

The Cross-Cultural Contact: Impact of English on Novels from Nigeria

¹Mrittika Ghosh, ²Dr. Bonani Chakrabarty

^{1,2}Assistant Professor, Institute of Engineering and Management, University of Engineering and Management, Kolkata, India

Abstract: In many communities, across Nigeria, the advent of written tradition ushered through the contact of colonialism. Ibo community being one such exemplar. The oral tradition was predominant among the Ibo before the arrival of Christian Missionaries. Promulgation of the English language took place through the different educational enterprises, carried out by the Missionaries. With the passage of time a profound impact of English, on the different literary genres from Nigeria, became significant. One such noteworthy genre being the novel. The concerned research aims to identify the influence of English on the genre of novel, from Nigeria, through the context of the narratives of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

Keywords: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, English, Igbo/Ibo, Novel, 'Appropriation', Cross-cultural contact.

A literary convention is grounded in a system of communication, where there is a presence of an addresser and an addressee, and the structure, in which it is contained is what we allude to as genre. To understand the development of a specific genre it is pertinent to speculate upon the 'conventions of construction'. (Chanda 25) By 'convention of construction' one means the process of assimilation, influence, reception, contact reconstruction, and renovation, which determine the presence of a specific genre in a particular society. For example, for genres, of oral tradition, the system of communication would encompass the process of participation, the nature of receptors or the audience, the relation, shared between the performers and their audience and the function of the oral text. For the genre, which are written, the communicative process would include the 'material conditions of reception and production'. (Chakraborty ii) Let us analyse the genre of novel, in the context of Nigeria. There are three popular beliefs regarding the 'material conditions of reception' of this genre. Critic, Eustace Palmer emphasise that unlike drama and poetry, whose origin can be traced to the indigenous oral traditions, novel in Nigeria is a direct mimesis of the Western model. He states that a detailed observation of this genre reveals that though authors like Achebe and Ekwensi claim to have been influenced by indigenous story telling tradition in reality they were influenced by the works of George Eliot, Hardy, Conrad, Kafka and Dickens. The reason being their exposure to Western literature as students. Though restructured thematically to contain the African experience the Nigeria authors have basically replicated the structure and language of the Western novel. (Palmer 5- 6) Another contention, regarding the structuring of novel as a genre, holds that this genre developed through indigenous oral traditions. Wole

Soyinka is one of the advocators of this theory. (Soyinka 8-9). The other popular hypothesis regarding the genre of novel is the one held by Chidi Amuta. According to him though the physical structure of the novel, in Nigeria, is almost similar to the Western model its essence is derived from 'the action of the community' rather than an individual. (Amuta 42). This speculation is in opposition to the claims of Soyinka, who believed that "African fiction should take into account both the relevance of the work to the human condition (the sociological, if one prefers the term) and the novelist's artistry" (8 -9)

European contact played a formidable role in consolidating the genre of novel in Nigeria. From language to the structure, the concerned genre owes indebtedness to its Western counterpart. A notable aspect, regarding the genre of novel in Nigeria, is the influence, mediated by the missionaries, which played an important role in studying the indigenous languages and adapting it to the Western script. Emenyonu (20) states, "Church Missionary Society (CMS), which arrived and settled in Onitsha in 1857 and until the middle of the twentieth century, were engaged in the work of education, evangelization and Westernization of the Igbo. They studied the Igbo language and adapted it to the Western alphabetic script. Using this script, they encouraged the Igbo to produce a 'literature'. But the missionary writings were biased in their assessment of the relevance of Igbo traditional institutes to contemporary Igbo social and political behaviour." He further argues that the most important contribution of the Christian missionaries was that they introduced the skill of writing. Hence, it is through their contribution that the written Igbo literature emerged. (Emenyonu, 1978) According to Emenyonu, creative writing was encouraged and competitions were held at regular intervals. In fact, it is through this creative writing only that the genre of novels from Nigeria materialized for the first time. Omenuko (1933) by Pita Nwana, the first novel in Igbo, was published after it had won a creative writing competition, arranged by Institute of African Languages and Cultures, in 1933. (Emenyonu 33)

