

## AN APPRAISAL OF THE LANGUAGE QUESTION IN THIRD-GENERATION AFRICAN FICTION

Oluwole Coker  
Mohammed Ademilokun  
Obafemi Awolowo University

### Abstract

*African fiction and the medium of its communication have engaged the attention of critics and writers for some time now. While a group in the early sixties led by Ngugi wa Thiongo advocated the use of African languages, others like Achebe would rather domesticate English to project African values. For some language formalists like Soyinka, there is no contest as language choice is considered a lame-duck discourse and "poetics of praying mantis". This paper interrogates how the new generation of writers has grappled with the age-long issue of languages of expression for African literature. This is with a view to determining if there is a paradigm shift in linguistic choice especially by third-generation Nigerian writers. The focus is an analysis of language strategies employed in selected third-generation Nigerian novels. Through a close and comparative reading of two purposively selected African novels – Shade Adeniran *Imagine This* and Doreen Baigana *Tropical Fish*, the paper highlights the stylistic and formal strategies employed by the writers. In addition to strategies such code-mixing, code-switching, inter-language and the like, earlier noted by scholars, the paper isolates Americanisms, loan words, hybridization, coinages as mechanisms of language mediation in the texts. This demonstrates that third-generation writers are not only sensitive to the vexed issue of medium of expression of African literature, they also inject fresh strategies to accommodate linguistic diversity and portray the transnational tilt of their works. This ultimately makes the creative productions accessible as globalized art forms.*

**Key words:** Third-generation, African fiction, language, globalization, domestication.

### Introduction

The debate on the status of English and indeed other European languages in the delivery of African literature has come a long way. This debate since Obi Wali's (1968) essay has assumed a life of its own. So important is the issue that many scholars seem to have come to a subtle conclusion on its seeming intractability. While several interventions especially from major creative and critical quarters have continued to dynamise and problematise the debate, it is clear that the matter is far from being concluded. As a matter fact, the current globalising wave which comes on the heels of the explosion of the age of information technology has further compounded the issue. This is to underscore the point made by Anyokwu (n.d.) that "The point is, English is the linguistic aspect of globalization, as earlier highlighted, which has completely overrun Africa, thus further problematising the issue of identity" Therefore, as the world is continually integrated, rather than exposing the several world languages and putting them on the global map, the development has paradoxically enhanced the former colonialists' language, most especially English and French.

What the above implies is apparent. English, French and other European languages would continue to dominate the scene for a long time. What does this portend for the continuous growth and flourishing of African literary corpus? Why has it been difficult for African writers to evolve a common front? In what ways can current or new writers play different roles that would ensure that, amidst this conundrum, the creative enterprise which has the imperative of disseminating the African experience is not stifled?

This paper seeks answers to the aforementioned posers. In doing this, the peculiarity of language use and exploration by two third generation African writers namely Shade Adeniran in *Imagine This* and Doreen Baigana in *Tropical Fish*, shall be evaluated. The objective of the paper is not to suggest that the two writers have written distinctively from their precursors or peers, rather, the paper attempts to demonstrate that the writers have continued to engage the language question creatively without undermining the African consciousness in their novelistic agenda.

### Third-Generation African Writing

Describing third-generation African writers, Olusegun-Joseph (2011,p.2) laments that they are writers,

Living within a grossly harassed socio-political reality of institutional corruption, nepotism and the atomizing blight of economic hardship, the bulk of new Nigerian writers are embattled within a riddled educational universe, the impossibly high cost of publishing, a depleted audience more drawn to film than to books and the inertia of spirited criticism in engaging with their literary wares (2)

From the foregoing, it is deducible that third generation African writers are products of peculiar circumstances. In other words, the circumstances of their emergence are a consequence of certain socio-political developments in the African body polity. This probably explains their description by African online magazine as "... writers of a disillusioned Africanist enterprise, who are not naïve about international realities but have become more hesitant about blaming outsiders because they have experienced a lot of enemies within' (7).

