THE POLITICS OF PLURILINGUAL CONSCIOUSNESS: REWRITING ENGLISH FROM THE MARGINS IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *AMERICANAH* AND ZADIE SMITH'S *WHITE TEETH*

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Résumé

Cet article compare Americanah (2013) de Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie et White Teeth (2000) de Zadie Smith afin de montrer comment ces romans « réécrivent » l'anglais en le transformant en médium plurilingue d'identité, de hiérarchie et de critique. Plutôt que de considérer l'anglais comme un standard monolithique, les deux textes mettent en scène ce que l'on peut appeler une conscience plurilingue : une perception narrative selon laquelle l'anglais est composé d'Englishes concurrentes (nigérian, afro-américain, britannique, jamaïcain et sud-asiatique) dont la valeur fluctue en fonction de la race, de la classe et de l'espace. En mobilisant l'hétéroglossie de Bakhtine, le capital linguistique chez Bourdieu et le modèle des World Englishes de Kachru, tout en dialoguant avec des approches raciolinguistiques récentes, l'analyse suit la manière dont accent, registre et alternance codique fonctionnent comme monnaie sociale ou stigmate entre Lagos et Londres. La décision d'Ifemelu de « désapprendre » son accent américain et le refus d'Irie Jones d'adopter un parler « proper » sont interprétés comme des gestes décoloniaux qui provincialisent l'anglais standard de l'intérieur. Du point de vue de la forme, la voix bloguée chez Adichie et la narration chorale chez Smith produisent une polyphonie qui enregistre et déstabilise les normes métropolitaines. En suivant la politique du cheveu, les scènes de salle de classe, les salons de coiffure et le langage de rue, l'étude montre que la langue n'est pas seulement représentée mais fabriquée : une pratique vécue par laquelle les personnages négocient l'appartenance, exposent les mécanismes de contrôle social et imaginent des alternatives. En définitive, Americanah et White Teeth convergent pour faire de l'anglais un bien commun dialogique où la différence devient méthode plutôt que faute.
***Mots-clés** : plurilinguisme, hétéroglossie, World Englishes, idéologies raciolinguistiques, identité postcoloniale*

Abstract

This article compares Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah (2013) and Zadie Smith's White Teeth (2000) to show how these novels "rewrite" English by transforming it into a plurilingual medium of identity, hierarchy, and critique. Rather than treating English as a monolithic standard, both texts stage what can be called plurilingual consciousness: a narrative

awareness that English is composed of competing Englishes (Nigerian, African American, British, Jamaican, and South Asian) whose value fluctuates with race, class, and place. Drawing on Bakhtin's heteroglossia, Bourdieu's linguistic capital, and Kachru's World Englishes, while engaging recent raciolinguistic approaches, the analysis tracks how accent, register, and code-switching function as social currency or stigma across Lagos and London. Ifemelu's decision to "unlearn" her American accent and Irie Jones's refusal of "proper" speech are read as decolonial gestures that provincialize Standard English from within. In terms of form, Adichie's blog voice and Smith's choral narration produce polyphony that both records and unsettles metropolitan norms. By following hair politics, classroom scenes, salons, and street talk, the essay shows that language is not merely represented but made: a lived practice through which characters negotiate belonging, expose mechanisms of social gatekeeping, and imagine alternatives. Ultimately, Americanah and White Teeth converge in turning English into a dialogic commons where difference becomes method rather than error.
***Keywords**: plurilingualism, heteroglossia, World Englishes, raciolinguistic ideologies, postcolonial identity*

Introduction

English, once the emblem of the Empire, has become a global medium through which postcolonial writers articulate identity, mobility, and resistance. In *Americanah* (2013) and *White Teeth* (2000), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Zadie Smith expose the contradictions of English's global reach: the same language that promises communication also reproduces hierarchy. Writing from distinct yet converging margins (Adichie from the transatlantic African diaspora and Smith from London's multicultural core) both authors transform English into a plurilingual field of tension and possibility. Their novels reveal that language is not a neutral vehicle of meaning but a political instrument shaped by race, class, and geography.

This topic gains urgency in a global context where English remains both a means of access and an instrument of exclusion. From academic publishing to digital communication, linguistic hierarchies reproduce colonial asymmetries under new guises. The choice of *Americanah* and *White Teeth* is therefore not arbitrary: both novels stand at the crossroads of African, diasporic, and metropolitan Englishes, making them ideal laboratories for observing how postcolonial subjects appropriate and reshape the

global language from within. This study thus participates in broader debates on linguistic justice and epistemic decolonization, echoing recent calls to provincialize English as the only legitimate medium of intellectual expression.

