

Alternate Paradigms of African Discourse Through Language

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Abstract

Language serves as a multifaceted tool in African literature, embodying cultural heritage, facilitating communication, and challenging colonial legacies. It often reflects the diversity of Africa's linguistic landscape, incorporating indigenous languages alongside colonial tongues like English, French, and Portuguese. African writers employ language to preserve oral traditions, express cultural identities, and convey the complexities of post-colonial experiences. Moreover, language acts as a medium for resistance against hegemonic narratives, enabling writers to subvert stereotypes and reclaim narratives previously dominated by Western perspectives. Through linguistic innovation and experimentation, African literature continues to evolve, asserting its significance on the global literary stage while celebrating the richness of Africa's linguistic heritage. This paper attempts to delineate the diverse paradigms that can emerge about the connotations of colonial African society, apartheid and its portrayal due to alternate discourses of language in texts. By examining the use of language as a tool in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* (1964) and Nadine Gordimer's *The Lying Days* (1953), this paper delineates how language can portray the same story with different levels of consciousness.

Keywords: Language, Multifaceted tool, Diverse paradigms, Resistance, Hegemonic narratives

Introduction

Nadine Gordimer was a South African writer and Nobel laureate known for her insightful portrayals of apartheid-era South Africa. Born in 1923, she tackled themes of racial injustice, oppression, complexities of interracial relationships and the moral dilemmas faced by individuals living under apartheid, and human rights in her works. But, Gordimer has often faced the criticism of being the insider-outsider in African literature due to her eurocentric and white gaze perspective portrayal of the African experience under colonialism. *The Lying Days*, published in 1953, represents how Gordimer's own experience as a white living in a colonial African setup seep into her works, delineating a sense of detachment while writing about something as sensitive as apartheid. On the contrast, Chinua Achebe, Nigerian novelist, poet, and essayist, widely regarded as the father of African literature in English, used the colonial language as a means to subvert the disruptive and misinformed white narratives about Africa and its people, reaffirm the pride and richness of the African Igbo culture and traditions, giving Africa and identity of its own, true to its actual essence. Achebe's works often explore themes of cultural clash, colonialism, and the complexities of African identity. Through his writing, he challenged Western stereotypes about Africa and advocated for a nuanced understanding of African societies. *Arrow of God* also exemplifies how language

was craftily used to represent and reaffirm the Igbo culture and identity, the catastrophic effect of colonialism on Igbo society.

Methodology:

Qualitative analysis of the two primary texts have been adopted along with deconstruction as research methodology. In-depth deconstruction of the narratives of both the literary texts have been conducted and some postulates of the theories of post-colonialism, culture studies have been applied to reach conclusive findings and establish the role of language as a powerful tool in African literary discourse- both as a weapon of strong emancipation and subversion as well as further pushing the native to the periphery

Discussion

In *The Lying Days*, Nadine Gordimer intricately weaves themes of insider-outsider dynamics within the complex tapestry of South African society. As a white South African writer, Gordimer grapples with her own insider-outsider complex, navigating the nuances of identity, privilege, and belonging within the racially stratified landscape of apartheid-era South Africa. Through the protagonist, Helen Shaw, Gordimer reflects her own experiences and perspectives, offering a multifaceted exploration of the tensions between insider and outsider identities. Central to Gordimer's portrayal of the insider-outsider complex in *The Lying Days* is the character of Helen Shaw, a young white woman coming of age in a racially divided society. As a white South African, Helen occupies a position of privilege and power within the social hierarchy, yet she grapples with a profound sense of dislocation and estrangement from her own cultural heritage. Gordimer uses Helen's internal conflicts and external interactions to illuminate the complexities of identity formation within a racially stratified society. For instance, when she is on the school bus and watches the street ahead from her superior position, there is a sense of detachment in the entire description- a fast moving narration of the town with all its peculiarities exemplify how the white gaze just moves past the complexities of the mine surroundings and living as if there's no point in describing their intricate details that could actually give the sense of horrible conditions the Blacks were living in, the mine is featureless with familiarity; it has lost its mysticism, here again we witness how the white gaze tend to push the indigenous Black away even from the periphery.