The formal education, which ushered the spread of the English language, was through the contact with Christian Missionaries. Till 20th century the spread of English across Nigeria was conducted through the missionaries and was mediated through the different cultural values and societal structures of the indigenous communities. The language English flourished very quickly in areas where Christianity was accepted and embraced. However, among the communities where Christianity received hostility the language English took time to evolve. One of the examples of the later is the lack of success of the missionaries, during the inception, in Northern Nigeria. The communities dwelling in Northern Nigeria, like Hausa, had already been exposed to the contact of Islam before the advent of Christianity. The missionaries could not offer an alternative formal education to the communities dwelling in north, where a formal education through Quranic Schools had already crystalized. Therefore, the West European type of formal education was a system which the communities, dwelling in Northern Nigeria, were habituated. The Quranic schools were tied to the mosques just like the manner in which early missionaries appended their schools to churches. In Northern Nigeria Arabic was the dominant language in the formal educational institutions. Therefore, in Northern Nigeria a feeling pervaded that the Christianity had

nothing new to offer. The acceptance of formal education of the colonizers only happened after 1914 when the geo-political areas of Northern and Southern Nigeria were formally amalgamated. However, in south of the river Niger the scenario was quite different. Monotheism was new to this area as the communities, dwelling in the south of Niger river, has their own respective indigenous forms of religion. Education, among the communities living in the south was not formal but rather disseminated through traditional practices. These became quite conducive for the Christianity to establish monotheism and a system of formal education. The colonial rule, in the south of the Niger basin, was successful in exhibiting its superiorities over the indigenous communities. Therefore, in the later years the exposure to formal education in English guaranteed an upward movement in the society and to secure a government job under the colonial administration. According to Adetugbo, “The intervention of the colonial administration in formal education in Nigeria took different forms, but most of these were to confirm the prestige of English in the system. The colonial administration needed Nigerian hands as clerks, messengers, interpreters; etc. the administration’s job of training Nigerians was made easier by the missionaries who had some of the products of their missions defect from the church to take up more lucrative employment with the government.” (Adetugbo, 101) Although, initially, Christian missionaries used the indigenous languages for the propagation of the Bible their approach gradually changed. Revd. Sunter, the first school inspector, under the colonial regime in West Africa, once stated, “These said (vernacular) languages (are) only interesting to the comparative philologist and (are) never likely to become of any practical use to civilization the native must and will know language of commerce and the only education worth a moment’s consideration.” (Sunter, 26) The language English became the core medium of instruction in the school and was studied through grammar, composition, dictation, spelling, etc. English language received a secured position in southern Nigeria through the education ordinances in 1882 and 1896. The examinations, which lead to certification of scholarly achievements, were conducted via English. Like this the language English acquired a dominant position. The situation remained the same even after the independence of Nigeria in 1960. In fact government intervention guaranteed secured place for English through the establishment of secular schools, where the medium of instruction was also English.

Though the first novel to be published from Nigeria was in indigenous language the concerned genre soared to popularity through English. Pita Nwana Omenaku (1933), written in Igbo, is considered as a novel, in its full generic development. However, novel as a genre, from Nigeria, received recognition through Amos Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952), which was written in English. Since then the genre of novel from Nigeria has mostly been expressed through the language English. In fact, the genre acquired an international fame through *Things Fall Apart* (1958) by Chinua Achebe, who defended the language English by stating that it should be reconstructed in such a way so that it is able to contain and express the African experience. According to him the language English would help in reaching the readers, residing beyond Africa, hence it is quite pertinent. What perhaps Achebe wanted to

elucidate was that the language English should only be the medium of communication the milieu would be Nigerian.

Literatures of Nigeria, expressed in English, have reached a huge expanse since the time of Achebe. Though the proponents of the colonial literature found Tutuola's work as illogical and improbable Tutuola's narrative, however, marks the beginning of Nigerian Literature in English. Though at its inception it was criticized for its lack of finesse in both the so-called "Queens English" and the contents of the novel, the narrative triggered off the genre now regarded as Nigerian Literature in English. As already discussed, Tutuola's narrative incorporated the elements of indigenous oral tradition. Therefore, in terms of characterization, structure, theme, and ideology the narrative was Nigerian, though the language was English. Indeed, as Clark (65 – 66) comments, Nigerian writing is writing with its heart right at home here in Nigeria and its head deep in America and England.

Besides Tutuola another catalyst to the growth of English language literature was the establishment of the University College, Ibadan (UCI) in 1948. Before the establishment of UCI, Nigerians had to travel to the UK for graduate and post-graduate degrees. Needless to say, UCI, affiliated to the University of London, was the replica of its Western counterpart. It produced the first Nigerian writers in the English Language; Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Ola Rotimi, J.P. Clark (now Bekederemo-Clark), Christopher Okigbo, T.M. Aluko and others. These writers, using the skill of the new language they had acquired, generated writings which replicated their own indigenous societies.

Although, they were influenced by Western Literature, they used their narratives to prove that Nigerians had culture and society before the advent of the colonizers. For example, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) can be considered as a quintessential treaty to prove that the indigenous communities of Nigeria had a set of social mores and values, which was embedded in their culture, long before their arrival of the Europeans on the shores of the continent of Africa.