Unlike multilingualism, which implies the coexistence of separate languages, plurilingualism refers to the fluid negotiation among varieties within a single tongue. In both novels, English itself becomes a site of struggle, performance, and self-reinvention. The protagonists, Ifemelu and Irie, learn that accent and diction determine social legitimacy as much as gender or skin colour. Through humour, irony, and narrative polyphony, Adichie and Smith dramatize what Mikhail Bakhtin terms heteroglossia. It is the coexistence of multiple voices within one linguistic system.

The theoretical foundation of this study draws from dialogic, sociolinguistic, and decolonial thought. From Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), the concept of "heteroglossia" illuminates how the coexistence of diverse social voices within one language destabilizes monologic authority. Pierre Bourdieu's notion of "linguistic capital" explains how accents and registers function as symbolic resources unequally distributed across social hierarchies (*Language and Symbolic Power*, 1991). Braj Kachru's model of "World Englishes" provides a framework for situating Nigerian, Jamaican, and British varieties within a dynamic ecology rather than a centre-periphery binary (*The Other Tongue*, 1992).

More recent raciolinguistic approaches (Flores & Rosa, Cushing) expose the racial underpinnings of linguistic judgments, showing that "appropriateness" in English often masks expectations of whiteness. Alastair Pennycook's posthumanist linguistics further expands this perspective by viewing language as a mobile, embodied practice rather than a static system. Finally, Édouard Glissant's "Poetics of Relation" and Walter Mignolo's "decolonial options" reinforce the ethical dimension of linguistic plurality, proposing relation and opacity as alternatives to assimilation. Taken together, these frameworks articulate what can be called plurilingual consciousness: a mode of awareness that perceives

English as both a space of constraint and a terrain of creative negotiation.

Methodologically, this analysis unfolds in four movements. The first part is entitled "Rewriting the Imperial Language" and examines how both authors unveil linguistic hierarchies through scenes of schooling, migration, and mimicry. The second part, "Plurilingual Consciousness and Narrative Form", analyses how Adichie's blog discourse and Smith's ensemble narration stage heteroglossia as both aesthetic method and ethical stance. "Language, Power, and Belonging" is the title of the third part and it explores the embodied dimension of language: how accent, hair, and gesture become extensions of voice and sites of resistance. Finally, the fourth part, "Language and the City", reads Lagos and London as twin laboratories of linguistic reinvention, where English is continually redefined from below.

Through this comparative trajectory, the article argues that *Americanah* and *White Teeth* make English itself the object of postcolonial critique. Their plurilingual poetics reclaim impurity as an act of agency, transforming English from a tool of domination into a shared, living commons.

This study adopts a comparative and interpretive methodology grounded in close reading and sociolinguistic textual analysis. By examining the stylistic and dialogic fabric of *Americanah* and *White Teeth*, it traces how linguistic variation (accent, code-switching, idiom) produces meaning and identity. The analysis combines narratological tools (polyphony, voice, focalization) with critical discourse analysis, attending to how characters' speech acts embody social power. Both novels are read not as isolated national texts but as transnational performances of English within the postcolonial world system, aligning with Pascale Casanova's view of literary peripheries writing back by saturation.

1. Rewriting the Imperial Language

In both *Americanah* and *White Teeth*, English operates as a social code whose mastery promises mobility yet enforces exclusion. Adichie and Smith stage the colonial afterlife of "proper English" through everyday interactions (classrooms, salons, immigration offices) where accent and syntax determine worth. For Ifemelu, linguistic adaptation is initially a survival tactic: "She had perfected, from careful watching, the blurring of her consonants, the creamy roll of her r's, the replacement of the flat Nigerian 'yes' with the American 'ye-ah'" (*Americanah* 214). Her American accent, however, becomes a performance that estranges her from herself: "She told the story of the time she first spoke with her American accent and felt like she had betrayed something deep inside her" (216). The tension between intelligibility and authenticity reveals what Pierre Bourdieu terms the linguistic market: English circulates as symbolic capital, and pronunciation becomes a currency through which class and race are negotiated.

