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Stylistic Innovation and Resistance in Postcolonial Anglophone Literature: From Achebe to Adichie

Chander Mohan
[1] Associate Professor and Head, Department of English, Government Degree College, Majalta, Jammu and Kashmir, India.

*** Corresponding Author:**
Chander Mohan
chandermohanpant@rediffmail.com
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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses how postcolonial Anglophone writers have appropriated, subverted, and transformed the English language as a means of articulating experiences and epistemologies that European literary traditions were not designed to accommodate. Beginning with Chinua Achebe's foundational theoretical intervention the claim that African writers must bend English to bear the weight of African experience the paper traces the stylistic strategies employed by postcolonial novelists across half a century to make English speak beyond its metropolitan inheritance. Close readings of representative works by Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Mohsin Hamid illuminate recurrent techniques of linguistic defiance: the incorporation of untranslated indigenous vocabulary, the disruption of syntactic convention, the use of oral narrative structures within written prose, and the deployment of irony and parody against the colonial literary canon. The paper situates these strategies within debates about language choice, cultural authenticity, and the politics of world literature.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Language Question in Postcolonial Letters

None of the questions that have been the subject of postcolonial literary debate has been as persistent as the question of language: should the writer from a formerly colonised society write in a European metropolitan language or in an indigenous vernacular, and what is won or lost? This debate isn't purely theoretical. It gets to the nub of the queries concerning cultural authenticity, political solidarity, epistemic sovereignty, and the conditions for the literary form and international recognisability of subaltern experience. The debate came to a head in a classic debate between two Nigerian writers during the 1960s. In a 1965 essay, Chinua Achebe claimed that the African writer using English should not be coerced into using it in the way it was bequeathed to him, but that it should be 'bent and reshaped', when needed, to accommodate and express African thought and feeling. By contrast, Ngugi wa Thiong'o realized that even if the writing was against colonialism, it would remain colonizing since it was being written in the language of the coloniser; hence he decided to write his novels in Gikuyu from 1977 onwards, translating to English afterwards.

This paper concentrates mainly on writers who have decided to operate in English but have been seeking to change its uses, exploring the stylistic means which they have used in doing what Derek Walcott termed the ‘Adamic’ business of naming a new world in a borrowed tongue. The paper does not pass judgement on Achebe and Ngugi; both are valid interpretations of an essentially problematic situation; it does, however, argue that Achebe's attempt to change English from within is a serious literary and political work and that it deserves a more detailed stylistic reading than it usually gets.

1.2 The Architecture of the Paper

The paper is organised around three major themes. Section 2 explores theoretical explanations of the use of languages in postcolonial contexts, focusing on discussions of the relationship between language, power and cultural identity. Section 3 provides in-depth stylistic analysis of a selected number of texts based on five techniques: employment of indigenous vocabulary, syntactic disruption, oral narrative structures, multiperspectival narration, and ironic reference to the colonial canon. In Section 4, these stylistic strategies are placed in the global economy of world literature, and how the international English publishing market is both enabler and limiting in what possibilities it can offer the postcolonial writer.

2. THEORETICAL TERRAIN

2.1 The Colonial Language Inheritance

Colonial language was discussed by Frantz Fanon in his Black Skin, White Masks (1952), which has set the pattern for post-colonial literary theory. Fanon suggests that the colonised who becomes bilingual adopts not only a language but also a whole culture, values and conceptions of civilization, humanity and knowledge, which are highly influenced by the self perception of the coloniser. Language learning in the colonial situation is thus a process of alienation; the person who is colonised begins to see the world through the eyes of the coloniser, to evaluate himself in the eyes of the coloniser, to measure himself in the light of the coloniser, and to find himself lacking in the eyes of the coloniser.

Achebe's answer to this dilemma of Fanon is not a utopian one. In his 1965 letter, he accepted the historical fact that English was the common language of Nigeria – a country with

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hundreds of indigenous language communities – and that it had been imposed by the colonials and could not be wished away. It was not to abandon English, but to assert it, and make it a new African language, an African language in its own right, with African realities, and expressive of African sensibilities, no longer deferential to metropolitan standards of correctness and literary decorum..