The interaction between the indigenous language and English led to the production of various speech patterns, which were unique to certain communities. The language English evolved into various dialects. The type of English used for official transaction was different from some of the dialects used by different communities for literary expressions. With reference to this context Herbert Igboanusi stated, "There is the national variety of English also known as Nigerian English (NE) and the ethnic variety of English exemplified here by Igbo english (IE)." (Igboanusi, 2) The Igbo English, which Igboanusi is referring to, is the one used for creative writing, especially the novel. The Igbo English is a stylistic device, deliberately constructed, which deploys the linguistic contact between the Igbo language and English. Igboanusi further asserts, "There is today, the distinctiveness of Igbo English writers, which manifests itself in experimentation in language, in recreating distinct Igbo discourse in English, and in stylistic innovations. The various manifestations of this distinctiveness can be seen in the works of Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi, Buchi Emecheta, Nkem Nwankwo, Chukwuemeka Ike, Flora Nwapa, Elechi Amadi, John Munonye, Ifeoma Okoye, Clement Agunwa, Onuorah Nzekwe. Their works demonstrate a good instance of the 'Igboization of

English.” (Igboanusi, 2) This indigenization of English reflects a linguistic compromise, a burden which the Nigerian authors had to carry for their literary expressions. One of the reasons for attempting to be both ‘local’ and ‘international’ was to reach the readers, across the globe. After the publication of *Things Fall Apart* (1958) ‘the Achebe model’ of language developed. It became the standard language for the novels from Nigeria. ‘The Achebe Model’ refers to incorporation of supra- linguistic and para-verbal narrative devices such as proverbs, songs, riddles, and traditional indigenous stories. According to Achebe, “The African writer should aim to use English in 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 peculiar experience.” (61) However, scholars, like Abiola Irele, have been debating over the issue of language for a long time. According to Irele only the literatures, which are written in indigenous languages, should be regarded as ‘African Literature.’ (Irele, 44) Therefore, the texts, produced in indigenized English language, becomes a cross cultural text of an unequal epistemic and cultural exchange between English and indigenous language. In *The Empire Writes Back* Bill Ashcroft talks about a method of ‘Appropriation’ which is ‘a process by which a language is taken and made to “bear the burden” of one’s own cultural experience, or to convey, in a language that is not one’s own.’ (39) In a multilingual country like Nigeria ‘Appropriation’ has become a structural protocol for ‘cross cultural’ texts. ‘Appropriation’ in the genre of novel exists through vernacular transcription and untranslated words. According to Igboanusi the linguistic process of contact and translation, the novels from Nigeria, can be identified through “seven linguistic categories – borrowing, coinages, loan-blends, translation, equivalent, semantic extension, collocational extension and colloquialism.” (Igboanusi, 2) As Nigeria is a multilingual country, where English is still the official language, the phenomenon of linguistic fusion is very common. Perhaps, this is the reason why the ‘Achebe model’ of novel became very popular and is still replicated through the narratives of the contemporary writers.

This model is still prevalent in contemporary novels, from Nigeria. The narratives of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, one of the most globally celebrated authors from Nigeria, not only employs the ‘Achebe Model’ in her novel but also extends it through an adequate incorporation of Igbo linguistic expressions. For example, in the novel *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) Adichie weaves in Igbo phrases, proverbs and words quite indulgently in the larger fabric of the narrative. The following are some of the igbo words use in the novel; *Icheku* (tasty fruit), *Nwunye m* (my wife), *Mmuo* (Ancestral spirit) and *biko* (please) (8-72-74-84). Some of Igbo phrases used in the narrative are; *Igba Kristmas* (Celebration of Christmas), *Ezi okwu* (indeed) and *Nnya anyi* (our master) (77-82-250). Besides this Adichie also indulges in the use of onomatopoeia expressions; like; “Aunty Ifeoma was scraping a burnt pot in the kitchen, and the *kroo-kroo-kroo* of the metal spoon on the pot seemed intrusive” (172); “Shut up if you do not want to lose your job because you can be fired *fiam*, just like that.” (229) According to Onyerionwu and Onukaogu the onomatopoeic expressions, used in the novel *Purple Hibiscus* (2013), “apart from being mainly improvised and articulated by the Igbo,

firmly located their nuances and rhythms of use in the Igbo culture-linguistic environment.” (290) The expressions *kroo-kroo-kroo* and *fiam* denote the way in which Adichie uses Igbo lexical and phrases to emphasise upon some specific situation. While ‘*kroo-kroo-kroo*’ refers to a metallic sound, made by a person, the expression ‘*fiam*’ refers to attitudes and can be translated as ‘in a jiffy.’

