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**POST-COLONIALISM AS A TOOL FOR CULTURAL
ASSERTION AND LANGUAGE IDENTITY: A STUDY OF
IFEOMA CHINWUBA'S *MERCHANTS OF FLESH***

UKANDE, CHRIS K., PhD.

Department of English,
Benue State University, Makurdi – Nigeria
ukandechris2016@gmail.com

IGBA-LUGA, CARMEL ASEER, PhD

Department of English
Benue State University, Makurdi
+2348032940587
carmelaseer@gmail.com

Abstract

Africa's contact with colonialism has brought about effects that are grievous in themselves. These effects have affected the socio-political and cultural life of the African people, to an extent that the true culture and identity of Africans have been thrown to the mongrels, if not gone into a total extinction. On the strength of the above premise, African writers, particularly African post-colonial writers, have been looking for ways to curb the effects of colonialism on the continent of Africa. One of such ways is a process of using post-colonialism as a tool for the investigation and the emancipation of the cultural traits of the African people from complete colonial gridlock, even though colonialism has come and gone. Post-colonialism therefore, gives voice to the once colonised people and also helps for a better appreciation of the cultures and identities of Africa by both the colonised and the coloniser. In discussing Ifeoma Chinwuba's *Merchants of Flesh* from a post-colonial standpoint, the paper uses the post-colonial parameters of appropriation, abrogation, hybridity untranslated words and affiliation as the basis for analysis. The paper therefore, concludes that before Africa's contact with

colonialism, it has had its well-established ways of conducting its affairs for the benefit of its people, and that their cultures and identities that make them distinct from other people of the world, be respected and be allowed to flourish ad infinitum.

Key words: *Post-Colonialism, Cultural Assertion, Language, Language Identity*

Introduction

It is worthy of note to start this introduction by categorically stating that Africa as a continent is still sadly tied to the apron string of the western world, despite the fact that its nations have had, to some extent, some degree of independence. It is common knowledge that the continent has undergone, to an immeasurable extent, some degree of oppression, suppression, subjugation, exploitation and injustice in the hands of the colonialists, particularly during the period of colonialism.

After the period of colonialism, western ideologies have come to have a bearing on the continent of Africa thereby downplaying the relevance of the things that constitute African values and technology. In this wise, the cultures and identities of African people have had what can be termed as 'marginalised status', as such cultures and idealities do not have international recognition in other parts of the world. It is true that African nations have had independence, but undoubtedly, this independence does not give these African nations that absolute and total freedom to be on their own, hence, the high dependency ratio on the western world for their survival.

But because Africa must be again what it used to be before its contact with colonialism, its writers have taken it upon themselves to carry out an all-important task of a resuscitation, recuperation and re-affirmation of the things that make them who they are, and that subsequently give them their identity. The continent has for instance, witnessed a boom in the projection and advancement of its cultures by especially African writers who write from a post-colonial perspective or standpoint. Thus, that which forms the gamut of these writers, is basically the assertive quest of their cultures and identities, as these are usually being included in their literary productions.

It is in view of this sort of philosophy that Ifeoma Chinwuba, one of Nigeria's post-colonial writers, decides to take the bull by the horn as she includes in her literary work, discourse elements that have bearing with her indigenous language in particular and the cultures of the Nigerian people in general. Her work titled *Merchants of Flesh* has heralded a new dawn for the continent of Africa in general and Nigeria in particular.

It is paramount to also mention at this juncture that Ifeoma Chinwuba, just like Nigeria's Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is indeed, a disciple of Chinua Achebe, one of Nigeria's first-generation writers. Achebe's attitude of a representation, presentation and projection of the cultures and identities of his people, was first noticed in his novel titled *Things Fall Apart* (1958). It is in recognition of this fact and feat that Nnolim writes that:

Achebe is the inaugurator of the great tradition of the Nigerian novel – that tradition which is concerned with cultural assertion or cultural nationalism which stresses and promotes the innate dignity of the black man and makes creative use of our myths, legends, rituals, festivals, ceremonies and folklore (179).