> *"The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his particular experience." — Achebe (1965, p. 30)*

2.2 Language and the Global Literary Market

The political economy of world literature brings a structural perspective to considerations of postcolonial language choice, which purely cultural accounts are apt to understate. In his book The World Republic of Letters (1999), Pascale Casanova proposed that the global literary field is structured around a hierarchy of distribution of linguistic capital, with metropolitan languages – in particular French and English – being viewed as universal literary currencies, and other languages in subordinate positions. Aspiring writers from the literary margins who want to be read internationally will have to either write in a metropolitan language or rope in metropolitan translators and publishers to act as intermediaries between them and readers abroad. This structural reality has an impact on the options that the postcolonial writers have, and this impact is not a matter of personal choice or political conviction. A novelist writing in Gikuyu or Yoruba or Tamil will have a huge disadvantage, in terms of global reach and acclaim. In this sense, choosing English (as a writer from Nigeria, Kenya, or India chooses English) is not just a choice of language, but a strategic choice of position taking in a global literary field, a choice of who to speak to and of which recognition economy to engage with.

Since the 1980s, the international Anglophone literary market has expanded with the addition of more literary prizes for writers in English from Africa and South Asia, the Man Booker Prize of Commonwealth and then world literature, and the development of new genre categories including 'world literature in English' creating opportunities and constraints for postcolonial writers. It has, on the other hand, enabled writers such as Adichie, Hamid, and Hari Kunzru to pursue careers which were not quite viable a generation ago. On the other, it has produced pressures in the marketplace for English that can be understood by readers in the metropolitan centres, which may shrink the possibilities for the most radical kind of stylistic experimentation that the highest goals of the postcolonial writers demand.

3. STYLISTIC STRATEGIES OF POSTCOLONIAL ENGLISH

3.1 Untranslated Indigenous Vocabulary in Achebe and Adichie

Although one of the more obvious and potentially more meaningful postcolonial Anglophone fiction strategies is the presence of untranslated native words in the English text. In his 1958 novel Things Fall Apart, Chinua Achebe presents the reader with Igbo words—obi, chi, ogene, and egwugwu—without gloss or explanation, assuming the reader who does not know Igbo needs to do the same work to understand cultural particularity as any other anthropological outsider. This is a conscious break from the usual colonial ethnographic practice whereby indigenous realities were made transparent to the European reader by extensive explanation and translation.

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The impact of this strategy is to place the implied reader in an attitude of coming to the text on its own terms, not as a metropolitan individual for whom the non-European world needs to be domesticated and simplified. As some of the commentators have pointed out it is narrative sovereignty, in the sense that the text claims to be read on its terms. The Igbo words also have conceptual content that the English equivalent cannot fully capture, such as the concept of chi, which is a personal destiny, a divine guardian spirit, and individual fate and the English 'soul' or 'God' only approximate to this.

This is similarly done by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in Half of a Yellow Sun (2006) and Americanah (2013), who, in prose formally accessible to international readers, uses a few Igbo, Pidgin and Nigerian English words. Adichie's use of Nigerian Pidgin is of particular importance: it can convey class, regional identity, social familiarity, all of which Standard English cannot; its inclusion in the text resists any reduction of social complexity that a fully standardised English would impose.

3.2 Syntactic Disruption and Oral Narrative Structures

However, on the level of syntax, postcolonial writers have been experimenting with ways to make English "bear the structural mark of other languages, other cognitive orientations" (1996, 129). The prose of Midnight's Children (1981), for example, by Salman Rushdie, is famously polygeneric, applying the mannerisms, structures and idioms of Urdu storytelling, Bollywood film and Indian oral tradition to a very densely intertextual English prose, which simultaneously borrows from Sterne, Dickens, Grass and García Márquez. The outcome is a centrifugal English that is able to include a range of cultural inheritances without diminishing the cultural inheritance of any one of them.

