

Transcreation, African Languages and Identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, Noviolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* and Amma Darko's *Between Two Worlds*

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Abstract: The rewriting of the African history as far as identity is concerned does not leave in the margin the African heritage. Adichie, Bulawayo and Darko have constructed plots in which African characters are given expression in a global space with their specific heritage. The shaping of such characters through the expression of their African heritage paves the way to new forms of creations. This “transcreation” or blending of African languages in African writings works as a writing technique and an expression the African identity.

Keywords: African languages, African writing, Expression, Heritage, Identity, Writing technique.

Résumé : La réécriture de l'histoire africaine en ce qui concerne l'identité ne laisse pas en marge l'héritage africain. Adichie, Bulawayo et Darko ont construit des intrigues dans lesquelles des personnages africains s'expriment dans un espace global avec leur héritage spécifique. La formation de ces personnages par l'expression de leur héritage africain ouvre la voie à de nouvelles formes de création. Cette « transcréation » ou mélange des langues africaines dans les écrits africains fonctionne comme une technique d'écriture et une expression de l'identité africaine.

Mots clefs : langues africaines, écriture africaine, héritage, identité, technique d'écriture

Introduction

This paper intends to demonstrate the way Adichie, Bulawayo and Darko have expressed African identity within their selected novels, respectively, *Americanah*, *We Need New Names* and *Between Two Worlds*. More specifically, it focuses on the insertion of African languages in their literary works as a way to express their African identity. To conceptualize the notion of African heritage, let us consider the following authors' texts. Writing about Adichie's novel and its protagonist, Chinenye Amonyeze states that "Adichie's cultural thermometer fits Fanon's third categorization due to Ifemelu's acceptance of her heritage with its baggage of kinky hair, dark skin, exotic accents, and so on" (2017: 6). Amonyeze makes use of the same term "heritage" to comment on Ifemelu. Giving a description of the character, which the author relates to heritage, Amonyeze observes that Ifemelu has some distinctive features that characterize the African. Through this quotation, Amonyeze seems to be praising Ifemelu for her baggage. In fact, as an immigrant in America, she is surrounded by features different from hers. In America, the canons of beauty are dominated by white race. The focus on her baggage, from Amonyeze's analysis, brings light to the way Adichie has constructed a character who carries and translates her Africanness into a predominantly white place. In this respect, this paper resorts to "transcreation" as a concept to highlight the way African languages are used as an expression of the African identity.

1- Reflection on Heritage

As mentioned above, Amonyeze relates baggage to heritage, which epitomizes the character's features which have not been earned in the host country but which she moved with. In this light, it stands out that heritage refers to what Ifemelu inherently possesses, which is not earned in America. In the same perspective, Amonyeze writes that: "Biculturalism represents comfort and proficiency with both one's heritage and the culture of the country or region in which one has settled" (3). Relating heritage to culture, she points out cultural frontiers, indicating the difference between the host and the home cultures. In this regard, it comes out that heritage, in this sense, refers to inherent values within a person or a people. In one word, the term "African heritage" refers to features, traits and values, ranging from moral, ethical, religious to social norms, among others. Consequently, the construction of the African identity within imagined worlds by the authors under study is based on their African heritage. To put it differently, the construction of African characters in line with identity expression is made with the inclusion of their African heritage, that is, inherent values received from their ancestors. As

just mentioned, through Amonyze's argument, Ifemelu clearly illustrates the point. However, going in the vein of migration, Steiner writes: "The narrative journeys of solid material objects, or the insertion of indigenous languages, are ways in which the everyday lived experience of migrants finds expression in these writers' works" (2010: 114). Though the quotation includes point as important as "material objects", focus is on the "insertion of indigenous languages". From Steiner's argument, indigenous languages are constitutive of immigrants' experience abroad. In other words, the insertion of indigenous languages are resorted to give insight in characters' lives as immigrants. However, such description is not simple as it appears. In fact, the insertion of indigenous languages in African literature, generally, and migrant literature, specifically, is core, both to the form and to the content, narration. In other terms, the insertion of indigenous languages is not solely to tell of characters' experiences but is invocative as far as artistic and the politics of writing are concerned. It is incumbent to their writings. And, the replenishment of its insertion within their novels reveals a majestically made construction observed in the African literary landscape. The meticulous insertion of indigenous languages within African writings is constitutive of a whole mechanism identified as transcreation.