Zadie Smith's Irie Jones undergoes a parallel schooling in linguistic conformity. Growing up in North London, she learns that "talking proper" is the only route to respectability, yet her attempts at correctness mark her difference more than they erase it: "Irie's voice was a strange hybrid, too posh for the playground, too Caribbean for the classroom" (*White Teeth* 295). English, for Irie, is never neutral. It is a site of mimicry and shame, echoing Homi Bhabha's claim that the colonial subject's imitation of the master's tongue is "almost the same, but not quite" (*The Location of Culture* 86). Both novels thus reveal how linguistic assimilation reproduces colonial hierarchies under new guises: the accent becomes a mask, the classroom a laboratory of docility.

Yet Adichie and Smith also invert this logic by transforming mimicry into critique. Ifemelu's later decision to "unlearn" her American accent and speak again "as she had learned to speak, from her grandmother's compound in Nsukka" (*Americanah* 342) enacts a decolonial reclamation of voice. Similarly, Irie's eventual

comfort with her hybrid speech signals resistance: she no longer wants to sound "like anyone else's echo" (*White Teeth* 398). In both cases, linguistic impurity becomes the mark of freedom. The two authors refuse Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's call for total linguistic rejection, opting instead for a strategy closer to Deleuze and Guattari's "minor literature": inhabiting the master's language to expose its fractures from within.

Through these characters, Adichie and Smith dramatize how the imperial tongue can be rewritten not by abandonment but by disobedience. English, once a badge of domination, becomes a field of creative contestation. Their protagonists' speech acts (hesitations, mispronunciations, code-switches) are not signs of deficiency but of what Bakhtin calls "the dialogized heteroglossia of social languages" (*The Dialogic Imagination* 272). In other words, linguistic tension becomes an ethical stance: to speak plurilingually is to insist that English, too, belongs to the world it once sought to master.

2. Plurilingual Consciousness and Narrative Form

Both *Americanah* and *White Teeth* dramatize what might be called a plurilingual imagination—a refusal of monologic English and a celebration of linguistic coexistence within narrative form. For Adichie, the novel's polyphony is inseparable from its structure. *Americanah* alternates between Nigeria and the United States, Lagos and Princeton, enacting a literal and figurative code-switching. The narration oscillates between the lyrical, the ironic, and the digital: Ifemelu's blog entries, "Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black" (*Americanah* 4), function as textual eruptions that puncture the realist flow of the novel. Each post performs a linguistic experiment in tone and register: sardonic, intellectual, intimate. The very choice of blog form decentralizes authority, making English a participatory medium rather than a colonial script. As one post notes, "The simplest way to explain

race in America? Observe how people talk" (Adichie 359). Here, language itself becomes the field where ideology is heard.

Smith's *White Teeth* enacts a similar heteroglossic dynamism through a choral narration that constantly shifts perspective and diction. The narrator slips between Jamaican patois, working-class slang, bureaucratic jargon, and immigrant English, producing what Bakhtin would call "a diversity of social speech types" (*Dialogic Imagination* 262). When Samad Iqbal, the Bangladeshi patriarch, laments his children's Britishness saying that "These days they speak to [him] in this strange accent, half-caste of Cockney and television" (*White Teeth* 193), Smith fuses humour with melancholy. The mingling of idioms embodies the novel's central tension: the impossibility of purity in a postcolonial metropolis. London speaks in tongues, and Smith's syntax mirrors its rhythm, juxtaposing fragments and registers without hierarchizing them.

Both Adichie and Smith use narrative voice to stage linguistic conflict as epistemological critique. Their plurilingual consciousness transforms English into what Homi Bhabha terms a "third space", a zone of enunciation where meaning is negotiated rather than imposed. As Paul Gilroy reminds us in *The Black Atlantic* (1993), diasporic cultures constantly reinvent language as a vessel of survival and innovation. In both novels, speech patterns function as diasporic "counter-melodies" to the imperial tune of Standard English. The alternation between creole, slang, and formal diction thus performs what Achille Mbembe calls "a critique of reason through rhythm" (*Critique of Black Reason*, 2017): it restores vitality to a language long disciplined by the Empire. Read this way, Adichie's and Smith's polyphonies do not merely represent diversity; they theorize it from within the text.

The polyphony of their prose enacts what Braj Kachru describes as the "worldliness" of English: a language "transformed by the histories of its users" (*The Other Tongue* 4). In *Americanah*, the dialogue between Nigerian English and American English collapses the hierarchy between "centre" and "periphery," while in

White Teeth, British English itself is provincialized by the vitality of migrant speech.