The above excerpt by Nnolim is indicative of the fact that for a novel from Nigeria to be qualified to be called Nigerian novel, it must contain in it, elements of the cultures that are embedded in the indigenous language(s) of the Nigerian people. This is truly the business of the Nigerian novel. Thus, those of them who have taken after Achebe, have characteristically included in their literary creations, words and phrases that have bearing with the Nigerian indigenous languages. In using this as the basis of cultural expression and exposition, they have also included in their works, the use of pidgin English so as to reach a wider readership on the one hand, and to portray pidgin as the basis of unity among the Nigerian people on the other hand, as it is well understood and spoken by almost every Nigerian.

Post-colonialism is basically the guiding principle that forms the corpus of Ifeoma Chinwuba's literary powers. As a theory that finds expression in various human endeavours and particularly the literary circle, post-colonialism has been described differently by different exponents. One of such is Jaware who submits that:

A major aspect of post-colonialism is the rather violent-like, unbuffered contact or clash of identities, cultures and ideologies as an inevitable result of former colonial times; the relationship of the colonial power to the (formerly) colonized country, its population and culture and vice versa seems extremely contradictory. This contradiction of two clashing cultures, identities, ideologies and the wide scale of problems resulting from it must be regarded as a major theme in post-colonialism (145).

Looking at Jaware's submission in the above excerpt, it can categorically be said that post-colonialism is truly a theory that has a motive of debunking of a cultural past that was distorted by the colonisers. It therefore, seeks reclamation of native cultures through the celebration of indigenous traditions and values. By exploiting the deconstructive approach, post-colonialism redefines, reassesses and restructures history, politics, culture, literature, knowledge and psychology of the erstwhile British colonies. It marks the end of colonialism by giving the indigenous people the necessary authority and political freedom to take their place and gain independence by overcoming political and cultural imperialism. An indigenous approach based on our multicultural and multilingual context can be helpful in decolonising the mind, and thus, handling the dangers of neo-colonialism. It also aims at a thorough investigation of history, culture of the indigenous people as had been obtainable in the past before the advent of colonialism and therefore, an attempt of a recovery of identity.

In talking about post-colonialism, Graham Hogan acknowledges the fact that post-colonial writing is embedded in a Western literary paradigm. While he accepts the indigenous desire to take over its literary output and production, in the African context he suggests that to reduce

African literature and western criticism on a binary insider-outsider mechanism “negates the transculturative potential inherent in a lengthy history of European encounters” (55). Instead, he feels that a way of exoticising ethnographic fiction is to privilege aesthetics, “a hybrid amalgam of cross-fertilised aesthetic traditions that are the historical outcome of often violent – cultural collisions” (56). He further argues that aspects of Western culture and literary aesthetics have become an integral part of colonised cultures and their writing.

Again, from the standpoint of post-colonialism and post-colonial literature, Ngugi wa Thiong’o who has been quite saddened about the disheartening effects of colonialism on the colonised people, stunningly writes of Africa in the following words:

A new world order that is no more than a global dominance of neo-colonial relations policed by a handful of western nations --- is a disaster for the peoples of the world and their cultures --- the languages of Europe were taught as they were our own languages, as if Africa had no tongues except those brought here by imperialism bearing the label ‘MADE IN EUROPE’. (cited in Sander, Reinhard and Lindfors, Bernth, 35)

From an African perspective, the cultural values; respect for knowledge, ability to be happy even without materialism and religious values of the natives, have been thrown to the mongrels in order to embrace foreign values and systems. For a complete shedding of the hegemonic influence of the West, Ngugi in all honesty, decides to write in his indigenous language at one point in his writing career. The Gikuyu language becomes a formidable force towards the process of decolonisation. In defense of his use of Gikuyu language, Ngugi wrote:

Language is a carrier of a people’s values; values are the basis of a people’s self-definition – the basis of their consciousness. And you destroy a people’s language, you are destroying that very important aspect of their heritage --- you are infact destroying that which helps them to be themselves --- that which embodies their collective memory as a people (cited in Sander, Reinhard & Lindfors, Bernth, 1).