Through her depictions, one can witness that Gordimer just moves past the Black experience without any second thought of why the society is functioning in this way. Throughout the first ten chapters, we see a political and social lack of awareness about the disruptions, the biasness, the divide that is existing in colonial African. It is owing to her superior white upbringing that Helen, the protagonist, is unable to recognise the ongoing events of the mine town as something barbaric, and thus, conforms to the existing hierarchy without any questioning and uncomfortableness. For example, the mine hooter is just another everyday bell for the whites that signal the happening of any accident or tell the time of the day, but, for the Black mine families, it's a call of distress. But Gordimer again brings in her white gaze to showcase how socially and politically unaware Helen is about the workings of the society and the struggles of the Blacks – “For there were very seldom any serious accidents, and few of those that did happen involved white men. Natives were sometimes trapped by a fall of rock from a hanging, and had to be dug out, dead or alive, while the Hooter wailed disaster. When a white man was killed, the papers recorded. The tragedy, giving his name and occupation and details of the family he Left. If no white man was affected, there was an item headed: “FATAL FALL OF HANGING. There was a fall of hanging at the East Shaft of Basilton

Levels, East Rand, at 2 P.M. yesterday. Two natives were killed, and three others escaped with minor injuries.”

Helen’s relationships with characters from different racial and cultural backgrounds serve as a lens through which Gordimer explores the insider-outsider dynamic. For example, Helen’s interactions with Lydia, her black housemaid, highlight the asymmetrical power dynamics inherent in their relationship. Despite Lydia’s intimate knowledge of Helen’s family and household, she remains an outsider within the white-dominated society, relegated to the margins of social and economic exclusion. Through Helen’s interactions with Lydia and other lower background characters such as the Jew friend Joel Aaron, Gordimer underscores the pervasive effects of racial segregation and discrimination on individual lives, reflecting her own awareness of her privileged position as a white writer.

There are many more such instances throughout the novel which delineates the superior white gaze perspective that Gordimer adapts, with Helen always maintaining a sense of detachment, a lack of awareness about the social hierarchies existing in her settings. “Those native boys sitting around making a noise the way they liked to in the garden, and the lovely tea all ready in Mrs. Ockert’s beautiful lounge (the scones collapsed into hot butter; I should have liked one more)—That couldn’t be a strike—? Hunger was whistling an empty passage right down my throat to my stomach. —I twisted my hand out of my father’s and ran on ahead, to bacon and egg put away for me in the oven.”- even while describing something as serious as a protest, Gordimer seemed to be just touching on the edges of it, and then abruptly she shifts over to Helen’s own pangs of hunger, as if the pleas of the workers are non-existent. Throughout the text, there is no mention of Black leaders, Black movements, except for Anna, there are no prominent description of any Black character, they are just passer-by’s in her narrative; in fact, the year this book was written, a monumental strike was being carried out by Blacks all over Africa, and yet, Gordimer just sticks to a mild description of the miners’ strike, relegating their struggle to the curbs of existence.

Furthermore, Gordimer complicates Helen’s sense of identity by depicting her ambivalent relationship with her own racial and cultural heritage. Helen feels a profound sense of alienation from the conservative, racially exclusive community of her hometown, Kensington, yet she is also estranged from the radical political activism of the urban black community in Johannesburg. For example, Joel says, “I often thought about going to your house, but I never imagined bringing you to mine”- suggest the existing power dynamics. While describing the Aarons’ house as very uncomfortable, shabby, dingy, Helen is unaware that she is speaking from her and asserting her own superior position. She feels uncomfortable, but she wonders why so, because Joel is her friend, she is not supposed to feel so suffocating in his house and yet, she couldn’t fathom why she was feeling this suffocating gap. This tension between belonging and alienation reflects Gordimer’s own struggles with her identity as a white South African writer grappling with the legacies of colonialism and apartheid.