Across Africa and her literary landscape are such writers who lend to this critical probing. This is consequent upon experiences arising from socio-political instability and incursion of the military in governance in most post-independence African states. Therefore, twenty-first century African writing can best be described as a child of circumstances. It should be remarked that, the attendant disillusionment which came in the wake of failed political leadership in several countries on the continent necessarily results in political colouration of African literary productions. With economic downturn recorded in most African societies, the germination and flourishing of artistic industries became difficult. However, energised by the globalising forces of the age, the writers gradually discovered their voices hence engendering a renaissance in the creative industry.

In Nigeria particularly, the writers are voices who operate from several locations – home and Diaspora, and who constantly revisit themes of the state of their homelands. Even for those permanently located in the West like Chris Abani and Chika Unugwe, their location merely broadened and globalised the intensity of their artistic offerings. All these evidently colour the writings and in terms of language use, the third-generation of African writers are exemplary in the fusion of domesticated strategies which showcase their works as world literature, written in world languages, but also accessible to a global audience. They therefore do not alienate their artistic sources in the language of expression, either in English and French.

### **Overview of the Language Question**

There is no poverty of scholarship on the language question in African literature. The issue has been addressed from both literary and linguistic perspectives. Literary scholars have dwelled extensively on this challenge starting from the early critics through later ones in African critical enterprise. (Wali 1969; Achebe; 1997; Adekoya, 1997; Kehinde, 2004 ; Ayeleru, 2011; Anyokwu, 2012). For language scholars such as (Bamgbose, 1998; Bamiro, 1991; Igboanusi, 2001), there is no disputing the place of English in African literary enterprise. Even though there is no consensus as to how this issue could be firmly addressed, the contentions have clearly demarcated the diversities of the arguments. There is no doubting the fact that in the literary consciousness of early African writers like Achebe, Soyinka and Ngugi wa Thiongo, the issue of language of expression is very topical.

However, while the duo of Soyinka and Achebe seem to have accepted the challenge as part of the realities of their location as African writers who evolved through an amalgamation of experiences from colonialism through neo-colonialism, and most recently, globalisation. However, Ngugi remains relentless in the struggle and seems to have taken the battle to higher fronts. In a recent article, Ngugi (2013, p. 2) challenges African knowledge producers along the language precincts:

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.

What comes out from the above is that, Ngugi has over the years deepened his argument for the use of African languages to convey the society's values and consciousness. This implies that, the writer and critic is aware of the moral dilemma involved in literate knowledge production in Africa, which of course does not preclude. Adejunmobi (1999, p. 583) calls this "moral stigma". She elaborates that "Right from the outset then, at a time when the very existence of an African literature remains controversial in some quarters, a moral

stigma was already attached to the fact of writing in European languages". Reconciling this contention with Achebe's (1997,p.347) re-echoed poser on the unique stature of English in Africa, one is left to ponder as he offers an explanation:

What is it that has conspired to place English in the position of national language in many parts of Africa? Quite simply, it is the fact that these nations were created in the first place by the intervention of the British, which (I hasten to add) is not saying that the peoples comprising these nations were invented by the British

It is deducible from the above that the language issue is indeed a knot that has been difficult to untie and may remain so for some time.

Ngugi's age-long position, has however been described by many critic as self-contradicting. This stems from the fact that, Ngugi does not seem, in the opinion of a scholar like Vakunta to be consistent. The critics carpet Ngugi's self-defeatist position which has clearly shown that he overtly favours English despite his nativistic apostasy. Citing several instances of translation from Gikiyu to English and the continued pursuit of his literary career using the English language, Vakunta(n.d), p.77,78) summarises his opinion of Ngugi's efforts thus:

It is disingenuous to limit the examination of a people's literature to the 'wrapping' at the expense of other constituting factors. I do not think that the language in which a work of literature is written is really as important as Ngugi and Wali perceive it. What is more important is the message/content and the stylistic devices employed to convey intended messages. It does not matter which language writers choose to glean their signifiers from, all that matters is what is being signified. I feel that one should judge whether or not a novel is "African" by what is being signified, not by the language from which the signifiers are culled.