In a discussion that dwells on post-colonialism, Sawant (2012) wrote that:

It seems that post-colonial theory emerged from the colonized peoples’ frustration, their direct personal cultural clashes with the conquering culture, and their fears, hopes and dreams about their future and their own identities. How the colonized respond to changes in the language, curricular matters in education, race differences, and a host of other discourses, including the act of writing become the context and the theories of post-colonialism (121)

The above gives an expression that post-colonialism stands for the cultures and societies at margin and challenges the centre-margin achetype with the intent of the removal of inequality. It therefore, means that post-colonialism as a theory eschews the high culture of the elite and espouses subaltern cultures and knowledge. Post-colonialism as expressed in the words of Charles E. Bressler, “is an approach to literary analysis that concerns itself particularly with

literature written in English in formerly colonized countries” (265). It is an embodiment of literary productions from colonised cultures in Australia, Africa, New Zealand, South Africa, South America and other places and societies that were once dominated by European cultural, political and philosophical tradition. Like colonialism, post-colonialism is a state of consciousness, a crucial phase in the continuum of the cultural process and self-awareness of nations that were once victims of colonialism and its many effects.

Discussing the workings of post-colonial literature in Canada, Diana Brydon opines that “a postcolonial politics means turning away from cheap cynicism and facing difficult arguments” (11). Yet, she, as a matter of fact, recognises quite cogently that “postcolonial politics takes place within a larger crisis of politics itself” (11). In spite of all these being specifically of Canadian terrain, it is relevant to African scholars and writers, and particularly post-colonial African writers working from an African or non-African location.

From the perspective of post-colonial theory, its hallmark which is resistance is an act of rehistoricising and rewriting aimed at demystifying Western approaches to African contexts which tended to view many of the continent’s structural problems as naturally generated and perpetuated by its population with little hope for self-development. Many contemporary African novels and short stories in this regard, however, seemed intent on revisiting post-independence conflicts that have been characterised by colonialism.

Post-Colonial Discourse Parameters Discussed

Ifeoma Chinwuba’s *Merchants of Flesh* will be analysed based on post-colonial discourse parameters of appropriation, abrogation, hybridity, untranslated words and affiliation, and what each of these means, explained.

Appropriation

This is a means or a process of doing away with the hegemonic influence of English over other languages of the world, especially, the indigenous African languages. It is therefore, a method that African writers, particularly African post-colonial writers have decided to use so as to free themselves from the cultural gridlock that they have found themselves. In the words of Ashcroft, appropriation has to do with “the process by which the English language is taken to bear the burden of one’s own cultural experiences; or --- to convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own” (38). In subscribing to the above submission, Chinua Achebe states, “I feel the English language will be able to carry the weight of the African experiences, it had to be a new English, still in communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit new African surroundings” (23).

Abrogation

This is a method employed by post-colonial African writers, to strip off English of its status of a standard language. It is therefore, a seizure of English language as an international medium of communication. Ngugi wa Thiong’o defends the use of abrogation in the following words: “The most obvious problem is one of language. The fact that you are writing in a foreign

language means that you are operating in a foreign cultural framework. This often leads African writers standing as referees between the common man and elite” (34). What this means is that instead of African writers writing completely in the medium of English Language, they should make it a point of adopting to the use of an English whose grammatical structure is dislocated, thereby, bringing into being, a grammatical structure with a true African surroundings and content, and that is possibly being devoid of English Language standardisation.

Hybridity

This is a situation whereby there is a mixture of cultures and identities to subsequently form one whole single identity. In this wise, Bohata writes that “hybridity arises from cultural contact and interchange. While for the individual this may be a painfully divisive experience, in terms of cultural production, the hybrid liminal space becomes an exciting and fertile area of cultural production” (25).

Untranslated Words: Cultural Nationalism

A situation where words from the indigenous African languages are used by writers, without necessarily bothering to gloss over such words, calls for a strong political and social tact. In this way, there is the creation of cultural and social independence for such indigenous languages. Thus, most African writers use this as a strategy to keep the West at bay in their literary productions. It is in this wise that Ashcroft (2001) states that “the technique of the selection of lexical fidelity which leaves some words untranslated in the text is a more widely used device for conveying the sense of cultural distinctiveness” (64).

