

# The impact of the translator's cultural identity on the translation of the African Anglophone novel A postcolonial approach of literary translation

**Hadid Meriem**

**Professional affiliation: A part – time teacher at the  
University of Badji Mokhtar \_ Annaba  
E- Mail: hadidmeriem@gmail.com**

## **Abstract**

*The present research seeks to analyze the postcolonial African Anglophone novel's translation into other languages, specifically the Arabic and French translations of Chinua Achebe's novel "Things Fall Apart".*

*When the postcolonial context of the novel is taken into account, the traditional concepts of translation studies such as equivalence and interpretation look useless to solve the problems that occur from subversive strategies (semantic extensions; coined collocations; un glossed and untranslated vernacular items), hybrid strategies (code-switching; Pidgin English) and the interpolation of the African oral discourse in the source text. For this reason, we try through this paper to reveal the validity of the postcolonial approaches of translation which assert that translation studies should be extended to take in consideration the heterogeneity and the unequal nature of languages when translating hybrid literary texts.*

**key-words : postcolonial translation – the African novel – hybridity – orality - subversion**

**أثر الهوية الثقافية للمترجم على ترجمة الرواية الإفريقية الأنجلوفونية  
مقاربة ما بعد كولونيالية للترجمة الأدبية**

## **ملخص**

تتناول هذه الورقة البحثية بالدراسة إشكالية ترجمة الرواية ما بعد الكولونيالية الإفريقية الأنجلوفونية إلى لغة أخرى. وهي إشكالية نشأت تبعا لطبيعة النص ما بعد الكولونيالي الهجينة وآلياته السرديّة التي تُبنى على هدم لغة الكتابة الإنجليزيّة –المركزيّة– وتحميلها بثقافة لغة الكاتب المحليّة الشفهيّة.

نحاول من خلال هذا المقال أن نسلط الضوء على إشكالية ترجمة آليات الهجنة (تحويل النظام اللغوي؛ اللغة البديعية الهجينة) وآليات الهدم (الامتداد الدلالي؛ المتلازمات المنحوتة؛ اللاترجمية واللاتفسير) وآليات الشفوية (النماذج الأدبية المحلية الشفوية) باعتبارها خصائصاً جوهرية في الرواية الإفريقية.

تكمن أهمية هذا البحث في دراسة مدى صحة المقاربات ما بعد الكولونيلية للترجمة التي تُجزم بعجز المفاهيم المعهودة في دراسات الترجمة كالتكافؤ والتأويل عن تخطي الإشكاليات التي يطرحها هذا النوع من النصوص، والتي تطالب في المقابل بـ: "تقنيات تكييفية" تزيد من مرونة اللغة الهدف من أجل احتواء التقنيات التي كيف بها الكاتب ما بعد الاستعماري لغة الكتابة الإنجليزية مع تجربته الثقافية الإفريقية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الترجمة ما بعد الكولونيلية - الرواية الإفريقية - الهجنة - الهدم - الشفوية.

### Introduction:

The African Anglophone literary text is in many ways a hybrid text, a blend of orality and writing, of the colonial language culture and the indigenous language one, of literary translation strategies and innovative strategies of literary writing. Such text seems to cause serious difficulties for the translator during the translation process.

Taking the postcolonial context of the novel into account, traditional concepts of translation studies such as equivalence and interpretation look useless to overcome problematic issues that occur from this type of intercultural writing, which are in short: subversive strategies (semantic extensions, coined collocations, unglossed translated vernacular items); hybrid strategies (code-switching, pidgin English) and the interpolation of the African oral discourse (songs, proverbs, folktales...etc).

Subsequently, selecting the best qualified translator and defining the required translation skills to translate such type of literary writing is not as easy as it might appear. An issue raised when some European publishers like Heinmann Edition and

Edition Le Seuil and some American publishers took interest in African literature and decided to translate it into other languages<sup>1</sup>.

Given the fact that West publishers had taken precedence in the translation of African literature over African organizations that showed little interest in sponsoring the translation of their own literary patrimoine, it was not surprising that most translators of African works in the beginning were non Africans living in the west.

However, this situation didn't conflict with the prevailing belief in that period of translation studies, which was that the best translator of any literary work is the one who will be able to master the language of the original and satisfy the target language culture's reader expectations.