2- African Writings and Transcreation

"Transcreation" is almost given the same function as translation but the interest of this paper is focused on transcreation. The term "transcreation" is borrowed from the article written by Maxwell Kadenge and Dion Nkomo whose title is *Language Policy, Translation and Language Development in Zimbabwe*. As the title indicates, the article is a study on the development of language in Zimbabwe in which translation is said to be playing a key role. Related to translation, the authors describe transcreation as the means giving way to the language development. In this sense, Kadenge and Nkomo write: "African literature written in English is one domain in which translation or transcreation is extensively employed in a very productive way" (2011: 266). From this quotation, the authors put in relation African literature and translation or transcreation. For a better understanding of the concept "transcreation", let us consider the following quotations. To begin with, Kadenge and Nkomo argue that:

...much translation and/or transcreation is involved in the creation of the English texts as African writers of English literature shape the English language in such a way that their African experiences remain African and, more importantly, traceable to their indigenous languages. This has had a tremendous impact on the development of English as a world language (266).

In Kadenge's and Nkomo's analysis of "transcreation" as a means of language development, as posited within this above quotation, they argue that African writers shape the English language

through their productions. In fact, as they mentioned, the development occurs through the perpetuation of the African experiences within the English language. In other words, though they, African writers, make use of the English language for their literary productions, the imprint of their pre-colonial features are still evident. For this reason, they make it specific that their African experiences remain African, which proves how unaltered is the content of their works though written in English, which is a foreign language for them. As a matter of fact, transcreation appears as a transposition, which, in this context, signifies writing and maintaining native original facts and experiences within another language without altering its essence, thereby mirroring the source.

Next, they quote Osundare to bring light on how African writers “articulate the experiences of their culture in the English language”. “The writer attempts to render in English the figures and tropes of the first language, striving consciously and oftentimes laboriously, to preserve their original flavour, the rhythms and cadences of their sentences, their idiomatic and proverbial authenticity, and even their situational dramatic occasions” (266), they write.

Finally, they also quote Kachru, whose point of view goes in the same perspective. They write:

Similarly, Kachru (1986) notes that the production of difference in English discourse across cultures has more to do with the use of native similes and metaphors, the transfer of rhetorical devices, the translation or transcreation of proverbs and idioms, the use of culturally dependent speech styles, and the use of syntactic devices. (266)

As Kadenge and Mkombo mention, these quotations have similar points in that they bring light on the same idea. For Osundare, African authors write in such a way that “*the figures and tropes of the first language...preserve their original flavour*”. And for Kachru, authors write while ensuring the transfer of rhetorical devices such as proverbs and idioms and the use of cultural speech styles, to quote but a few of them. In sum, transcreation, which Kadenge and Nkomo define as a means of language development refers to the maintenance, expression and perpetuation of writers’ original values in a borrowed language. Conversely, the English language experiences development as African authors incorporate therein their original “flavour” while using it for their writings. In this light, and keeping in mind that transcreation refers to the transfer of original “flavour” from African experiences to the English language, this paper explores the selected novels under study and reveals how, re-thinking African identity, African writers include the African heritage.

3- African languages, African Writings and the Expression of the African Identity

In his *Writing Degree Zero*, Roland Barthes makes statements which can be paralleled to recent African writings which re-construct the African personality. He, firstly, writes: "...a mode of writing whose function is no longer only communication or expression, but the imposition of something beyond language..." (1970: 1) and, secondly argues that "Literature is no longer felt as a socially privileged mode of transaction, but as a language having body and hidden depths, existing both as dream and menace" (3). The book was published in 1970 and can be posited as reflecting the ongoing realities at the time, with emphasis on literature. The same way literature was the imposition of something or the body of dream and menace, migrant literature resonates, in the current time, as the imposition or dream emanating from African writers. As mentioned earlier, migrant literature shows interest in the reinvention of Africans in a global world and, as a matter of fact, is an expression of African ideology for universalism. Writing about ideology, Jorgensen and Phillips define it as the "meaning in the service of power" (2002: 75). They also define ideologies as "constructions of meaning that contribute to the production, reproduction and transformation of relations of domination" (75). As a result, ideology stands as meaning intending to bring transformation. In this respect, the relation of migrant literature to the African ideology is significant of the way African authors create meaning of transformation as far as universalism is concerned.