Affiliation

This is a literary method that allows room for the colonised to effectively identify with their indigenous socio-political and economic value systems. In literary criticism therefore, it gives room for the independent reading of African literary texts, that is, without having to fish out parallel trends with for instance, western classics with little or no respect for their cultural milieu. Ashcroft speaks of this situation in the following expression:

While filiation suggests a utopian domain of texts connected serially, homogeneously and seamlessly with other texts, affiliation is that which enables a text to maintain itself as a text, --- Affiliation sends the critical gaze beyond the narrow confines of the European and canonical literary into [the] cultural texture [of] the ‘status of the author, historical moment, conditions of publication, diffusion and reception, values drawn upon, values and ideas assumed, a framework of contextually held tacit assumptions, presumed background, and so on (105).

The above excerpt succinctly depicts that for Africa to be itself and on its own, its writers have had a shift from filiative to affiliative status in their literary productions. Thus, African writers, especially African post-colonial writers use affiliation to explore Africa’s rich cultural heritage that are only characteristic of the continent of Africa. Such cultural heritage has no bearing

whatsoever with the West. In discussing the affiliative function of literary texts in Africa, Ashcroft (2001) further states that, “By thus stressing the affiliations of texts, its origins in cultural and social reality rather than its filiative connections with English literature and canonical criteria, the critic can uncover cultural and political implications that may seem only fleetingly addressed in the text itself” (56).

Synopsis of the Text

Published in 2003 and Chinwuba’s first literary masterpiece, this 306 – page novel exposes the sort of experiences black women generally go through in the hands of human traffickers. The novel tells particularly the pathetic story of Faith Moses who happens to fall victim of this inhuman treatment that people like Lizzy in the story perpetrate on innocent souls. The novel takes us into the dream world of Faith Moses, who is once a university student with high hopes of becoming a successful person in life and for life, but her dream is cut short as fate befalls her at a point her father dies suddenly in a ghastly motor accident. At this point, Faith drops out of school due to lack of support. As a means of survival, she finds a job at a clinic as a cleaner and sometimes assists in carrying out abortions. She continues with this job until she meets with Lizzy, a human trafficker who lures her into Italy where she gets her involved in commercial sex work.

Textual Analysis

Appropriation

In the use of appropriation in her literary work, Chinwuba (2003) makes sure that she does this in different situations. One of such is where Faith Moses accompanies Idahosa, an accomplice in human trafficking, on a visit to a shrine where she and other victims will swear before the shrine. This is to be done in the presence of Igirigidinta, the custodian and operator of the shrine:

Timidly, I went in the direction of the shrine and bent to go in. There was a bush lantern that hung over the door. It was like a cave-like structure. It threw ugly shadows over the thatched walls on which hung several human skulls. The stench was indescribable. Working in the clinic, I have come across numerous odours of human being. The odours in the shrine were mixed but I remember that the most powerful was that of blood, wounds and death. In one corner sat the medicine man dressed in a white waist cloth. His face, chest and bulging belly were painted in brilliant colours and he held a knife in his hand (222-223).

The description which Chinwuba gives of the ‘juju’ man and the environment where he operates, is indeed one that carries with it a true Nigerian experience. What Faith Moses sees and experiences in this shrine, can be experienced by any other Nigerian who happens to fall a victim like her.

In another instance, Chinwuba makes use of appropriation at a point she describes Faith Moses’ mother’s desperation about her going overseas, thus, “Faith. If you need anything, like

medicine, send me message. I know you are a Christian like your late father. But do not disregard our medicine. This Lizzy that you are going to meet, she is using our native medicine. You should fortify yourself with it too” (257)

