

Linguistics innovation of the twenty-first century African writing

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Abstract

This research stems up from the proposition that linguistic innovation within the purview of contemporary African writing is not without recourse to the domestication; the nativization and the acculturation of English language in African fiction. In this light, this paper seeks to analyze various domestic phenomena of English language in Onyeka Nwelue's *The Abyssinian Boy*, in order to demonstrate the indigenous features of the two distinctive languages from the separate continents of Africa and Asia that are applied to the subversion of English language in which the novel is written. Thus, this study fulfill the critical gap of unveiling that the twenty-first century African writers are adventurous about the language medium through skillful deforeignization of the English language in African fiction. The paper further concludes that Onyeka Nwelue is a skipper with the subversion of the English language as he hinges on childhood and transcultural tropes in African fiction through careful deployment of code-mixing, western mannerism, transnational loan words, and the Nigerian English.

Keywords: Linguistic innovation, twenty-first century, contemporary African writing, transcultural tropes and language politic

Background to the Study

The beginning of contemporary African writings marked the advent of the twenty-first century African writers, most of who lives in Europe and in the United State of America with new creative movement of global cultural phenomenon. The twenty-first century African writers are threshold of writers who perceive cultural diversity and the notion of the global world vis-à-vis transculturation as alternative means of contextualizing identity, race, citizenship and belongingness which is beyond the narrow confines of a specific national boundary. Thus, African writers have embraced these new cultural challenges in this epoch of media technologies which are in tandem with new linguistic strategies and the mapping of the cosmopolitan individuals in the twenty-first century African fiction.

It is apt to therefore admit that the twenty-first century African literary state of

affair is compounded by a steadily growing and influential community of young African writers, mostly resident across Western Europe and the Americas that have added a diasporic dimension to African literature and its literary culture. The bulk of these writers such as Chimamanda Nogzi Adichie, Sefi Atta, Diana Evans, Chabi Dere Allagbe and the host of others coalesce the literary exegesis of trans- national consciousness in African fiction. Yet, these writers have come to the literary scene with a

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whole lot of experimentations, as regards linguistic innovations; the domestication of the English language within the scope of transcultural tropes.

It therefore makes sense to signify that Onyeka Nwelue, one of the twenty-first century African writers is not an exemption of the above aforementioned. His text, *The Abyssinian Boy*, is experimental and instructive from the production of his linguistic modicum. In this light, one cannot but reiterates that Onyeka Nwelue deploys innovative linguistic strategies to indigenize the language of the new West African novel. In this sense, Onyeka Nwelue places his mother tongue, Igbo language, side by side with one Asian language (Tamil, Indian) and with one European language (English language) in the course of creating his own literary text which makes his text unique.

Debates about Language Politics in African Fiction Revisited

Scholars like Chinua Achebe (1975) offers in his speech titled “The African Writer and the English Language” as obtainable in *Morning Yet on Creation Day* that “for me I have been given the language and I intend to use it”. To Achebe, it is better to embrace the notion that European colonial languages are today part of the linguistic literary landscape of African writings. However, Lewis Nkosi sees a hopeless situation in African writers expressing themselves in English language. According to Lewis Nkosi (1981) “these kind of African writers have insurmountable obstacles placed in the way toward full expression and thought and so could only falsify the African experiences or at best create something that fall short of his true ideal: his struggle with his materials... the true meaning of the word he seeks to depict is always endless and incomplete”.

Ngugi as well remains adamant in his struggle towards having an abiding faith in the expression of African literature in African tongues. This he succinctly articulates below:

So if we want to develop knowledge, philosophy, and other arts through African languages, then we have to learn how to listen to what African tongues are saying. The pen should work with the tongue; walk

together; help widen, spread, and store the products of the tongue in productive spaces. Pen and tongue should journey together to search for education, knowledge and philosophy, help it grow and spread (2013:2)

However, although the Ngugi’s pro-African language stance is highly admirable and understandable but the critical question at this juncture is how many of our African kinsmen can actually be communicated to through African languages in fiction form. More importantly, even Ngugi who has attached a “moral stigma” to the fact of writing African literature in European languages have most of his widely read and popular works later translated to English language. Some of these works are *Devil on the Cross* (1980), *I will marry when I want* (1982), and *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976).