This approach to some degree became inappropriate after the independence, when African literature written in European languages succeeded to achieve certain reputation and a remarkable readership. Many critics and studies had been attached to this literature and serious questions and polemics about its language, writing strategies and translations were worthy for many scholars' attention, one of them is who is better qualified to translate African Europhone literature: Is it the western educated African writing in what is for some a second language but who is intimately familiar with the logos of African culture? Or should it be a native European translator for whom the colonial language is the mother tongue but who may not be able to internalize the deep structures of African sociocultural reality?

### **1- Defining Postcolonial African literature**

When talking about the translation of postcolonial African literature, it is of the utmost importance to define some concepts that are involved. One of the major themes that have been the subject of debate for so long is the African literature's identity.

For some African scholars and writers like Ngugi Wathiongo' and Obi Wali, the language of the African literature and the audience are the two major criteria one can depend on to classify a literary work as African, in other words, African literature is only the literature written in African languages and

destined to an African readership; which means that all African works written in colonial languages (English, French, Portuguese) are not included.

However, this was not the opinion of all African writers like Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka who assert on the authenticity of the African literature written in European languages, since these languages are a colonial heritage that gave a solution for the problem of multilingualism and ethnicity in Africa; in addition, these languages were adjusted and manipulated to express a pure African experiences in a creative and innovative way but to a wider market.

So, whether written in a colonial language or in an African one, what define an African literary work is the African cultural background of it, the same idea is well summarized in the following statement of Ohaegbu:

“African literature therefore, can be seen as creative writings skilfully done in indigenous African languages or in foreign languages by African nationals or, if one prefers, bona fide citizens of the African continent (regardless of colour), which works spring from African sociocultural background, deal with the problems of the African and offer to the rest of the world African perception of the human condition. [...] Even though its primary audience is the African, non-Africans do and should have access to it. Only those who have profound knowledge of its cultural background and the language of the work should be qualified to undertake its criticism”. [ Cit. Marthe Dijk Ma 2011: 16].

## **2- Translation studies, the translator and the postcolonial African literature.**

Reading the above-mentioned statement, one can conclude that even the translator should have more than linguistic abilities to have access to the African text.

In her essay entitled “*translation and the postcolonial experience: the North African text*”, Samia Mahrez discusses the concept of “*the multilayered text*”, by this latter, she means that postcolonial literary texts in general, contain more than one

language and one culture. According to her, this type of texts excludes several other traditional concepts in translation studies, starting with “the monolingual reader” who will not be able to accomplish the reading experience interrupted every time he is in front of a foreign cultural item or a second and sometimes a third code, and the translator as a reader at first, he faces the same insurmountable dilemma:

« Hence, in many ways these postcolonial plurilingual texts in their own right resist and ultimately exclude the monolingual and demand of their readers to be like themselves: “in between” at once capable of reading and translating, where translation becomes an integral part of reading experience.”[Cit. Gudde 2009: 35].

Furthermore, depending on translation theories to translate postcolonial text into other languages is neither useful nor required. First of all because translation studies have developed theories according to static monolingual texts; secondly and which is the most important, these theories have been constructed far from the unequal nature of languages and power relations.

For Snell Hornbey, what is lost in the translated version of postcolonial texts is generally the trace of the multilingualism in the original, because the translator tries most of the time to shape his text in one unified target language [Hornbey 2006: 97].

In other words, the translator tries to facilitate to the target reader what was complicated for the reader of the original. Not just on the linguistic level but also on the cultural one.

The translation of African oral narratives in the black continent began with works of western anthropologists, linguists, administrators and missionaries who sought to translate the African oral culture into a western written culture[Bandia 2008: 163]. And because Africans were considered as unreliable natives and unqualified interpreters of their own laws and culture [Hornbey Ibid: 94], those translations assigned to non- African translators were mostly a domesticated translations, fully loaded by a heavy paratextual material (glossaries, footnotes, explanations, translations...etc). A strategy well advocated by the theorist Kwame Anthony Appiah who underscores the

fundamental importance of these paratextual data to enhance the understanding of the African world view by the target reader [1993: 423 - 424].

Appiah's notion "thick translation" was not very welcomed by several scholars like Maria Tymoczko who denied this translation strategy that threatens the balance of the translation as a final product, because - and in contrast to the writer- the translator would not control the load of the cultural information by giving the reader greater details that make from his work an anthropological version rather than a fictional one [Tymoczko 1999: 21 - 22].

From a receptive point of view, this strategy is nothing than an annoying way of translation since the reader will be deported from the story all the time to understand vernacular cultural items, in this matter, Paul Bandia says:

" furthermore, heavy paratextual material may undermine the artistry and aesthetics of the creative work by drawing attention away from the story line and directing it at sociological, anthropological or historical details, thus interrupting the smooth flow, or reading experience, of the text and minimizing this literary aesthetic quality" [Bandia *ibid*: 165].

