besong makes certain statements and utterances that can be better understood only if placed within the context of post-colonial Cameroon. For example, when Besong says "making Sonara money", a reader who is not familiar with the relationship that the Betis (a powerful ethnic group) in Cameroon have with the national oil refinery corporation, Sonara will definitely make very little meaning out of such profound satire. Such examples are bound in almost all of Besong's plays.

Another instance of Besong's use of language and by implication heteroglossia is seen in the following dialogue between First, Cripple and Blind Man:

FIRST: O me die man, innocent Anglo

Monkey work gorilla chop? CRIPPLE: (wisely) a stumbling block

Always looks innocent

BLIND MAN: (as rich plunderer to sweet sixteen) I think you understand?

Just tell me in what currency, you want, my dear-you see, my brother-in-law is with BEAC, and my younger sister is P.S of Alhadji Magida Ewondo. Ndingi, Director of Con-

tracts at the Ministry of Secret Contracts and Honey in Gidigis.

CRIPPLE: Na grammar she go chop (with evened cynicism) de girl de think how we go fit get and double money for this Faya-Largeau crisis, the braggart dey talk grammar-talk. Grammar-talk na chop talk? [12].

While the above dialogue is an expression of the multi-lingual nature of postcolonial Cameroon, it equally exposes themes like corruption, embezzlement and tribalism. Again, like in the previous speech, a lot of meaning can be deduced from the dialogue above with specific reference to the realities in post-independent Cameroon. To place First's statement within the context of Post-independent Cameroon (*innocent Anglo, Monkey work gorilla chop?*) "Monkey" will refer here to the Anglophone Cameroonians who as Besong says at some point have been condemned to perpetual servitude. They do most of the work in the country but benefit very little in terms of economic and political power, while the Francophones, referred to as "gorilla", enjoy all the benefits. In most of Besong's plays, Anglophones are provocatively referred to as "Anglos", "Slaves", "Carriers of Shit", "Biafrans", "Second Class Citizens" and "Enemies in the house".

Similarly, Bole Butake refers to them in *Family Saga* as "Executors". It is this derogatory rule attributed to Anglophone Cameroonians that most of Besong's plays set out to satirize.

Furthermore, in *Change Waka and his Man Sawa Boy* (*Henceforth, Change Waka*) a play which satirises political elections in post-independent Cameroon, Besong's language becomes slightly different from the other plays because the utterances of some of his characters have crystallized into quotable proverbial expressions. Examples include:

-We turn many sweet dreams into nightmares [11]

-The word election may call to mind a hunter setting a camouflaged device to catch unsuspecting prey [11]

-The jackal does not hunt the buffalo [11]

-You have traded in sand; expect to be paid in pebbles [11]

The above proverbial expressions all in one way or the other satirize the fraudulent electoral system in Epeng Ebho. The electoral system is so corrupt because "the flow of oxygen-rich blood to the brain is cut off and the transparent ballot boxes die of electoral asphyxia or cerebral anaemia. [11] This imagery vividly captures the extent to which Epeng Ebho's electoral system is corrupt. In terms of language, there is no denial that *Change Waka* presents particular comprehension difficulties to readers. Meaning at some point can only be perceived from the heavy images and hanging tapestry that inundates the work. It is in this play that Besong qualifies as an absurdist playwright with exceptional innovative and experimental dramatic tenets.

In a pattern similar to the other plays, *The Most Cruel Death of the Talkative Zombie* (*Henceforth Zombie*) is a play in which Besong demonstrates his mastery of the linguistic situation in Cameroon. Though the two official languages - English and French - feature in most of the play, they are

subverted by other new language creations and other less popular, unofficial and unconventional languages. One finds in the play, verbal formations that contextualize the overriding message of villainy, oppression, dictatorship and the brutality of postcolonial leadership in the playwright's fictive society. Examples of such verbal formations which run through the play includes: "We will machine gun them", "I[9]ll frog-match you", [9] "He decided to Hir"[9], "Cutlass them, bayonet them" [9]. This verbal and ungrammatical use of English grammar emphasizes the playwright's ability to experiment and his attempt to break away from linguistic conventions. When Besong says "he decided to Hiroshima a whole region", he is here referring to the lake Nyos gas disaster of 1986 during which an entire village, human beings and animals alike, were all killed by a gas explosion. The incident to Besong is similar to what happened to the people of the Hiroshima region in Japan during the Second World War. This historical allusion highlights the theme of man's inhumanity to man.

Besides the unconventional use of English grammar, Besong in *Zombie* also fuses French, Pidgin English, Arabic and Hausa to transpose the linguistic reality that characterises postcolonial Cameroon. A good example of the playwright's linguistic flexibility is noticed in his use of English and French at the very beginning of the play in the exchange between Badjidka and his friend Toura:

BADJIDKA (to the audience) In fact, this is a three act play

TOURA: (clearing his throat) La problème de la politique n'est pas facile a résoudre

BADJIDKA (attacking him) Shame the devil! for once speak the truth! This is

Bi-cultural bilingual paradise –see?

TOURA:(importantly) Merde! Quelle est notre nationalité?

BADJIDKA: (in attitude of prayers, meekly) L'abbe, c'est tres aimable de votre part !

TOURA: (blessing Badjidka) Je me suis en colère.

BADJIDKA: ne soyez pas si tot !