To put the debate about language matters in proper perspective, it is important to therefore invite the arguments of the “liberal critics” over this sensitive matter. To the liberalist, it is their belief that there is something fundamentally wrong with expressing African thoughts in foreign languages. But, to this group, it seems nothing can be done about it. This view is often expressed in the assertion that whatever that cannot be cured must be endured. This seems to be the view of Chinua Achebe. In other words, the language has come to stay and should be skillfully and imaginatively use to express African feelings and African heritage. This Achebe (1975) further expresses when he reveals that “it does not matter what language you write in, as long as what you write is good. Language is a weapon, and we use it. There is no point fighting a language”.

In this respect, the English language must be “tamed”, nativized and actively manipulated to admit and to legally adjust to its foreign surroundings. Thus, English must be compelled to blend with the environments (of its users) thereby producing artistic works that will be aesthetically pleasing. Within this scope, the twenty-first century African writers can hope to have the best of African literary works in English and can achieve “an extra-ordinary novelty of expression and yet all of them blossoming on the native root” (Chinua Achebe, 1975). With this, Achebe is pointing to the expanding trans-language

experiences of African people in fiction.

In this sense, the future vision of the twenty-first century African writer peculiarity with language is that of a linguistics “contamination” and perforation with different languages at work.

This is because the world is of mixed linguistics perambulation with a form of language that is clearly reshaping language consciousness based on interdependency among nation-states of the world. In other words, these generations of African writers pose a literary poise of imprecise language bazaar to the world fictional scene. In a word, of the entire continent, contemporary African writings house the greatest number of the most intersecting or interchangeable languages of the world in fiction with cross linguistics collective consciousness of the third-generation African writers.

Linguistics Innovation: the Example of Contemporary African Writing

It seems that certain subtle affinities exist between the discourse of transcultural negotiation and habituated or domesticated use of language in contemporary African writings. This means that the notion of a bi-cultural heritage or triple heritage can be a golden thread of this study, particularly when using transnational tilts to analyze language situations. In other words, third-generational African writings are not without the appropriation of European languages in African fiction, and in this case, the subversion of English language which brings about various beautiful cross-linguistic expressions which is now an indication of the new approaches of domestication phenomenon.

To this day, African intellectuals, artists and especially third-generation creative writers are particularly language-conscious when it comes to the discourse of transcultural tropes. Within this scope, such a state of affairs has not only enriched the writings of these crops of writers but contributed immensely to language sensibility of border-crossing. In a sense, language disposition of the twenty first century African writers is the trending of new linguistics cultural influx. This energizes the thinking of Africa in term of plurality (with recourse to “colonization” of European languages within the African

corpus of writing) rather than unity as it pertains to language expression. This Alain Ricard further notes:

It is important to think of Africa in terms of plurality and not just in terms of unity. It is also crucial to free oneself, on the one hand, from dualistic patterns that only serve to organize fossilized cultures into a hierarchy, and on the other, from theories that are obsessed with myths of origin and verge on totalitarianism. The compatriot of Cheikh Anta Diop, Leopold Sedar Senghor, clearly expressed this necessity of being open to others in a beautiful expression: “where giver and receiver meet” (2004:21)

It therefore follows that the twenty-first century African writers come to the language domain of the world literary landscape with copious multi-lingual’s entry into the European languages by cultivating and nurturing Western mannerism and hybrid languages in African fictions. To this end, contemporary African writers effectively indigenize and accustom the diction of the novel tradition in European languages which hinges on transcultural consciousness. In this sense, twenty-first century African novels such as, Onyeka Nwelu’s *The Abyssinian Boy* are “adequately imbued with domesticated English and expressions which deepen the thematic and stylistic thrusts of the novelist” (Oluwole Coker & Mohammed Ademilokun, 2013).

Some of the major reasons for the acculturation of English by most African writers are to add local colour to the text and to promote African sensibility. It also motivates the use of native words and expressions within their socio-cultural relevance by a way of preserving and compensating for a lack of adequate terminological equivalent. This Bandia further argues for that:

African writers [those who write in European languages – use the African language(s)] to express certain specific function in social interaction situations, and also some community-specific ways of communicating. The most common form of code-switching and code-mixing used by African writers is changing between vernacular language(s) and the European language.

When African writers cannot adequately express African socio-cultural reality in a European language, they resort to the use of indigenous words and expressions (1996:40).