### **3- Towards a postcolonial theory for the translation of African literature**

After the cultural turn, translation studies became the field where new approaches and theories took place. Especially with emerged concepts like emigration, hybridity and globalization which abolished cultural boundaries and changed the notion of the text's identity, thus, some scholars found it urgent to develop new theories that can deal with these texts' translation challenges.

The difficulty in translating the African literature lies in how complicated is the transfer of literary writing strategies used by the African author to represent his oral marginalized culture in an alien international written language. Even he fellows western literary conventions of the novel, the African author writing in the colonial language transfers not just his sociocultural reality into the

colonial language but also the grammatical and syntactic features, rhythm and tone of his local language too.

An act needs a highly stylized language, and couldn't happen without conscious and intended manipulations and distortions of the European language of writing. These derivations that take many forms in the literary text, require a translator who is deeply familiar with the African cultural background of the literary work from one side, and conscious about the ideological context that surrounds this type of literature from the other side, which is removing the dominated local culture into a more powerful location and make the language of the colonizer strange for its own speakers.

Paul Bandia describes the same idea in what he refers to as "conserving the pragmatical function of the language". For him, conveying the African author artistry in the language of writing is the crucial translation skill required when translating postcolonial African literature [Bandia Ibid: 173], noting that the translator must be interventionist and more decisive when translating from heterogenous languages into homogenous ones.

#### **4- Corpus analysis**

To answer the question I have asked in the introduction, I have kept a narrow mind, which means I have included just the African Anglophone novel and precisely Chinua Achebe's classic: *Things fall Apart*<sup>2</sup>.

In the following lines, I will present how both translators of the French<sup>3</sup> version and the Arabic<sup>4</sup> one of the novel have dealt with specific features of this literature and to what degree translation strategies applied by the translators have been adequate to preserve the author's postcolonial writing strategies and convey his stylized Africanized English.

African writers used to use some writing strategies that became common strategies with time or if we can say "African literary writing universals"; some of them will be briefly presented in this paper.

**4-1- Semantic extensions:** the assignment of features of meaning in the source language to known lexical items in the

second language such that the derived meaning is more relevant to the new user and is no longer native to the native speaker [ Bandia Ibid: 101]

In order to convey African thought and world view, authors assign new meanings to common words (generally body parts) like stomach, chest, head...etc to describe feelings or attitude, in a way to appropriate the English language and make it strange for its native speakers. This subversive strategy has been present in Achebe's novel in the following example:

<p>لو كانت إيزينما ولدا. لكنت سعيدا، فهي تتحلى بالروح الصحيحة. (2002) ص: 75).</p>	<p>“Si Ezinma était un garçon je serais plus heureux. Elle a du <b>caractère</b>, elle. ” (1964, p82)</p>	<p>“If Ezinma had been a boy I would have been happier. She has the right <b>spirit.</b>” ( 1958, P: 47).</p>
---	---	---

In this example, Achebe used the word “spirit” to mean “personality” or “attitude”. Even the English language has the appropriate word to describe the situation, the author has chosen to convey his mother language’s “Igbo” way of expression, and he had just assigned a new local meaning to a known English word.

Instead of translating the word spirit literally into French (l'âme), the French translator interpreted the meaning and gave it immediately to the reader who will never know that the translation deleted a cultural specific item and an intended subversive strategy of writing in the original. In opposite, the Arabic translation was adequately preservative and transferred to the reader the African world view.

**4-2- Coined collocations:** Yeibo contended that coined collocations occur when a new word is made up or created in order to express cultural concept, object or situation [Yeibo 2011:206].

We should note that these coined words are literal translations from the author's mother language to the language of writing; they are not just conveying the meaning but also the structure. Below are some illustrative examples:



<p>" سيكون مثل الرجل في الأغنية، الرجل الذي كانت لديه عشر زوجات و زوجة واحدة [...]". (ص: 61).</p>	<p>« Il était comme l'homme de la chanson qui avait <b>dix et une</b> femmes[...]. » (p : 68).</p>	<p>« He was like the man in the song who had <b>ten and one</b> wives. » (p: 37).</p>
---	--	---

<p>"و كانت بنات إخوان أوتشيندو هناك أيضا". (2002 ص: 146).</p>	<p>"les filles des frères d'Uchendu étaient là également." (164: 160).</p>	<p>"The daughters of Uchendu's brothers were all there." (1958: P 95).</p>
---	--	--

In the first example, Achebe abandoned the numbering system in the English language and coined a new word or collocation to describe a number we all know; which is simply eleven (11).