Achebe, on the other hand, in *Arrow of God* uses language as a powerful tool to reaffirm the Igbo cultural identity and showcase how colonialism has disrupted the peaceful existence and living of Africans, with a powerful vigour. Through depiction of various Igbo traditions, symbols, thematic exploration, Achebe has delineated the richness of the Igbo culture and how colonial power has encroached upon their harmonious and pacific society, segregating them and taking away their sense of identity and belonging. The rich tapestry of Igbo culture is vividly depicted through a myriad of symbols, traditions, and customs. Set in colonial Nigeria, the novel offers readers a glimpse into the complexities of Igbo society, its spiritual beliefs, social structures, and cultural practices. One of the central symbols in *Arrow of God* is the shrine of Ulu, the deity worshipped by the people of Umuaro. The shrine serves as the focal point of religious

and spiritual life in the village, where the chief priest, Ezeulu, performs rituals and communicates with the divine. The shrine represents the spiritual connection between the people of Umuaro and the supernatural forces that govern their lives, as well as the traditional beliefs and practices that sustain their community. Another important tradition depicted in *Arrow of God* is the New Yam Festival, a ceremonial celebration of the harvest season and the blessings of the earth goddess Ani. The festival serves as a time of communal rejoicing and thanksgiving, as well as an opportunity for the village to come together to honour their ancestors and reaffirm their cultural identity. Achebe portrays the New Yam Festival as a vibrant and festive occasion, marked by music, dance, and feasting. The festival's significance is underscored by its role in strengthening social bonds and fostering a sense of unity and belonging among the villagers of Umuaro. The sacred arrow of Ulu is a potent symbol of divine authority and spiritual power in *Arrow of God*. Handed down from generation to generation, the arrow represents the embodiment of Ulu's will and the chief priest's role as the arrow of God. The arrow serves as a tangible manifestation of the divine presence within the community and a symbol of the chief priest's authority to interpret and enforce Ulu's commands. The arrow's significance is further underscored by its role in determining the outcome of important communal events, such as the Feast of the New Yam.

A prominent aspect of Igbo culture depicted in *Arrow of God* is the use of proverbs and oral tradition to convey wisdom, moral lessons, and cultural values. Proverbs serve as a means of communication and expression, allowing characters to convey complex ideas and emotions through concise and evocative language. In Chapter 5, for example, Ezeulu uses a proverb to admonish his son, Oduche, for his lack of humility and respect, highlighting the importance of humility in Igbo society. Igbo society is structured around complex systems of social hierarchy and status, which are reflected in the use of titles and honorifics. Titles such as "Obi" (chief) and "Ozo" (nobleman) denote individuals' positions within the community and carry with them certain privileges and responsibilities. Ezeulu, as the chief priest of Ulu, commands respect and authority within the village, while other characters such as the colonial administrator, Winterbottom, wield power based on their official titles and positions.

Rituals and sacrifices are integral components of Igbo religious and spiritual practices, serving as means of communication with the divine and expressions of communal solidarity. Sacrifices are often offered to appease the gods, seek protection from malevolent forces, and ensure the prosperity and well-being of the community. The Feast of the New Yam, for example, involves elaborate rituals and offerings to Ani and other ancestral spirits, symbolizing the villagers' gratitude for the harvest and their dependence on the land for sustenance.