It is therefore deducible from the above, that the domestication of English language in African novel brought about transnational loan words, the Nigerian English, Americanism, code-mixing which all constitute the strategies of linguistic innovation and indigenization employed by Onyeka

Nwelue in *The Abyssinian Boy*. More importantly, the author deliberately employs certain loan words both from Nigeria (Igbo language) and from Asian continent, and in this case, Tamil language from India. This again has been used by the author as a mean of demonstrating transcultural negotiations between the two distinct worlds and to showcase childhood identity authentication of David, the major protagonist of the text and other children in the text, as multi-nationals extending to Africa, Asia and Europe.

Examples of these indigenous loan words from Indian in Tamil language are *Diwali*(2), *Saris/Saliwars*(2), *Pahar Ganj*(3), *Sri Ramakrishna*(4), *Nahin*(15), *Kyahua*(15), *Tum!*(20) and so on. These loan words from Tamil language are used in parity with loan words from the Igbo language from Nigeria. These Igbo loan words are *Kedu* (139), *Amadioha* (142), *Onye?* (145), *Ihe I kwuru bu eziokwu* (138), *Lee nu gi* (126), *Onye Kwuru* (153), *Onye oshi* (129). The catalogues of these loan words are from two distinctive continents, namely; Asia and Africa.

These two languages, Tamil and Igbo languages as shown in Onyeka Nwelue's *The Abyssinian Boy*, are the domesticating agents of English expressions in the text. They also point to the fact that, the major settings and the primary characters and audience of the text are from Indian (New Delhi) and Africa (Nigeria). This particular notion leaves us with migrant childhood(s) and multiple identities about children and more importantly about globalization and hybrid identities. Apart from David and Raghu that are of mixed genealogies, there are many other cases of mixed identities and multi-national identities

of children. For instance, Belito and Carlito are also described in the text as two half-Nigerian boys and two half-Italian boys.

Code-Mixing

Onyeka Nwelue's *The Abyssinian Boy* does not only exemplify the author's linguistic and dialectical heterogeneity through loan words but also provides several instances of the author deployment of code-mixing, a sociolinguistic phenomenon, which is an indication of the study of language contacts weaves around multi-racial identity and the thematic thrust of bilingualism in African fiction. By a way of definition, Rabia Redouane (2005) from Canada sees "code-mixing as the process of mixing of elements from two languages in one utterance". Thus, code-mixing has become a common phenomenon in communities where two or more languages are alternately used for communication.

In view of the above, code-mixing is very common in the speeches of semiliterate characters in the novel of Onyeka Nwelue. In *The Abyssinian Boy* for instance, the characters often code-mix as the author tries to reflect the realities of the use of English in Nigeria and in Indian, and to project possible cultural milieu that could emerge in the course of such language transfusion. This method of linguistic inter-languages is of great stylistic effect in African fiction and to the venom of borderless language within the discourse of childhood. The author actualizes this aim with the experimentation of English with both Tamil and Igbo languages respectively.

These as seen in the text are exemplified as follow: A *chaiwallah* stepped across the street (3), If the *salagrama* stone had been cleaned (13), Land of *Kala* (86), Some of the *Rani Jhansi* streeters (16), No *Okada* allowed in (122), I eat *gari* with water (166), An Indian hacked to death at *Ikorudu* by *Agberos*.(119), "*Theek hai*", Mrs. Frazier polished her Hindi. "*Aap khana khaey hain?*" (105), "*Onye oshi*", Mama-Nkeukwu screamed at her (129) ect. From the foregoing, the mixture of one Indian language (Tamil) and one Nigerian language (Igbo) code-mixed with English language.

The point being made here is that, right from the primary school, two, three and more languages could co-exist in the speech

stock of the average child in the community. As seen in the text, David can speak English language; he understands Igbo, Americanism and even Tamil. Raghu, David's cousin and Picard, his American friend are also multilingual. In effect, the child starts to become bilingual right from the primary school stage of education. This corroborates with the findings of Ayeomoni (2006) who opines that at childhood stage, when "the grammar of the first language has not been thoroughly grasped, the child would naturally want to express himself using all the linguistic resources at his disposal".

Americanism

Western mannerism also features in Onyeka Nwelu's *The Abyssinian Boy*. In other words, Americanism slangs and version of English are now gaining prominent space in African fiction. This domesticated form of English in African fiction pontificates to the discourse of transnationalism in African fiction. Among many other African writers that has also made use of this form of accustomed English language is Mukoma Wa Ngugi's *Nairobi Heat* (2009) with such Americanism like; "fucked up shit", "fucking Africa", "get the fucker" and so on. This brand of English subtly reveals the split identity of the Africans in the Diasporas.