African authors use African languages to maintain and express the African identity. They use it as a writing technique to achieve such a goal. Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* exemplifies such a claim. This linguistic expression can be illustrated through the following utterance of the narrator of the novel: "What are you doing, masascum evanhu imi? Liyahlanya, you think these expensive white people came all the way from overseas ipapa to see you act like baboons" (2014, 54). As evident as it is, it is a combination of different languages, English (117) and a language Darling identifies as "our language" (54), a Zimbabwean indigenous language. This quotation foreshadows the significant place of language in African writings. For instance, Darko's *Between Two Worlds* tells: "The Gold Coast was by now experiencing grave political agitation. Colonialism brought with it the advantage of formal education and the learning of English language" (2015: 240). The novel, from this quotation presents colonial Ghana and the language issue. Of course, the introduction of the English language within the society means a lot. Not only does it stand as an asset for employment and other opportunities,

but also brings light on linguistic struggle. That is, the option of the people and the lot of native languages as well the way “colonialism” linguistically exerted domination. Further in the narration, it is told: “How did he get there from Africa? Oh Ursula, Africa? Why? Why Africa?... Oh child, Ursula, how do you talk to each other? Do you speak his language? What language does he speak? (351). The narrator takes readers into the love experience of black Jofri and white Ursula.

Through the quotation, the narrator points out the language issue. The fact that Darko, female Ghanaian writer, constructs such a scene is worth consideration. Actually, the question in the quotation is put by Gertrud, Ursula’s mother, when she hears of her daughter’s engagement with a young African. Her question “What language does he speak?” is purposely constructed. In reality, as a white character, and being a character who communicates using language, her question reveals her position regarding other languages. In fact, she seems to be portrayed as denouncing a subject who only has consideration for her own language while disregarding others’, proving the marginality of African languages. Such struggle, far from being a mere narrated fact, applies to African literature. The use of European languages, which Mkwandawire identifies as “exoglossic language” (2005: 171), by African writers has led to a sort of struggle. For instance, Ngugi, reputed for his implication in using African languages defines language as a “communication system” (2005: 20), which, he argues, is a symbol of “identity” (16). As such, to maintain and express their identity he strongly encourages its use. Following his argumentation, the use of European language is not but a western orchestration through colonisation. In this respect, he qualifies this linguistic diversion as *linguicide*. He writes:

Linguicide...“implies that there are agents involved in causing the death of languages.” This is precisely the fate of African languages.... “The encounter between African Languages (Yoruba, Igbo, Twi, Kikongo, and many others) and Western languages (French, Spanish, Dutch, Portuguese, English) was perhaps the most subtle and most complex aspect of the cultural confrontation. (17)

Since he argues that language is a “carrier of culture... and memory” (20), the use of those European languages by African writers results in a betrayal from their part at the expense of their own languages. Always in the struggle context, he therefore ends up suggesting that “African languages are essential for the decolonization of African minds as well as for the African renaissance” (93), hence its reuse in the African literary landscape. It is conversely inevitable that the use of African languages as main language for writing will give rise to a larger restriction as far as access to African literature is concerned, due mainly to the lack of

education in those languages. However, in spite of the fact that writing in African languages will have a smaller audience, not going beyond their “nation of origin” (Frassinelli, 2015: 713) or beyond people able to read those African languages, African authors, holding fast to their linguistic identity have developed strategies to express it.