Notwithstanding the critical venom above, the fact remains that Ngugi's position is not without its merit. What is important is not to dismiss the critics' articulations, but rather, writers and critics alike are supposed to appreciate this reality and deploy the consciousness in the creative and critical imaginations. This aligns with the observation of Ayeleru (2011,p. 3) that:

In their texts, they deploy, in a specialized manner, linguistic strategies like African orature, proverbs, translation/transliteration, pidginization, intra/intertextuality, euphemism, metaphor, and metonymy...The new generation of West African writers are daring in the subversion and appropriation of the European languages with which they produce their texts. They freely deploy different linguistic strategies to indigenize and domesticate the borrowed medium they employ.

The point from the above is that writing in English is not odd or misplaced. Rather, the content and style of writing which fail to appropriate the sensibilities of the enabling milieu is damnable and incapable of portraying the actual experiences of the cultures being mirrored. Given the Gaurav Desei, position in "English as an African Language" (1993) English is, therefore, capable of being appropriated and successfully Africanised, therefore, the African writer through the medium of English language can successfully navigate the stormy waters of language choice and cultural consciousness. Desei quotes theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, to support the view that a world language can be indigenised once a writer "populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention" (Bakhtin qtd. in Desei 6).

For a writer such as Ken Saro Wiwa, the prospect of using Pidgin is very viable. Though the late writer earlier insisted the use of English as creative medium is sacrosanct; much later in his career, and apparently in a bid to further his political end as an environmental activist, Saro Wiwa became a linguistic apostle of Pidgin and his famous novel *Sozaboy* is a clear testimony of his conviction. This is what Olusegun Adekoya (1997 p.166) refers to as linguistic "experimentation". In fact, Adekoya's study of the use of Pidgin in Zulu Sofola's *Wizard of Law* underscores the need to embrace its use for creative communication, since "it is a register on its own right and works for its users as a medium of communication"

In general, the climate of critical position seems to favour creativity in linguistic deployment in African literature. This creativity would certainly involve a consistent effort at domestication of standard orthography as well as infusion of indigenous elements in a bid to achieving better impact and effective message delivery to intended audience.

### **Energising a Tradition: New Approaches of Domestication**

There is a need to examine how the present crop of writers has fared in the task of deploying English in the present. The choice of Sade Adeniran and Doreen Baigana as textual references for this paper is hinged on a number of factors. The two writers share boundaries in aesthetic and stylistic corridors. Apart from being debutant female novelists, they are part of an emerging generation popularising the African Bildungsroman as a viable novelistic form that helps engage the postcolonial African condition (Okuyade, 2009). In addition, they are less visible among writers of their generation such as Chimamanda Adichie and Sefi Attah. Hence, critics have not sufficiently engaged their works.

To begin with Doreen Baigana's *Tropical Fish*, the novel is adequately imbued with domesticated English and expressions which deepen the thematic and stylistic thrusts of the novelist. Set in Uganda in the heat of political upheaval under a bestial ruler, Idi Amin, the novel is a commentary on the decadence of the society. Also, the novel captures the frustrations of the individual in such a milieu. Actually, the prevalence of transnational ethos and aesthetics is captured in choice of language of expression by the characters in the novels. Essentially a satire of the Ugandan condition, *Tropical Fish* also touches on cosmopolitan and postcolonial issues of identity, HIV/AIDS pandemic, racial discrimination and the like.

All the aforementioned tropes are however given bite through specific domestication strategies such as the use of loan words, Americanisms, code-switching and hybridised expressions. In fact, *Tropical Fish* is so replete in loan words that the novelist seems to deliberately use this as a means of identity authentication. Examples are listed below:

- *Kantonge, wange (15),*
- *agandi basebo (16),*
- *kanzu (16),*
- *posho (20),*
- *bambi (31),*
- *bazungu (40),*
- *sapatu (48)*
- *bodingi (56),*
- *gomesi (59),*
- *munange* (61)

The above loan words are drawn from Swahili language and they go a long way in showing that Swahili is the domesticating agent of the English expressions in the novel. They also point to the fact that, the setting and primary audience of the novel is a Swahili milieu.