In Onyeka Nwelu's *The Abyssinian Boy*, Americanism is a similar contemporary trend of domesticated phenomenon which has been used not only to indicate the diasporic identity of children in the text but to comment on the bloodletting and "high-tech thief" kind of politics associated with most African countries in the hands of politicians who are actually looters. This is the kind of expression we get from the dialogue between Picard, the "American Boy Ambassador" in India and his friends with global affiliations to other countries of the worlds and these are David and Raghu. According to the "American Boy Ambassador", politics is not a thing a rich man struggles for like he sees in India if people actually wanted to serve the countries.

He (Picard) further continues that: „This is a reality“, Picard said in confusing American accent. „Tonight is our festival“. „Yaar!“ David nodded. „Alright,“ he moaned. „I look at Indian politics and I shudder“... „Das absolute nonsense,“ John Kennedy Vulture Handlebroadman groaned. „Why?“

David asked „En American where I come from, politics is not something a rich man struggles for, alright?“ „Yeah, it should be,“ he continued. „No“ this derry stinking smelly sherry nonsense bawdy politics you play here“ (52-53).

In view of the above, African fiction is replete of western mannerism in the course of coding socio-political realities of most African countries. Other examples of such western mannerism in the text under examination are as follows: Bitch (11), Bullshit (77), Fucking mulatto (53), You fucking don't understand (58), The shit out of her (138), Bitches. Fucking. Pussy. Dicky. Arsey. Lickey. Micky (55).

The Nigerian English

Other strategies of language indigenization of twenty-first century African writers are also seen in the deployment of Nigerian English. This is the English language use in "Nigeria which is the nativized form of the Standard English" (Dare Owolabi, 2012). The writer couches this stylistic innovation of Nigerian English in a subtle expression which seems to explicate that English language is no longer the exclusive preserve language of the British Isle, from where it originated. Words that are typically Nigerian English in Onyeka Nwelu's *The Abyssinian Boy* are "Agbero" (a bus conductor) and "Okada" (Motorbike). In a nutshell, Nigerian English according to Okoro (2004) is "the way Nigerians speak and write it!" with its peculiarities which do not seriously obstruct international intelligibility".

Transnational Loan Words

Another domesticated strategy that is apparent in Onyeka Nwelu's *The Abyssinian Boy* is the import of transnational loan words. Through these transnational loan words, Nwelu has been able to focus on transnational connectivity and flows generally within the African world and sometimes reaching to Europe and Asian countries. Within this scope of transculturation, cultural images and consciousness organize themselves not around any boundary or delimitation but delineate people within the globe as being in constant negotiation and dialogue about nature and culture. In this sense,

transnational loan words has therefore become in the generative sense of it, the pivotal site for the product of transnational flows.

Examples of these transnational loan words as obtainable in the text are outlined below: Juju (153), Shi Shi (128) Witches (137), Buru buru buru (130), Dogonyaro (151), Mongols (180), Shoo (59), Woo (60), Kpoi! Kpoi! (28), Kpaah kpaah sound (100) ect.

Conclusions

Base on the textual analysis of the novel, one perceives a trend of systematic linguistic deployments to meaning projection. The author careful employment of transnational loan words,

Western mannerism, code-mixing and the Nigerian English translate to the manipulation of English language in order to accommodate "Tamilbonglish" thoughts which have greatly enriched the author's styles. Nwelu seems to be skillful in the subversion of the English language, which he blends with both languages of Tamil and Igbo languages. This methodological manipulation of the English language with two other distinctive languages from different continents makes his fiction highly innovative, linguistically.

To put this properly, "Tamilbonglish" is a language used in the text that is not just Tamil. It is neither Igbo nor English but a triple-sided approaches of linguistic experimentation which illuminates childhood experiences through reciprocal influences of language mode of representation and cultural practices. To be precise, this generation is adventurous about English language through skillful deforeignization of the language which has been the main business of the day by West African artists. In other words, no matter how Europeanize the borrow medium may look like, certain aspects of the African thoughts, experiences and worldviews render the language scabbard of African literature to be a conglomeration of linguistic acrobatic pastiche.

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