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Issue Editors

Dr. Madhav Hande

Department of English, Deogiri College Aurangabad

Dr. Grishma Khobragade

Department of English
Birla College, Kalyan

**MGEW SOCIETY'S
CENTRE FOR HUMANITIES AND CULTURAL STUDIES
KALYAN (MAHARASHTRA)**

Contact: +91 9730721393 +91 8329000732 chcskalyan@gmail.com

Igbo Rhetoric And The New Nigerian Novel: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Purple Hibiscus

Prof. Abdulkadar Maniyar
Balbhim College Beed

Introduction : Part of the fallout of the incidence of Western incursion into Africa and the developing world is the issue of culture conflict, or, put less bellicosely, culture-contact between the imperial West and the indigenous cultures of traditional Africa. Indeed, it seems perhaps discursively inevitable that *all* talk of modern African literature cannot meaningfully be had without foregrounding the so-called "Language Question". Although the urge to tell stories is native and common to man everywhere, the term „Modern African Literature“ dramatizes the problematic relationship between [written] African narratives and the colonial legacy. Literacy as a major element of modernity came with colonialism in Africa, and, as such, those equipped with the ability to read and write in the language of the colonial masters, became the avatars of African *belles-lettres*. And, since language is the vector of culture, the indigenous tongue took a hammering in the momentous, if, cataclysmic encounter between the occupying western power (or language) and the native tongue. Consequently, in Anglophone Africa, English became not only the official language but *the* medium of instruction in schools.

This imperialism of the English Language, therefore, led to the vernacularisation of indigenous African languages, a situation which encumbered the African with a deeply-ingrained sense of inferiority complex even to date. Be that as it may, following the cobbling together of peoples from culturally divergent backgrounds by colonial fiat, it became rather fatalistic for these people to adopt a common tongue in which to communicate with one another and conduct their daily businesses. And due to the inevitable interaction between English and the several indigenous languages spoken in Nigeria, Nigerian (African) speakers of English evolved their own varieties of English, varieties which reflect the speech patterns and habits of thought of the speakers. Thus, apart from the English spoken in polite or formal environment, we discover that there are also several other ethnic-based varieties used both by educated and non-educated Nigerians. According to Herbert Igboanusi: „There is the national variety of English also known as Nigerian English (NE) and the ethnic variety of English exemplified here by Igbo English (IE)“ (2). To be certain, Igbo English is said to be found in creative writing (in the novel) „as a deliberate but significant stylistic device, which arises from the influence of the Igbo language and culture on English“ (2). The phenomenon of, say, Igbo English, has spawned what has been categorized as „ethnic literary tradition“, and, as such, African literature today is characterized by „linguistic diffusion and cultural diversity“ (2). Igboanusi goes on to assert that:

There is today, the distinctiveness of Igbo English writers, which manifests itself in experimentation in language, in recreating distinct Igbo discourse in English, and in stylistic innovations. The various manifestations of this distinctiveness can be seen in the works of Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi, Buchi Emecheta, Nkem Nwankwo, Chukwuemeka Ike, Flora Nwapa, Elechi Amadi, John Munonye, Ifeoma Okoye, Clement Agunwa and Onuorah Nzekwe. Their works demonstrate a good instance of the „Igboization of English“ (2).

To a very large extent, Allwell Abalogu Onukaogu and Ezechi Onyerionwu appear to agree with Igboanusi's convictions, particularly with regard to the Nigerian writer's burden. According to Onukaogu and Onyerionwu:

[t]he Nigerian writer's major burden has been how to arrive at a linguistic compromise in his bid to express his artistic thoughts. He knows that because of his dual cultural heritage and orientation [English and Igbo, for instance], and that of his audience, and of course the national, continental and international demands on his art, he has to find a formula which enables him to be relevant. He knows he has to be at once „local“ and „international“ and that language manipulation is one very effective way of achieving this. (265)

In the *new* Nigerian novel, therefore, what has come to be referred to as „the Achebe model“ has become standard practice, namely, the deployment of supra-linguistic, para-verbal nuances such as folklore, proverbs, wise sayings, folksongs and other allied forms of language games, stylistic strategies which emboss and semiotize the Africanity or the sense of place in the novel. Much as Nigerian (African) writers have preoccupied themselves with the „fleshpot“ of the African past, the question of *content* did not bother literary critics as such. But the issue of *form* was another matter. The problem of *form* – or, in part, language – has continued to agitate the minds of many African and Africanist scholars in the field. The polarized positions of those critics and scholars on the language question are well-known and well-documented. Perhaps what brought – and still brings – the issue of form into sharp focus was the famous debate between Chinweizuet. *aland* Wole Soyinka over this problem of form. Chinweizuet. *al* have argued that African writers should adopt the „language of African particulars“ which must convey „an African poetic landscape with its flora and fauna – a landscape of elephants, beggars, calabashes, serpents, pumpkins, baskets, town criers, iron-bells, slit-drums, iron masks, hares, snakes, squirrels“ (147). They further aver that African works of art must be imbued with proverbial