The God of Small Things (1997), by Arundhati Roy, takes syntactic disruption one step further by breaking the normal usage of English to fragment it, capitalizing common nouns and giving them the weight of a cultural category, compressing time and causality to make them less amenable to the linear rationalism of classic realist narrative, and using a prose rhythm that seems to be as much indebted to Malayalam poetry as to the English literary tradition. Roy's English is not just English with Indian stuff; it is an English that is formed from the collision of multiple inheritances, and it requires a reader to be able to live in an experience of English not fully compliant with metropolitan expectations.

3.3 Irony, Parody, and the Revision of the Colonial Canon

The third important approach in postcolonial Anglophone writing is ironic quotation and parody of conventional literary texts like Shakespeare's The Tempest, Defoe's Robinson Crusoe, Conrad's Heart of Darkness, Bronte's Jane Eyre that contain encoded colonial ideology which earlier generations of readers missed. In The Tempest, Caliban; in Crusoe, Friday; and in Conrad, the Africans who speak with Kurtz, all represent an attempt by postcolonial writers to both recover and critically engage with writings of the colonial imagination.

Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea (1966), which gives narrative voice to Bertha Mason the 'madwoman in the attic' of Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre who is revealed as a Creole woman from Jamaica displaced and destroyed by English patriarchal and colonial power is perhaps the most celebrated instance of this strategy. In Foe (1986), J. M. Coetzee does a similar trick with Robinson Crusoe: he highlights the voiceless Friday and asks the question as to what makes certain stories of discovery and civilisation speak and others be speechless. Such intertextual strategies do not just represent literary games, however; they perform a

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fundamental challenge to a fundamental epistemological assumption of the English literary tradition and signal the possibility for reading and writing against it.

4. WORLD LITERATURE AND THE POLITICS OF RECOGNITION

The success of postcolonial Anglophone fiction on international literary markets has led to some critical reflection on what conditions of non-Western literary production are necessary for international recognition. Kwame Anthony Appiah (1991) suggested that the success of African writing in English on the international market rests to some extent on its ability to conform to the image of 'African otherness' that the market for postcolonial fiction expects. This argument introduces disturbing questions concerning the extent to which even the most politically guarded postcolonial discourses are determined by the very cultural economies that they challenge. A good test case in the modern world is the work of Mohsin Hamid. The Reluctant Fundamentalist (2007) and Exit West (2017) use minimalist, accessible, and unflashy styles of prose, in stark contrast to Rushdie or Roy, that write directly to a global readership, while commenting critically on post-September-11 politics and the experience of migration. Hamid has been candid about the strategic reasons for his stylistic decisions, which are based on a prose style that is more likely to be appreciated by the widest possible audience than the most sophisticated and experimental readers. This argument proposes that the politics of postcolonial English style would not be judged according to one criterion of linguistic radicalism. From its measured use of Igbo vocabulary to Achebe's syntactic disruption to Hamid's strategic accessibility, the scope of strategies that postcolonial writers can employ in their literary production is broad and is defined by various contexts, audiences, and political goals. What they have in common is that they all make the case that English is not a neutral medium, but a historically charged resource that can be appropriated, bent, subverted, and reclaimed in the service of experiences and perspectives the original metropolitan formation of English does not anticipate.

CONCLUSION

One of the most prominent advancements in the last 100 years in the development of the English language is the stylistic creativity of postcolonial Anglophone writing. Together, writers from Nigeria, Kenya, India, Pakistan, the Caribbean and the South African literary tradition have extended the range of expression of English far beyond what its literary inheritance in the metropolitan parts of the world could have generated, inserting the rhythms, concepts, social textures and epistemological orientations of dozens of other cultures into a language that was once the property of a small island nation and its colonial administrators. It is impossible to separate this political and artistic feat. Achebe's appropriation of English to transport Igbo experience, Roy's dislocations of syntax to defy linear colonial rationalism, Adichie's use of Pidgin to remind readers of the social complexity of Nigerian life are all acts of literary and aesthetic and political sovereignty. They are followed by the generation of writers who grew up in Africa, South Asia, and the exile of the English-speaking world in the 2020s, inheritors of a rubust, conflicted legacy of linguistic experimentation, far from spent.

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