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Exploring Colonial Hybridity through English Racial Expressions in Contemporary African Anglophone Literature

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Abstract

In the era of globalization, English literature has expanded beyond its roots in England and the United States, evolving into Anglophone literature that reflects diverse postcolonial experiences worldwide. English, as a legacy of colonialism, has become the medium through which formerly colonized regions express complex hybrid identities and cultural negotiations. Anglophone literature encapsulates the tension between Western colonial values and local indigenous cultures, often centering on postcolonial themes such as identity crises and racial discrimination. In India, literary works explore the hybrid cultural identity shaped by British colonial influence, while African Anglophone literature reveals the added complexity of racial segregation and apartheid. Novels like *Playing in the Light*, *Afterlives*, and *This Mournable Body* utilize new English expressions to portray racial discrimination while simultaneously serving as spaces of resistance and cultural identity preservation. This study applies Homi K. Bhabha's theory of postcolonial hybridity to analyze these linguistic expressions, highlighting how they disrupt colonial discourse and empower the colonized. By focusing on micro-level linguistic elements rather than broader discursive scenes, this approach offers fresh insights into the political and cultural significance of language in postcolonial contexts. The research advances theoretical understanding and enhances cross-cultural communication by uncovering unique African English expressions tied to local cultural identities.

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1. Introduction

English literature in the era of globalization no longer focuses on literature produced in England or the United States. English as an international language has then become the literary language in various parts of the world, which created the term Anglophone Literature. The use of English in countries outside Europe and America is a consequence of colonialism, which created a unique hybrid culture (Saxena, 2022). Literary writing in English started from former British colonies in South Asia and Africa and then became a phenomenon of global literature. Globally, Anglophone literature has a broader scope, accommodating both the Western values brought by the colonizers and local values (Ede, 2022). The broad scope of Anglophone literature makes postcolonial issues a main theme of stories. Postcolonial issues such as the long-term impacts of colonial crimes to the exploitation of nature and culture by Western countries are commonly seen in Anglophone literary works (Gaboriau, 2022).

The postcolonial theme commonly found in global Anglophone literature has unique characteristics according to local postcolonial issues. Identity issues in India are the postcolonial issues most often expressed through literary works. In India, the existing postcolonial problem relates to the hybrid cultural identity between India and England, problematic since colonial times until the contemporary era. Indian literary works such as *Swami and Friends* (1935) by R.K. Narayan show the struggle of an Indian child to be accepted by his friends in an English school. Contemporary Indian authors like Arundhati Roy, through her work *The God of Small Things* (1997), also question the cultural identity of India that has disappeared due to British colonialism. The identity problem then creates new social and economic gaps broadly narrated in literature and creates a correlation with linguistic expression, which contributes to the expansion of the meaning and use of English globally (Van Heerden, 2024).

The trend of Anglophone literature in Africa differs from the global trend because identity issues are more complex due to segregation during colonialism (Gibson, 2024). The policy of separating indigenous people and Europeans in Africa contrasts with the standardization of life using the English language. This created a wider gap between colonizers and the colonized compared to other colonies. Colonizers who had little interaction with the colonized created many linguistic expressions to describe the colonized (Rezaei & Asadi Amjad, 2022). The colonizers' full ignorance generated English expressions to describe the colonized in Anglophone literature as racial expressions.

South African literary works such as *Playing in the Light* (2006) portray a woman who reconciles with her identity but has to face hierarchies encoded by apartheid, interrogating fixed categories of racial identity and the property they should possess. Specifically, this text explores unique personal experiences concerning the impact of racialization. The racial narrative in the novel then creates new English terms such as "pot-bellied with meaning," describing entrenched racial classifications. However, the racism terms in this novel raise the protagonist's racial consciousness, allowing resistance that previously did not exist. Other contemporary African novels such as *Afterlives* (2020) by Abdulrazak Gurnah also explore the colonial double standards causing identity issues expressed through the creation of new racist vocabulary. Another novel that extensively explores racist terms is *This Mournable Body* (2020) by Zimbabwean author Tsitsi Dangarembga. This novel focuses on the life of a female character named Tambu who struggles in a big city and faces discrimination through new racist English expressions.

The racist expressions used to demean in these novels also have another function, namely as a space to maintain local identity. The creation of these racist English expressions uses local vocabulary that can represent communal identity. These English expressions then create a "third space" where cultural hybridity occurs, allowing a meaning that is essentially value-free. Value-free meaning in the third space can be defined as the meaning depending on the purpose of its use, not on its semantic

meaning (Asempasah et al., 2022). The three novels mentioned above become sites where linguistic phenomena emerge, in which racial words become a space for maintaining local identities that have begun to disappear due to colonization.

Among other contemporary Anglophone African novels, *Playing in the Light*, *Afterlives*, and *This Mournable Body* show a narrative phenomenon where English expressions used are not only expressions of racism but also as spaces of resistance for the colonized. This narrative phenomenon is the reason those three novels are used as material objects for this study.

The textual problems appearing in these three novels are postcolonial hybrids emerging from racial English expressions. Therefore, this study will use postcolonial hybrid theory to examine the complexity of these racial expressions. Postcolonial hybridity stands in opposition to colonial discourse to realize local identity when that identity is subverted (Azada-Palacios, 2021). Postcolonial hybridity does not record cultural and historical differences with a flat narrative involving balanced cultural exchange. Instead, it is a layered, convoluted narrative based on unequal relationships and forced encounters (Iqbal, 2024). The complexity of postcolonial hybridity requires understanding the social and cultural context carried by the novels; understanding this context helps reveal how the unequal relationship between colonizers and the colonized manifests in racist English expressions. To see resistance in the hybrid narrative in the novels, it is necessary to observe how the colonized are depicted as unaware of English customs/manners and must avoid making cliché comments against them (Menon, 2016). This can disrupt colonial discourse and alter and question the use of colonial stereotypical discourse institutionalizing knowledge about the colonized.