Code-mixing, aptly described by Bamiro as “the transfer of untranslated words into a text as a counter-discursive strategy of ‘Otherness’, code-mixing is a device that directly confronts and challenges the territoriality of a dominant discourse in the context of a multilingual and multicultural setting” (2000, p. 98 qtd in Bamiro, 1991, p. 317), is also effectively deployed in *Tropical Fish*. In a sense, both code-mixing and loan words highlighted earlier are strategies for “nativisation” or self-assertion. They effectively indigenise the diction of the novel. Examples of code switching in the novel include:

- Mary, bambi, my bread has gone stale (31)
- I wish a prefect would come running in right now and announce that Mama is here (33)
- There were about two bazungu left (40)
- The cassava sat like a rock in my belly (35)

In addition to the above, *Tropical Fish* also contains domestication strategies like transnational loan words such as *Juju, doh-doh, ganja* (90), duka-Hausa; Hybridisation with words such as *Shambaboy* (11) while Americanisms are exemplified in expressions which include : “ Fuck the children, fuck them” (23). The point to be made therefore is that, through the deployment of strategies identified above, Doreen Baigana evidently makes a statement that the third-generation African fiction writer endears his/her craft to the literary audience by engaging the realities of the milieu via a domesticated linguistic-cum stylistic mechanism.

Shade Adeniran is a Nigerian female writer whose craft can also be discussed in relation to choices of linguistic expression. Apart from heavily colouring her epistolary novel with African imageries and metaphors, *Imagine This* is a novel which underscores the importance of “Africanisation” of English. Granted that the strategies of domesticating English in Shade Adeniran’s *Imagine This* are not strange, yet, one can easily discern the creativity and novelty she brings to bear, especially in the desire to blend medium and message.

The theme of Shade Adeniran’s *Imagine This* centres around the physiological longing of home and the paradox of belonging. In other words, identity is the crux of the novelist’s preoccupation. However, it is evident that, Adeniran’s ulterior ambition is to universalise the identity issue by deconstructing the idea of home, a common trope in twenty-first century African fiction, which develops a problematic around the home/exile consciousness. The point is apparent that, through the character portraiture of Lola and the attendant frustrations of existence, the novelist suggests that location hardly determines fate; rather, fate is a construction of existential vicissitudes.

In projecting the above thematic thrust, domesticated English readily becomes Adeniran’s tool of navigation. Given the fact that “language is a means of representation which also functions as instrument of control...and a means of achieving personal fulfillment”, Adeniran’s linguistic mediation revolves around the characterisation of Lola and her aspiration for self-actualisation in her roots. To achieve this, Adeniran’s strategies of pidginisation, coinages, nativised expressions appropriation/use of proverbs code-mixing and loan words shall be highlighted.

Shade Adeniran punctuates her prose with expressions from the Yoruba worldview. She uses this to draw attention to the root seeking agenda of her protagonist, and to a great extent, the expressions depict the setting of the novel. This also shows the variant of English spoken in the environment. Examples include:

- Five years is a very very long time (26)
- it was the small fried akara that made my stomach to talk ( 24),
- I was inside myself but outside myself (28),
- wife number two (75),
- You think I was born yesterday (134),
- face-me-I- face-you (41)

As can be seen in the examples above, the expressions are more or less transliterated from the native language to convey meaning. Closely related to this is code-mixing, which as explained earlier generally depicts a situation of contact between languages, as seen in the following examples:

- I wanted to buy some akara ( 5)
- An iro and buba (18)
- They are called agbepo (41)

Shade Adeniran promotes Nigerian Pidgin English extensively in *Imagine This*. She has a firm grasp of this deviant form and masters the registers. The exploration of Pidgin English, on the one hand is used to promote diversity especially in Lagos, a cosmopolitan setting of the novel. On the other hand, Nigerian Pidgin deployed in *Imagine This* suggests its wide acceptance and popularity of the English variant in the twenty-first century, especially its growing influence in arts and entertainment. *Imagine This* is replete in this domestication strategy, as exemplified below:

- Na your fault we never live for time (7)
- Come and chop (8)
- Na im cut am, so she no go die ( 17)
- Wetin dis pikin do you? (58)



- I don't carry belle, we must marry (75)

Another domestication strategy prevalent in *Imagine This* is the invocation of cultural images and consciousness. This is achieved through a deep exploration of Yoruba proverbs and other cultural resources. Also the loan-words from Yoruba language symbolise a conscious effort at attenuating Standard English and altering same for creative expressions. In fact, the varieties of loan words also suggest the desire of the protagonist to share in the language experience of the imaginary root. Loan words and proverbs in the novel are a deliberate attempt at marrying diction with thematic and ideological thrusts. Examples include :

### **Loan Words**

- akara (5),
- Idogun; atiporo (11),
- Ajapa (Ijapa) (17),
- Iro and Buba (18),
- juju (21),
- babalawo (24),
- Ole (25),
- Egungun (26),
- agbepo (41),
- moi-moi (58),
- Oba (79),
- gele (143),

### **Proverbs**

- Whatever the eyes of a dead man see in the burial yard is caused by death (3),
- No matter how long a log may float in the water, it will never become a crocodile (252),
- The river is never so full that it covers the eyes of the fish (217)
- It is the fly that has no one to advise it that follows the corpse into the grave (201)
- The teeth are smiling, but is the heart? (58)

Our view from the analysis of the two writers is that they have demonstrated an abiding faith in the domestication of English. They have, in addition to previously exploited strategies, deployed their artistic craft in capturing the realities of the global age and the place of postcolonial order that has evolved into a global citizenship. Through the diversities and dynamics of the mediated English in the works, the writers evidently lend themselves to the observation by Igboanusi (2011, p.57). He remarks:

Consequently, they try not to distance themselves from any of their two groups of readers. They use the English language which is European in such a way that they incorporate the idiom and language resources of Igbo while ensuring that the English language grammar is not terribly distorted. This effort may be conscious. The problem with the use of English in creative writing by African writers is largely a problem of culture. It is, no doubt, a fact that a society's language is an aspect of its culture. African writers carry and transfer some of the cultural nuances of the indigenous African people into English. To be able to play this role effectively, the structure of native-speaker English has to be adjusted.

In effect, what the above suggests is that, the use of English as a medium of transporting African consciousness in the corpus of written literature is a dynamic engagement. In order to imbue this with innovation and continuous creativity, writers must seek fresh ways of arresting the intrinsic resources of the language to energise the African experience. This becomes particularly relevant in the twenty-first century where the tension of existence continues to confound artistic creativity. Chinua Achebe (2012, p. 55) in *There Was a Country* underscores this further that:

Engaging such heavy subjects while at the same trying to help create a unique and authentic

African literary tradition would mean that some of us would decide to use the colonizer's tools: his language, altered sufficiently to bear the weight of an African creative aesthetic, infused with elements of the African literary tradition.

Achebe's admonition above is written conscious of the challenges of the twenty-first century. In this vein, the fact that, writers would require greater skills of altering English and entrenching the domestication strategy already established by earlier writers becomes an imperative.

## Conclusion

Language is a creative resource. Apart from the fact that it is generated within a given culture, it has the capacity to exude ideology and position its users in a given direction. The inherent capacity of language for dynamism enhances its agency of creative engagements. Since language is beyond a set of conventional rules, its full exploration and exploration go a long way in repositioning the worldview of its users. Hence, in deploying and injecting freshness in its usage, third-generation writers in African fiction have re-orchestrated the interconnection between linguistic experimentation and creative innovation. As demonstrated in this paper, the oeuvres of literary offerings of third-generation African writers exemplify the direction of the novels.