Abrogation

Chinwuba makes use of abrogation here by way of the use of pidgin and other forms of Nigerian English distinct from Queen’s English, as can be seen in these examples: “I know say I never go overseas but e no mean say I foolish” (50 -51). (I know that I have never been to overseas but it does not mean that I am foolish), ‘You no pick tomatoes for Benin, na for Italo you come pick am’ (79) (You have not picked tomatoes in Benin, it is in Italy that you have come to pick), ‘All they know is to chop money. Finish. To provide road, no. hospitals, no. security who sai!’ (116) All they know is to spend money. That is all. No provision for road, no provision for hospitals. There is no provision for security too), ‘I have seen it with my “crow-crow” eyes (117) (I have witnessed it myself), ‘please sir, I beg you, no deport me. We are suffering in Nigeria’ (198) (Please sir, don’t deport me. We are suffering in Nigeria), ‘Even sef if you marry and stay at home your husband can still go and carry AIDs and come and infect you at home’ (78-79)(Even if one is married and stays at home, her husband can contact AIDs and then come back to infect her with it), ‘My brother, you wan kill me?’ (112) (My brother, do you want to kill me?), ‘When you go send me money to join’ (252) (When you get there, send some money to me so that I can join you) and ‘please help me to fill this form. I no understand well’ (241) (Please help me to fill this form. I don’t understand well). All these are done systematically and intentionally in order to dislocate the grammatical structure of English Language that has a bearing with the African terrain in general and Nigeria in particular.

Hybridity

One of the instances where Chinwuba makes use of hybridity is when Faith’s mother makes an observation of Faith’s trip abroad:

Faith, there are ways of doing these things. There is a medicine for not to be seen. Very strong medicine. But it works. I can carry the drugs myself and walk pass Obalegbe and he will not see me. I know you people have gone to school and seen white man’s civilization. But do not forget that our people too have power. When you reach the white man’s land and you need something, I am here (100).

This shows that in spite of Ma being aware of white civilisation, she still trusts her traditional belief system; hence, her advice to Faith to follow this means of arriving to success. Ma is, therefore, seen in the light of one who has a dual identity, that is believing in traditionalism as much as she is aware of modernity, judging, for example, by the following lines:

Like so many of her kith that went to Church on Sundays, Ma had not left her pagan ways. She would not hesitate to consult an oracle or a medicine man when the need arose. Like her Kin, she mixed the white man’s medicine and belief system with our traditional ways and practices (100-101).

Though Ma attends Church which is a key symbol of white culture, she ventures into traditionalism at the slightest need. Thus, she is presented or portrayed as one who practises two religious simultaneously as the situation demands. This dualism is upheld by Chinweizu et al., in their suggestion as how African writers ought to present their stories, thus:

African literature whose addiction to European techniques of presentation compels it to alternate or eschew entirely the flavor of African life cannot sustain its claim to being an African literature no matter who produces it. And the flavor of African life is a matter of contemporary realities and life tones as well as the cultural inheritance from the past (240).

Untranslated Words: Cultural Nationalism

Chinwuba makes use of this post-colonial discourse parameter, using Nigeria's three main languages, namely, Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba. In narrating the death of Isaac Owejero, Chinwuba mentions a time when he returns home from a meeting and refuses to eat his favourite dinner of yam fufu and bitter leaf soup. The use of the word 'fufu' (57) is an example of untranslated word. Fufu is food produced from cassava and mostly eaten in the eastern and western parts of Nigeria. Still on the death of Isaac Owejero, Chinwuba expresses how his mother-in-law blames his death on those whom she feels have 'afoojoo' (57), as a result of her son-in-law's progress in life, 'afoojoo' meaning 'evil mindedness' in English.

Chief Godson, a Nigerian ambassador and polygamist, uses the Igbo diminutive expression 'pim' in warning his quarrelling wives to shut up: if he so much as hears 'pim' from either of them, he would call the Italian police. 'Pim' (25) (One jot of a word). In another instance, Chinwuba takes us to a scenario where Angelina, Owejero's wife, cries as a result of her husband's death, and one of her sympathisers says to her, 'Odinduonwukanma (62) which the author does not translate or even parry with hints. This is a whole sentence meaning that Angelina's sympathiser's husband were better dead than be alive, having been incapacitated by a motor accident. We find other usages such as 'Okrika' (63) (second hand cloths), 'Ashawo' (88) (A prostitute), 'Danfo' (35) (a bus used for commercial purpose), 'Malam' (77) (A scholar/gentleman) and 'Tufia' (164) (God forbid).