The kola nut holds a central place in Igbo culture, serving as a symbol of hospitality, communion, and unity. In *Arrow of God*, the ritual of breaking and sharing the kola nut is depicted as an essential social custom that precedes important gatherings, ceremonies, and discussions. It is believed that the kola nut has the power to bring people together, foster goodwill, and invoke the blessings of the ancestors. Through the sharing of the kola nut, bonds of friendship and kinship are reaffirmed, and conflicts are often resolved. Additionally, the kola nut serves as a form of currency in traditional Igbo society, exchanged as a sign of respect, gratitude, and reciprocity. The new palm leaf is another symbolic element that carries cultural and spiritual significance in Igbo society. In the novel, the new palm leaf is used in various rituals and ceremonies, particularly those related to purification, blessing, and protection. The palm tree holds a revered status in Igbo cosmology, symbolizing fertility, abundance, and resilience. The new palm leaf, representing vitality and renewal, is often employed in rituals to cleanse and sanctify sacred spaces, homes, and individuals. Chalk, known as nzu in Igbo, is a substance imbued with symbolic meaning and ritual

importance. In "Arrow of God," chalk is used in various religious and social contexts, including divination, ancestral veneration, and initiation ceremonies. It is believed to possess purifying and protective properties, serving as a medium through which messages can be conveyed to the spirit world. The onwa, or moon, holds a special place in Igbo cosmology and religious beliefs. In *Arrow of God*, the moon is associated with femininity, fertility, and the cyclical rhythms of nature. It is revered as a divine presence, embodying the nurturing and transformative powers of the goddess Ala, the earth deity. The phases of the moon are closely observed and interpreted by Igbo priests and diviners, who use lunar cycles to determine auspicious times for various activities, such as planting, harvesting, and communal celebrations.

In the novel, the arrival of the British colonial administrator, Winterbottom, represents the encroachment of colonial power into the territory of the Igbo people. Winterbottom's attempts to assert British authority and impose Christianity on the villagers symbolize the broader processes of colonization and cultural assimilation. Achebe vividly depicts the clash between tradition and modernity as a recurring theme in *Arrow of God*. The novel explores the tensions that arise when traditional beliefs and practices come into conflict with the forces of modernization, including Western education, Christianity, and colonial bureaucracy. Ezeulu's struggle to uphold the customs and rituals of his people in the face of external pressures exemplifies this conflict. Ezeulu's reluctance to embrace change is evident when he refuses to attend the missionary school opening ceremony, viewing it as a threat to the traditional values of his community. His defiance reflects his commitment to preserving the cultural heritage of the Igbo people in the face of external influences.

The novel explores the complex interplay between indigenous religious beliefs and the introduction of Christianity. Achebe juxtaposes the traditional worship of Ulu with the spread of Christianity among the Igbo people, highlighting the tension between competing belief systems and the impact of religious conversion on individual and communal identities. The character of Nwaka represents the conflict between traditional religion and Christianity within the Igbo community. Initially a staunch supporter of Ezeulu and the worship of Ulu, Nwaka later converts to Christianity, symbolizing the influence of colonialism and the erosion of indigenous spiritual practices.

Thus, we see that Achebe has portrayed the colonial impact and their attempt to disrupt the indigenous Igbo culture with powerful depictions that delineate the struggle, the complexities of African society, keeping the hardships and the inhuman treatment of the Blacks at the centre of the narrative, unlike Gordimer. Through reiteration of Igbo culture, traditions, norms, Achebe has tried to reaffirm a sense of identity and belonging and instil pride in indigenous Africans.

Conclusion

Thus, we witness how the same narrative of colonial hegemony and power abuse, social hierarchy and discrimination can be written and perceived from alternative paradigms, due to the alternate employment of language in different ways, as portrayed by Achebe and Gordimer in these respective texts. Gordimer is enmeshed in her insider-outsider complex so much that she is unable to relinquish her superior white gaze and adopt the Black sensitivity towards the state of affairs going on around her; it was a very typical nonchalant portrayal of the environment and conditions existing at that time that we witness in *The Lying Days*. Contrastingly, Achebe uses language as a powerful tool to write back to the occidental, establishing African culture in a supreme and richly dignified position that needs no saving or grace. Thus, language can relegate the persecution of Africans to the periphery and it has also the power to reaffirm indigenous identity, subverting the colonial discourse

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