We can see that he transferred the Igbo's numbering system into the language of writing, a system containing only fifteen numbers ( from on to ten in igbo: *otu /abuo/ ato /ano /ise /isii /asaa /asato /itolu / iri/* then twenty **20** is *ogu* /four hundred **400** is *nnu* /eight thousand **8000** is *puku* / one hundred and sixsty thousand **160.000** is *nde* /billion(one thousand million) is *ijeri* ) and form all other numbers depending on the additive principle ( e.g.: thirteen **13** is ten and three, **iri na otu** in Igbo); the multiplicative principle (e.g.: hundred **100** is twenty times five, **ogu isi** in Igbo); the subtractive principle (e.g.: seventeen **17** is taking away three from twenty, **bere ato n'ogu** in Igbo) and finally the combined principle ( e.g.: eighty – six **86** is twenty by four and six[20 x 4] + 6, **Ogu ano na isii** in Igbo)

In the second one, he abandoned known kinship names in the British culture for that way of expression used in his local culture (actually, Igbo culture doesn't have specific words to describe kinship relations), when he could use simply the word nieces instead of "the daughters of Uchendu's brothers".

Both translators were conscious enough to preserve these collocational shifts used by the author to nativise the English language and adapt it to carry the African sociocultural reality.

**4-3-The interpolation of unglossed vernacular items:** the interpolation of indigenous items or African oral traditions in the English text without any explanation or translation to the reader.

Achebe often interrupts the reading experience in some phases of the story by switching the code and interpolating words or passages in his mother tongue in the text without any explanation. The following example is “Ikemefuna’s song”, an Igbo traditional song transliterated into English:

<p>إيزي إلينا إلينا!  سالا  إيزي إيليكوايا  إيكوابا أكوا أوليجولي  إيبي داندا نيتشي إيزي  إيبي أوزوزو نيتي  إيجوو  (2002 ص: 69).</p>	<p>“Eze elina, elina !  Sala  Eze ilikwa ya  Ikwaba akwa  oligholi  Ebe Danda nechi eze  Ebe Uzuzu nete  egwu  Sala”  (1964, p76).</p>	<p>“Eze elina, elina !  Sala  Eze ilikwa ya  Ikwaba akwa oligholi  Ebe Danda nechi eze  Ebe Uzuzu nete  egwu  Sala”  (1958,p : 42).</p>
--	--	---

We can notice that both translators used the author’s strategy to transfer the song into the language of writing, thus they transliterated the song respectively into the target languages. Consciously or unconsciously, translators sacrificed the target reader’s assimilation of this part of the story and adopted Venuti’s strategy of resistance that preserves otherness and foreignness.

**4-5-Code switching (Pidgin English):** Code -switching is the mere juxtaposing of languages in a text, [...], code -switching is rather calculated non - spontaneous and often the creation of a particular author” [Bandia 2008: 142 -143].

As many African novelists, Achebe refers to more than one language when telling his story in order to inform the reader about the linguistic reality of the social environment of his characters. In

Things Fall Apart, he used three languages: English, Igbo and Pidgin English<sup>5</sup>.

<p>"كان سعاة المحكمة هؤلاء مكروهين كراهية شديدة في أوموفيا[...]. وقد دعوا <u>كوتما</u>". (2002، ص: 188).</p>	<p>« Ces messagers de la cour était profondément hais à Umiofia[...].on les appelait <u>kotma</u> [...]» (1964, p:211).</p>	<p>“These court messengers were greatly hated in Umiofia[...]. They were called <u>kotma</u>[...]” (1958, p: 125).</p>
--	---	--

**Kotma** is a pidgin word that means “a court messenger”. It was formed through the spelling of African natives- who swallow the letter “r” in general- of the English expression court messenger; the two words were combined in one word: court is “kot” and messenger is “ma” (kotma).

In the novel’s glossary, Achebe have mentioned that Kotma is a distortion of the word court messenger without indicating to which language it belongs.

The Arabic translator had translated the glossary as it is into Arabic and transliterated the word Kotma in the target language. The French translation missed the glossary which contains almost the definition of all Igbo words in the text, but the translator transliterated the pidgin word in French too.

By deleting the Igbo glossary in the end of the novel, the French reader will miss the linguistic diversity of the novel; he could suppose that *Kotma* is another Igbo word and would never think that the author is using a third code to express a cultural reality in that time of the story, which is the emergence of a new creolized language after the coming of the colonial oppressor into Africa.