Affiliation

Here, Chinwuba weaves into her narration, one of the cultural value systems of the African people, which has to do with the deployment of oral tradition. This she does through Faith Moses. The song that she sings for the children at the end of the story session with regards to how the princess mother sings a song for her, and how in response to her mother's song, the princess sings a song that shows an enactment of true African oral literary tradition (orature). The songs in their two separate versions are shown below

1st version: "Oh princess, princess, child that I love, will you marry this one? Oh marry this one"

2nd version: “Oh Mother, Mother, woman that I live, I cannot marry this one, his stomach is big, big, big, I cannot marry this man” (31)

Again, through the process of affiliation, Chinwuba writes about a disturbing phenomenon that has constituted a social reality in the Nigerian polity, especially as it concerns tenancy matters. The poor condition of living in most of our so-called urban settlements is graphically captured by the author in the following expression:

The corridor was long. There were twelve rooms on each side a style popularly known as “face-me-I-fight-you”. There were single rooms. And the rooms, together, housed over sixty souls. The two toilets and bathrooms were at one end of the building to the right. They were grossly inadequate for the tens of adults who lived there. You had to wake up very early indeed to use the facilities, or you would have to join the queues (33).

Chinwuba presents yet another social reality of the Nigerian people as she fully captures what befalls a widow after the burial of her deceased husband. It is common knowledge that most widows in Nigeria in particular and Africa in general, do not usually have a say as to how the property of their deceased husbands can be kept in safe custody by them. It is characteristic of such husbands’ relations to launch attacks on such widows, physically, spiritually and otherwise, in order to stop them from thinking about such property, let alone have a say as to who gets what and how. It is of this sort of fate that has come to live with us in our African communities that she writes, “Angelina bemoaned her fate. Now that Isaac was gone, the only thing certain about the future was its bleakness. His property would be shared among the brothers. And yes, the widow would also be inherited by one of them but that came with so many months attached” (56).

It is characteristic of mothers in Africa to usually give blessing to their children before departure to wherever they want to go to, for goodness only to come their way. This is Faith Moses’ case as her mother, popularly known as Ma, gives her the blessing of her life as she departs for Italy. This is a culturally valued tradition that mothers are fond of doing. In this regard, Chinwuba writes:

May the spirit of our ancestors go with you and protect you. Amin. May they open doors for you. Amin. May you find favour wherever you go. Amin. Where there is trouble, Faith will not be there. Ise! When there is trouble in front, you will be at the back. Amin. When it at the back, you will be in front. Ise. Go well. The legs that you use to go are the same that you will use to come back (99).

Again, Chinwuba depicts in most realistic manner the things that young girls do in Nigeria before they are taken aboard for purposes of prostitution. This she does by showing how Faith Moses is involved with such fetish practice. Of this happening, she writes:

This is Igirigidinta’s shrine. He is the most powerful medicine man alive in Nigeria today. People came from Senegal and even London to consult him. His juju cannot

be broken. Once Igiriidinta has tied a knot, no one alive can untie it. You are about to swear with your life and your mother's life that you will pay back the money you owe this madam that is sponsoring you to Italy (221-222).

Conclusion

From the preceding submission, the paper has shown without doubt that indeed, Ifeoma Chinwuba can be accorded the status of being one of Nigeria's post-colonial writers, especially as she uses her work to appropriate the colonisers' language and then, adapt it to 'bear' the burden of her Nigerian/African people. By so doing, she has succeeded in creating a situation whereby, the Nigerian people are better recognised and appreciated culturally, and therefore, register a point that Nigerians are also a culturally civilised people on the planet earth.

Also, the paper has demonstrated the fact that the life-wire of a people, is usually determined by that which identifies them as a people, in which case, culture being the most important of them all. Hence, there is no gain saying that a culture that identifies a people's way of life, is inferior before others who do not share that same culture with such people. This goes to say that no matter the amount of influence that western culture has on the culture of a people who are not from the West, efforts should be made in such a way that, getting back to the roots of their culture, forms the gamut of their struggle for identity and recognition. Suffice it to say that as a cultural crusader, Chinwuba depicts through her work that she is one writer who is socially committed towards a resuscitation of the culture of her Nigerian people in general and that of the Igbo people in particular.

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