What distinguishes their plurilingual poetics is not mere linguistic variety but the ethical stance embedded within it. The clash of voices in both novels resists the homogenizing tendencies of global English. Adichie's alternating voices (Ifemelu's transatlantic narration, Obinze's interior monologue, the blog's digital vernacular) constitute a form of narrative resistance. Smith, meanwhile, transforms omniscient narration into a democratic chorus where no single voice dominates. Through such structures, both writers literalize Bakhtin's dictum that "language is never unitary" (272). Their novels teach readers to hear English otherwise: not as the Empire's monologue but as humanity's dialogue.

3. Language, Power, and Belonging

Ifemelu's and Irie's linguistic struggles are inseparable from their embodied experience of race and gender. For both protagonists, speech and appearance operate as parallel sites of discipline and revolt. In *Americanah*, Ifemelu's hair becomes an analogue for her accent, a bodily marker that registers submission or resistance within racial hierarchies: "Relaxing your hair is like being in prison," her friend Wambui tells her. "You're caged in. Your hair rules you" (Adichie 251). The metaphor extends beyond aesthetics: just as straightened hair mimics Euro-American ideals of beauty, an acquired American accent mimics linguistic whiteness. Ifemelu's eventual decision to wear her hair natural coincides with her decision to speak in her Nigerian accent again: "She had stopped faking the American accent she had perfected," the narrator explains, "and her voice felt true again" (Adichie 342).

This parallel between linguistic and bodily decolonization echoes Supriya Nair's observation that in postcolonial women's fiction, "voice and appearance become mutually constitutive acts of self-authorship" (*Ariel*, 2022). Similarly, Elizabeth DeLoughrey's

notion of "ecologies of the body" (*Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 2020) helps read these gestures as forms of environmental and cultural reclamation. By reclaiming texture—of hair, of sound—Adichie and Smith ground resistance in the sensorium, showing that decolonization begins not in discourse alone but in felt experience. Through this linguistic and corporeal decolonization, Adichie dramatizes a reclaiming of selfhood in the face of cultural assimilation.

Similarly, in *White Teeth*, Zadie Smith locates linguistic hierarchy within the politics of the body. Irie Jones's mixed-race identity renders her both hypervisible and unheard, trapped between linguistic codes that never fully fit. When she visits her grandmother Hortense, she struggles to imitate her Jamaican inflection: "The words felt heavy and awkward in her mouth, too big for her British tongue" (Smith 323). Her tongue becomes the novel's central organ of conflict—simultaneously site of inheritance and alienation. Irie's desire to "sound right" mirrors her longing for bodily conformity; she diets, straightens her hair, and reshapes her vowels in pursuit of belonging. Yet her eventual embrace of hybridity, her acceptance of the fact that "there was no single way to be English" (Smith 382), transforms shame into agency.

Through these embodied metaphors, Adichie and Smith connect the politics of language to the politics of self-presentation. The body, like English, is a text marked by colonial inscriptions but also open to rewriting. As Sara Ahmed reminds us, "the body remembers the histories that language disavows" (*The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 49). Ifemelu and Irie's gestures (refusing to straighten hair, refusing to mimic accents) constitute small but radical acts of narrative agency.

Both novels suggest that linguistic authenticity is not a return to purity but an ethical choice to live one's plurality. Ifemelu's accent and Irie's mixed idiom signal not fragmentation but wholeness reclaimed through difference. In this sense, their bodies speak a decolonial language of belonging that is not predicated on

sameness. English, once the instrument of domination, becomes the site where multiplicity thrives.

4. Language and the City

If language in *Americanah* and *White Teeth* embodies hierarchy and identity, the cities that frame them, Lagos and London, function as laboratories of linguistic modernity. Both spaces amplify what Mikhail Bakhtin calls the "centrifugal forces" of language, those that resist homogenization and generate plurality (*Dialogic Imagination* 272). In these novels, English is no longer the voice of the Empire but a field of improvisation constantly reshaped by the everyday speech of migrants, traders, students, and dreamers.