TOURA:(inclines his head, and smiles down conspiratorially) Il y'a trios personnages principaux dans cette pièce.dans le dernier acte: les héros est assassiné. [9]

Later on, the use of English and French is interjected with expressions from Pidgin, Arabic and Hausa. For example, we find in the play, Pidgin expressions such as "if it be the will of allah" (71), "na weti concern me"? (74), and "Satan block hi nyash! I go die o!" (80) amongst others. Equally, one notices in the play, Arabic and Hausa expressions like "Walah" (61), "Ranka dede, ranka dede, Al Hamudi" (62), "Barawo, banza ni yanmirin, (71) "Shege! Assalamaou Alaikoum!" (72). At times, the playwright even makes use of some typical Nigerian exclamations like "Tufia!" (57). A conscious reader of Besong's *Zombie* is not surprised with his enormous use of Arabic and Hausa because the playwright served as a teacher in the Northern part of Cameroon where Arabic and

Hausa is widely spoken. Also, he studied and at some point worked in Nigeria and as such was greatly influenced by their way of speaking. Besong therefore uses language not only to re-assert his Anglophone Cameroonian identity but most especially, to frown at those who continue to marginalize and oppress the Anglophones in Cameroon. To grapple with the different levels of meanings in the plays of this radical, provocative, experimental and extremely innovative playwright, readers and critics are required to occasionally keep conventional linguistics aside and, as the concept of heteroglossia suggests, give preference to context over content.

From the examples above, one can conclude, as Hilarious Ambe suggests, that the jumble of language usage in *Zombie* is meant first to give a bearing to the multilingual setting from which the incidents of the play emanates. Secondly, that it is indicative of the playwright's concern about experimenting with form and breaking away from tradition. Thirdly, in the opinion of Ambe, the linguistic parameters in the play articulate a rejection of linguistic classicism in writings. Ambe quotes Ashcroft et al, who have offered a similar interpretation of such a style in what they refer to as an attempt in postcolonial writings in "re-placing language" through the processes of "abrogation and appropriation". They point out that:

The crucial function of language as a medium of power demands that postcolonial writing defines itself by seizing the language of the centre and replacing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonial place. There are two distinct processes... abrogation or denial... and appropriation and reconstitution.... Abrogation is a refusal of the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standards of normative or correct usage, its assumptions of a traditional and fixed meaning 'inscribed' in the words... This literature is therefore always written out of the tension between the abrogation of received English which speaks from the centre, and the act of appropriation which brings it under the influence of vernacular tongue. [5]

From the arguments put forward by Ashcroft et al, one realizes that language to postcolonial writers like Walcott and Besong is an instrument of cultural imperialism [3]. Besong's use of language adds realism to his play, shows the multilingual nature of Cameroon, his anger as a playwright as well as his questioning of linguistic conventionality. Butake believes that Besong is so violently angry with the wrongs and injustices done to the "Anglophone community in our society in particular that he vomits nothing but filth and shit" (25). If Bate Besong succeeds to administer shock waves in his audience as Sesan Ajayi posits, it is partly because of his ability to use language. He uses language that is not only full of imagery but farfetched allusions. George Ngwane argues that Besong's style of writing is provoked by the realities in his society. He asserts that:

Besong's plays depict moral decay and his tone like that of Anyikwe Armah is bitter and hard as the unfathomable depth of moral decay we have been enveloped in. In other

words, he faces his antagonists with the same emotional vigour and the same dictatorial weapon they use against the masses. He is allergic to treachery and betrayal and spares no effort to lambast in bitter tones leaders who betray their people. The harder they rule, the harder he writes. Since plays are supposed to be watched not read, the gusto of his plays is found when mounted on stage. [16]

Difficult though the form and diction of *Requiem*, *Change Waka* and *Beasts* could be, there is no doubt that the playwright successfully recreates in language, the sensibilities and fractured postcolonial outlook of the society he represents and in most occasions, each time Besong uses a particular language, there is an imbedded satirical intention.

3. Conclusion

From the above, it is evident that as a counter discursive measure, Walcott and Besong continuously transform the English language to reflect their postcolonial situations and contexts. Symbolism is an important ingredient in the literary works of Walcott and Besong. The strength of their literary commitment lies in their use of historical, physical and recognisable references with symbolic meaning. In their attempts to conceive an independent national identity, the playwrights concentrate on developing symbolic vocabularies that are recognizably indigenous or at least different from European representation, yet intelligible within a global grammar of post-war politics. Thus, Walcott and Besong use the well springs of their cultures and societies in order to offset the borrowed influences of European languages.

As concerns similarities, the works of Walcott and Besong are a combination of tragedy and comedy, plays that can, to a certain extent, be considered as “problem plays” because they project social issues which are meant to raise the awareness of their audience. Also, in terms of similarities still, especially as far as their use of language is concern, Walcott and Besong use the postcolonial notion of appropriation as they both take the language of the colonizers and transform it to bear the burden of their cultural experiences, or to paraphrase Raja Rao, to convey one’s spirits in a language that is not one’s own. Though Walcott and Besong share a lot of aesthetic similarities, for example, in their transformation of conventional literary devices like allegory, symbolism, songs and dance and language into veritable revolutionary weapons, the playwrights are however writing from two different linguistic communities. For instance, while Besong is writing from a diaglossic linguistic group (societies in which bilingualism has become an enduring societal arrangement), Walcott emerges from a polyglossic linguistic group (communities where a multitude of dialects interweave to form a general comprehensible linguistic continuum). Nevertheless, the playwrights both succeed to use language in a manner that portrays a conscious attempt to break away from linguistic conventions as an attempt to impose their postcolonial experiences and reassert their cultural identities.

Author Contributions

Emmanuel Nchia Yimbu is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

I declare that there is no conflict of interest publishing this paper with your journal.

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