Though the novel is written in English the examples, sought above, are the Igbo lexical and phrases which serve the important purpose of affirmation and emphasis. Therefore, the author, instead of using the form of English, which is rooted in American or British culture uses the English dialect, which is rooted in Igbo experience. Adichie, in fact, goes to the extent of using lexical features like borrowing, loan-blends and coinages. Lexical expressions like; ‘*Igwe*”

(102) *mmuo* (74), ‘*biko*’ (8) and ‘*Igba Krismas*’ (77) are examples of borrowing. The expressions like *garri* (22), ‘*gudu morni*.’ (58) and *fufu* (65) are some of the coinages, deployed in the novel. Throughout the narrative the liberal use of Loan-blends can be observed; like; ‘*ngwo-ngwo*’ (32), chunks of *azu* fried (32), ‘*ezi-butterfly*’ (50); etc. Besides using Igbo lexical expressions Adichie also uses colloquialism in the narrative; ‘this is not a good time for NEPA to take Light.” (165) the use of colloquialism serves the purpose of Igbonizing the language English. After a thorough research on the novel by Adichie Onukaegwu and Onyerionwu developed a hypothesis, entitled as ‘Strategies of Meaning Linking in Adichie’s Narrative’ (291). Through this hypothesis the scholars identify three different strategies, namely; ‘Linguistic Appositioning’, ‘Narrative Framing’ and ‘Discourse Implicature.’ ‘Linguistic Appositioning’ is similar to glossing. ‘Narrative Framing’ is the contextual explication of a specific situation in the narrative and ‘Discourse Implicature’ deals in reader-response strategy, where a reader is expected to read between the lines to understand the cultural milieu, in which the narrative grounded.

The Igbo laced English language of the novel *Purple Hibiscus* (2013) provides the impression that the narrative is a craftily transliterated Igbo novel. Almost every page of the novel carries an Igbo transliteration or an Igbo phrase. For example:

Papa came in them on his way to his bedroom.

I was sure it was to get more stacks of naira notes that he would give to visitors for *Igba Krismas*. (79).

The expression *Igba Krismas* has been weaved into the larger framework of the narrative like an English expression as it is not highlighted through a visual clue like italics. The commingling English and Igbo can be found in many instances. The way the term *Ummuna* enters the novel is very interesting. According to Christopher Anyokwu, “Adichie skillfully insinuates the term in the artistic tapestry of her tale in such a way that *Ummuna* begins to read like a mint-new entry into the English lexicon. Really, the term, *Ummuna* is strategically pivotal in the narrative, being as it is the cultural linchpin of the Igbo communal set-up. *Ummuna* approximates the English concept of extended family membership. In ancient African society, in which polygamy was practiced, you could find an *Ummuna* comprising of many wives of a man, numerous children, cousins, nephews, nieces, uncles and aunties.” (87)

Therefore, when 'Papa' or Eugene Achike takes his family to his hometown during Christmas, Mama is advised to allow the wives of the Umunna to do the cooking. This ancient Igbo cultural norm survives to the present day.

To refer to indigenous practices, the author uses Igbo terminologies to initiate the readers into the Igbo cultural nuances, who are unaware of it. One of the most important examples being how the terms *mgbalu* is used in the narrative. It is used as a culturally appropriated lexical term and is not highlighted in the course of the narrative. This achieves a socio-aesthetic effect here: there is a certain confidence, an easiness displayed here in the manner of usage; and the cultural practice of the Igbo is conveyed in a foreign code rather effectively in spite of the fact that English carries its own cultural assumptions which, if not carefully handled, might affect the cultural norm of the community.

Adichie skillfully captures the nuances of Igbo-English, in her narratives, a unique linguistic hybrid that incorporates elements of both English and Igbo languages. This adaptation of linguistic patterns and speech habits is a deliberate and effective literary strategy employed by her to create a sense of authenticity and to mirror the way people communicate in Nigeria. By embracing this linguistic complexity, her novels go beyond a mere representation of language; they become a reflection of the cultural and social dynamics of Nigeria. The use of Igbo-English in her writing adds depth to the characters and settings, allowing readers to engage with the complexities of identity, post-colonialism, and the intersection of different cultural influences.

Adichie's novels demonstrate that the contemporary Nigerian novel cannot be constrained to a single language but must embrace the linguistic diversity inherent in the country. Through her adept portrayal of Igbo-English speakers, she captures a verisimilitude that reflects the rich tapestry of Nigeria's linguistic and cultural landscape.

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