A good illustration of the perpetuation of African linguistic identity, among others, is Uncle Kojo’s family in America. Their presence in America does not prevent them from speaking their African language. It is for instance narrated: “Aunt Fostalina throws the rest of the orange in the bin and says, Yes, in your country maybe, but this is America, and nxa ubon’ engan’ uleboyi lapha manj’ uzatshetshela negeza fanami!” (Bulawayo, 156). Such narration inevitably is confusing to the readers. A part written in English, understandable, while the other in a language not accessible to all. Taken as a representation of the family everyday life, it epitomizes how hybrid the family is, using both, English and their home languages. Taken, on the other hand, in the form, it takes us to writing technique of the author. In this respect, she can be said to incorporate African indigenous languages in her work. The “insertion of indigenous languages” in their works is not but the expression of their identity through a European form of writing. This is apparent in Moji’s point of view. Moji writes: “Reading African literature that is written in colonial languages can be considered a process of translation, through which colonial languages are appropriated through the incorporation of the lexical structure of African languages into colonial languages” (2014: 1). From the quotation, it stands out that modern African literature, though written in “exoglossic languages” still carries the mark of African identity which is actually a clear resonance of Kadenge’s and Nkomo’s analysis on “transcreation”. As for Moji, it identified as “Africanized colonial writing” (2).

In addition to the insertion of indigenous languages, African writers affirm the African identity through European languages, the case of English in our context. The imposition of European languages through colonialism as Darko’s narrator tells is perceived as a symbol of domination from the Western world. This is evident in that the very Africans end up resorting to those languages at the expense of their own languages. In this context, Ngugi writes that “to impose a language is to impose the weight of experience it carries...” (20). The use of the term “impose” in the quotation reveals the position of the colonized African as weak, due to that he cannot but accept it. This weakness is, in return, manifested through the reuse of the language by the colonized himself. However, in the struggle for self-assertion, African thinkers have shown possibilities of demonstrating their identity, even, through a language which is not their

own. Though acknowledging the imposition of European values and the entailing disruption operated within the African people, Achebe, for instance, suggests the appropriation and refashioning of the English language.

The language of the colonizer serves as a means to express the African identity. For instance, English has been used to perpetuate the African identity. As an illustration, the narrator of Adichie's *Americanah* says: "The radio turned on low to the Pidgin English news on Wazobia FM..." (2013: 19). Migrant literature is also a place where African writer re-invent and re-affirm the African identity even through English which is a European heritage. "Pidgin English" as mentioned in the quotation is a clear demonstration of the way the African identity is re-asserted.

English is inherited from the colonial counterpart but is re-used in such a way it bears the marks of African identity. The term "Pidgin English" refers to the combination of English and African local languages. G. Tucker Childs writes in that sense in *An Introduction to African Languages*: "Another problem arises when a language serves as a lingua franca and serves as a second language to many speakers, where pidginization and restructuring can occur" (2003: 21). Childs' definition of pidginization suggests the speaking of a "second language" which in turn implies a first language. Pidginization, from his text, occurs when the two are used by speakers. As a result, the new language emanating from the two becomes a pidgin language. The case of Nigeria where English, as a legacy from the British colonial empire, is spoken is "Nigerian Pidgin English" (21) as Childs says. Pidgin English is therefore the combination of both local languages and imported English. To take the subject back to the novel where Pidgin English is spoken on Wazobia FM, and considered that the narration takes readers in Nigeria, it is evident that the Pidgin English in view is not but the combination of Nigerian languages plus English inherited from Britain which gives birth to the new English. This English, though perceived as a legacy of the colonial experience, now bears the mark of the African identity, namely Nigerian local languages composing its new form.

The incorporation of such English in the novel can be said to be a technique used by the author to express the African identity through a European language. In fact, this strategy is a clear resonance of Achebe's philosophy when he says "I have been given this language and I intend to use it" (1965: 30). Achebe further says, "I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings" (30). From

Achebe's perspective, the colonial English imposed on the African people would be used but in such a way it would carry the African experience. In other words, the English language would be naturalized.

Conclusion

The incorporation of Pidgin English and the insertion of African indigenous languages in African writings echoes Kadenge's and Nkomo's transcreation, revealing the expression of African values in modern literature. It brings light on the way Adichie, Bulawayo and Darko, African migrant literature writers include the African heritage in the construction of the African personality. In this sense, Zimbabwean and Nigerian languages, Igbo (62) and Yoruba (65) spoken by their characters are vital. Concretely, it is expressed through proverbial expressions such as "E gbuo n'gu uno, e luo na ogu agu, e lote ya" (Adichie, 2013: 62) which means "If you kill a warrior in a local fight, you'll remember him when fighting enemies" (62). The insertion of such utterance in the novel is indicative of the way African authors render in English some items of African languages. The use of such writing technique is not but a way of expressing the African identity in literature.

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