When 'the Centre Cannot Hold': Achebe and Anglophone African Literary Discourse

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Abstract

Extending Derek Bickerton's pioneering study on the Creole Continuum; this essay argues that English, a former colonial language, serves as an arbiter in the reimagining of diverse African communities. The essay revisits Chinua Achebe's fiction to examine the relationship between literary English and the indigenous languages, and cultures it imaginatively and concretely embodies in traditionally nonnative universes of discourse. The essay considers how Achebe's literary English embodies the local cultural-specific literary elements to illustrate that anglophonism can thrive in the national discourse of a non-native English environment if it has both a functional and utilitarian value, an integral part of Achebe's theory on the language of African literature. Achebe's works show that English serves as a linguistic bridge in the complex multi-ethnic and multi-cultural Nigeria. Finally, the essay establishes that the local aspects introduced into literary English do not necessarily represent a break from the main Anglophone literary-linguistic tradition, but rather a manifestation of an anglophone African literary-linguistic continuum with peculiar characteristics and divergences imposed by a localised context.