To sum up, this paper avers that, through the deployment of identified strategies, third generation writers are empowered to engage larger issues in the twenty-first-century. In addition, the art of the writers is creatively energised through the path of language. The writers hence deepen the domestication tendency in African literature and position the artistic and thematic concerns of the novels on the global plane. To agree with Anyokwu (n.d) that :

It is, however, trite to continue to bemoan the continued use of English since it is only one, if crucial, aspect of the comprehensive colonization of the African world. The African writer's adoption of English should be appreciated within the context of the African's dependence on Europe (2, accessed June, 2012)

As Anyokwu implies above, contestations and ruminations over the English language should be rested. This is because of the seeming indispensability of the language in positioning indigenous cultural experiences and ensuring that, African literature is not sidelined in the global corpus. Perhaps, rather than dissipate energy on the impropriety or denying that African literature in English is a misnomer, it would be fruitful to advocate, as Kehinde (2004, p.1) suggests that "in this age of globalization, African writers cannot afford to deny their works of wide readership; therefore, they should consider the appropriation and reconstitution of English as a medium of African literature."

## References

- Achebe, C. (1997). English and the African writer. *Transition*, 75/76, The Anniversary Issue: Selections from *Transition*, 1961-1976(1997) 342-349
- Achebe, C. (2012). *There was a country: A personal history of Biafra*. New York: Penguin.
- Adejunmobi, M. (1999). Routes: Language and the identity of African literature. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 37 (4): 581-596
- Adekoya, O. (1997). Linguistic experimentation in *wizard of law*. *Studia Anglica Posnaniensa* XXXII: 157-167.
- Adeniran, S. (2009). *Imagine This*. Abuja: Cassava Republic.
- Anyokwu, C. (n.d). The past is prologue: English, metafiction and the postcolonial condition in Karen King-Aribisala's *The Hangman's Game*" *African Writing Online*. 10. Accessed on 25<sup>th</sup> July, 2013 from <http://www.africanwriting.com/ten/anyokwu2.php>
- Ayeleru, B. (2011). Linguistic innovation in the new West African Europhone novel: Between interlanguage and indigenization. *California Linguistic Notes* XXXVI (1): 1-32
- Baigana, D. (2009). *Tropical Fish*. Abuja: Cassava Republic.
- Bamiro, E. (1991). Nigerian Englishes in Nigerian English literature. *World Englishes* 10(1): 99-110.
- Gaurav, D. (1993). English as an African language. *English Today: The International Review of the English Language*. 9 (2): 4-11.
- Igboanusi, H. (2001). The Igbo tradition in the Nigerian novel. *African Study Monograph*. 22 (2): 53-72.
- Kehinde, A. (2004). English and the postcolonial writer's burden: Linguistic innovations in Femi

- Fatoba's *My Older Father and Other Stories*. *West African Review* 6:75-90.
- Olusegun-Joseph, Y. (2011). The unfortunate generation writes back: The signifying tears of Akeem Lasisi's Night of My Flight. *California Linguistic Notes*. Volume XXXVI (2): 1-17
- Saro-Wiwa, K. (1992). The language of African literature: A writer's testimony. *Research in African Literatures*, 23 (1):153-157.
- Vakunta, Peter W. (n.d) Aporia: Ngugi's fatalistic logic on the position of indigenous languages in African literature <http://www.africanlit.org/publications/jala/Vol5No2/vakunta.pdf>
- Wali, O. (1963). The dead end of African literature. *Transition*, 10: 13-15.
- wa Thiong'o, N. (1981). *Decolonising the mind*. London: Heinemann.
- wa Thiongo (2013). Tongue and pen: a challenge to philosophers from Africa. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 25 (2)158-163.

### Author Information

\* Dr. Oluwole Coker is a Lecturer in the Department of English, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. His teaching and research interests lie in cultural, oral, postcolonial African fiction and interdisciplinary studies. His e-mail is [wole4u@gmail.com](mailto:wole4u@gmail.com).

\*\* Mohammed Ademilokun teaches in Department of English, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria, where he is also a Doctoral Candidate. His e-mail is [mohmilokun@yahoo.com](mailto:mohmilokun@yahoo.com).