In *Americanah*, Lagos is the site where English mutates most freely. Ifemelu's return home reveals a metropolis "swarming with voices," where Nigerian English and Pidgin coexist without hierarchy. Uju teases her: "You are eating rice and beans like a true Nigerian … not rice and beans like an American girl" (Adichie 482). Here, humour and code-switching perform cultural belonging. As Ato Quayson observes, postcolonial cities "translate themselves endlessly into the idioms of their citizens" (*Oxford Street, Accra* 24). Adichie's Lagos thus becomes a counter-discursive centre, where hybridity signifies not dilution but self-definition. The city's verbal abundance undermines any notion of linguistic purity; its street idioms and digital slang transform English into a creole of resilience.

Smith's London, by contrast, is a palimpsest of colonial encounters, a metropolis where English splinters under the weight of its own history. In *White Teeth*, language reveals the city's class and racial cartography: "There was England, and there was the rest of the world, and when the two met, they were rarely on equal terms" (Smith 127). Yet London's polyphony unsettles these boundaries. From Samad's anxious formalism to Archie's Cockney banter and the teenage slang of Millat and Irie, Smith orchestrates a civic dialogue that mirrors the heteroglossia of the global city.

The novel's humour (its quick tonal shifts from parody to pathos) suggests that linguistic friction is the lifeblood of coexistence.
In both novels, the urban soundscape becomes a metaphor for postcolonial modernity itself: noisy, overlapping, and perpetually in translation. Lagos and London are not opposites but mirror cities, each haunted by the other. Adichie's protagonist moves between continents to discover that English has no stable home; Smith's Londoners inhabit a city built on the very migrations that Adichie's characters undertake. Together, they suggest that to speak English today is to dwell in a world where centre and margin continually trade places.
As Pascale Casanova reminds us, "the peripheries write back not by imitation, but by saturation" (*The World Republic of Letters* 176). In this sense, both authors saturate English with new rhythms and histories, transforming the metropolitan city into a plurilingual commons. Through Lagos and London, Adichie and Smith reveal that the decolonization of English is not a return to origins but a collective act of urban reinvention.

Conclusion

By reading *Americanah* and *White Teeth* comparatively, this article has shown how Adichie and Smith transform English from a colonial inheritance into a plurilingual site of resistance and renewal. Both authors dismantle the fiction of linguistic neutrality, revealing that to speak English is always to negotiate history, power, and belonging. Through narrative strategies that intertwine irony, dialogue, and embodiment, they make the act of speaking itself an ethical gesture, a reimagining of what it means to inhabit the language of the former colonizer.
Ifemelu's accent and Irie's tongue illustrate that identity is neither fixed nor purely discursive: it is felt, performed, and constantly rewritten through the body. Their linguistic awakenings (Ifemelu's decision to reclaim her Nigerian voice and Irie's acceptance of her hybrid idiom) mark a passage from mimicry to affirmation. In

these gestures of self-definition, both heroines transform vulnerability into authorship, reclaiming language as a mode of agency rather than compliance.

Lagos and London, as urban laboratories of hybridity, further reveal that English's vitality depends on its pluralization. The language thrives precisely where it fractures, where new rhythms, idioms, and accents erupt from the margins. In this sense, Adichie and Smith do not merely decolonize English; they democratize it. Their novels reconfigure world literature not as a hierarchy of centres and peripheries but as a polyphonic exchange among voices equally legitimate in their difference.

The social and practical implications of this reading extend beyond literary criticism. In a world where linguistic inequality still mirrors racial and economic stratification, Adichie and Smith's works advocate a politics of listening, a pedagogy that values accent, idiom, and plurality as sites of knowledge. To embrace plurilingual consciousness, their fiction suggests, is to acknowledge that every language carries the memory of others, and that English itself survives not through purity but through its infinite capacity to be re-spoken.

Beyond the literary sphere, this analysis carries pedagogical and social implications. In contexts such as African and diasporic education, it calls for curricula that recognize English as a family of voices rather than a monolithic norm. Integrating African Englishes, Caribbean Creoles, and diasporic vernaculars into classrooms would not dilute standards but democratize them—acknowledging linguistic difference as cultural wealth. As Bourdieu warned, linguistic legitimacy is never neutral; by embracing plurilingual pedagogy, institutions can begin to dismantle the symbolic violence embedded in "proper English".

On a broader ethical plane, the novels invite a politics of listening. Their polyphony teaches readers to hear the histories of others inscribed in accent and rhythm. In an era of renewed migration and linguistic nationalism, *Americanah* and *White Teeth* offer a decolonial

literacy rooted in empathy: to speak and hear plurilingually is to live the equality of voices.

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