### Conclusion

The promotion of pragmatic considerations over linguistic ones when translating postcolonial African texts requires certainly an “audacious translator”.

Knowing that textual and supratextual parameters intervene unconsciously in the translator’s decisions, Javier Franco Eixela

(1996) stated that these parameters like the degree of the target language's conservation, the nature of editors and their aims, the status of the literary work (reputation and awards), the social status of the translator, work conditions and previous translations of the same work can give the translator a wider or a narrower space to choose the convenient strategy to translate cultural specific items. Nevertheless, he is the only one who carries the responsibility and critics about his choices.

To conclude, the translator must adopt what Lawrence Venuti refers to as "a strategy of resistance" which is to keep the foreign as it is and to reinforce dissimilarities and differences in attempt to change the mentality of the fluent and assured understanding of translated texts, just to remind the reader that there will be always unbridgeable gaps between cultures in spite of their locations. [Venuti 1995:306].

### **1- Corpus:**

- Achebe, Chinua (1958) *Things Fall Apart*, London : Heinemann.

- ----- (1966) *Le monde s'effondre*, trans. par Michel Ligney, Paris : Présence Africaine.

- تشنوا أتشيبي: الأشياء تتداعى، تر. سمير عزت نصار، دار الأهلية، الأردن، 2002.

### **2- References:**

- Aixela, Javier (1996) *Culture-Specific Items in Translation*, in Alvarez, R. and Carmen Africa, M. Vidal.(ed) Translation, Power, Subversion, UK: WBC Book Manufactures Ltd.

- Appiah, Kwame Anthony (1993), *Thick Translation*, in Venuti, Lawrence (2002), *The Translation Studies Reader*, London and Newyork: Routledge, pp. 417 - 429.

- Bandia, Paul (2008) *Traslation as Reparation : Writing and Translating in Postcolonial Africa*, UK and USA: St JEROME.

- Dijk, Marthe (n.d) *The Translation Problems of African Literature and Their Corresponding Strategies*, Utrecht University.

file:///E:/Documents%20and%20Settings/Administrateur/Mes%20documents/Downloads/DijkMarthe\_Thesis\_The%20Translation%20Problems%20of%20African%20

- Gudde, Robert (2009) *La décolonisation linguistique et la problématique de la traduction postcoloniale chez Assia Djebar et Malika Mokddem*, Hollande: Université d'Utrecht.

file:///E:/Documents%20and%20Settings/Administrateur/Mes%20documents/Downloads/Masterscriptie\_Robert%20Gudde\_0490717\_La%20decolonisation%20linguist.

- Hornbey, Snell (2006) *The Turns of Translation Studies: New paradigms or shifting new points?*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins publishing company.

- Ogomaka, Pathrick Mathias (2005) *Traditional Igbo Numbering System: A Reconstruction*, *Africa Development*, pp. 35 – 47

- Tymoczko, Maria (1999) *postcolonial Writing and literary translation*, in Bassnett, Susan and Trivedi, Harish, *Post-colonial Translation: theory and practice*, Newyork: Routledge, pp. 19– 40.

- Venuti, Lawrence (1995), *The Translator's Invisibility: history of translation*, London and Newyork: Routledge.

- Yeibo, Ebi (2011) *Nativization of English in African Literary Texts: A Lexico-semantic Study of Transliteration in Gabriel Okara's The Voice*, USA: *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, Vol. 1, N°. 13, pp. 202 – 208.

[http://www.ijhssnet.com/journals/Vol\\_1\\_No\\_13\\_Special\\_Issue\\_September\\_2011/26.pdf](http://www.ijhssnet.com/journals/Vol_1_No_13_Special_Issue_September_2011/26.pdf).

### **End notes :**

(1) These translations were often read as originals by interested groups in schools and universities and the aim was to make African literature available in other colonial languages [ Bandia 2008: 160].

(2) This novel first published in 1958 by the Nigerian author Chinua Achebe, known as “the father of the African literature”, marked the beginning of the postcolonial African novel. The book tells the story of the protagonist Okonkwo, an Igbo man, before and after the coming of the British oppressor to his land.

(3) translated in 1962 by Michel Ligney as « le monde s’effondre ».

(4) translated in 2002 by Samir Ezzat Nassar as « تتداعى الأشياء ».

(5) We can define Pidgin English as a hybrid language, largely the result of combination of several African languages and some European languages (English, French Portuguese etc.) [Bandia 2008: 123].