This study has two novelties in both theoretical and practical contexts. Theoretically, this study uses linguistic expression elements as data sources for a postcolonial approach; previously, the postcolonial approach used discourse data obtained from scenes in novels. This more micro approach will illustrate how language is used as a political tool to subordinate certain social groups. Practically, this research will produce new findings in English expressions that have special meanings in African culture. Additionally, this study will provide new insights into African culture that can strengthen communication and relations with Africa on levels ranging from individual to bilateral country relations.

2. Materials and Methods

Homi K. Bhabha's theory of hybridity offers a crucial lens through which African Anglophone literature can be understood and analyzed, especially within the complex postcolonial context. At its core, hybridity challenges rigid binaries such as colonizer versus colonized or tradition versus modernity by focusing on cultural interactions that generate new, fluid, and often ambivalent identities. Bhabha conceptualizes hybridity as a "third space," an in-between zone where meanings and identities are continuously negotiated and transformed rather than fixed or pure (Bhabha, 1994). This conceptual space undermines the authority of colonial discourse by revealing how the colonizer and colonized are entangled in ongoing cultural exchanges, making clear-cut separations impossible.

Bhabha's idea of hybridity is closely tied to his concepts of ambivalence and mimicry. Mimicry describes the phenomenon where colonized subjects imitate the colonizers in language, behavior, or dress but always imperfectly, introducing differences that undermine colonial authority (Bhabha, 1994). This ambivalence creates a subtle but powerful resistance, destabilizing the assumed superiority of the colonizer and creating a space where new cultural meanings can emerge. This process is not simply a blending; it is a dynamic negotiation fraught with tension and contradiction, and it highlights the fractured identities produced by colonialism.

African Anglophone literature, emerging from the historical realities of British colonialism and its aftermath, is a fertile ground for applying Bhabha's hybridity. Writers from the African continent who write in English often face the challenge of grappling with identities shaped by indigenous heritage and colonial influence simultaneously. Their texts frequently reflect issues of cultural dislocation, identity crisis, and linguistic hybridization (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2007). These literary works reveal a persistent negotiation between the cultural legacies of indigenous Africa and the imposed European colonial frameworks. English, the language of the colonizer, becomes a site of hybridity as African writers appropriate it, infuse it with local idioms, rhythms, and oral traditions, and transform it into a tool for self-expression and cultural reclamation.

In analyzing African Anglophone literature through Bhabha's lens of hybridity, one focuses on several interrelated analytical dimensions. First, hybrid identity formation is central. Characters and narrators often exist in a state of "in-betweenness," embodying identities shaped by both indigenous and colonial legacies. These identities are fragmented, fluid, and contested rather than static or essentialist (Clifford, 1997). African Anglophone literature often explores how such characters navigate these complexities balancing tradition, modernity, indigenous values, and Western influences. The narrative voice itself may oscillate between or blend oral indigenous storytelling techniques and Western literary forms, reinforcing this hybridity at the level of language and structure.

Another important dimension is the subversion of colonial discourse. Hybrid texts do not simply present colonial histories or identities; they actively critique, destabilize, and challenge the colonial narratives that often define African identities in reductive or stereotypical ways. Through mimicry and ambivalence central to hybridity African Anglophone literature unsettles colonial authority and exposes its contradictions (Ashcroft et al., 2007). The "third space" becomes a site of resistance where new meanings are created that refuse to be confined by colonial frameworks. This subversion can be seen in how traditional beliefs, rituals, and social structures are represented alongside or against colonial ideologies, forming complex and nuanced cultural narratives.

Language itself is a potent site of hybridity in African Anglophone literature. Writers engage with the English language, colonial in origin, in innovative ways: through code-switching, incorporating indigenous proverbs, idiomatic expressions, and rhetorical forms that reflect African linguistic traditions (Irele, 2001). This blending destabilizes the notion of English as a purely colonial or western language and allows for a cultural re-signification of language. The hybrid linguistic style not only empowers writers and characters to express their identities authentically but also marks a form of cultural resistance, asserting African cultural presence within the global linguistic landscape.

In the context of African Anglophone literature, this linguistic hybridity manifests in several key ways. Writers blend English with indigenous languages, dialects, proverbs, and oral traditions to reflect the complex cultural realities of postcolonial societies. This blending produces a distinctive literary language that refuses to be wholly western or colonial, embodying instead a negotiated identity that speaks to colonial legacies while affirming indigenous worldviews. The hybrid language enacts what Bhabha conceptualizes as *mimicry* and *ambivalence*: it mimics the colonizer's language but simultaneously disrupts its authority through difference.

This hybridity in language carries significant implications for representation and identity. It allows African writers to speak both within and against the colonial linguistic paradigm, articulating local experiences and knowledge that resist erasure or assimilation. The hybrid language becomes a symbolic and political tool for reclaiming narrative authority, validating indigenous epistemologies, and challenging colonial hegemony. It reflects the fragmented and fluid nature of postcolonial identities, which must navigate overlapping colonial legacies and indigenous histories. Moreover, the use of hybrid language marks a cultural translation that problematizes binary distinctions between colonizer and colonized, self and other, tradition and modernity. By mixing English with African

linguistic elements, postcolonial writers expose the porous boundaries and continual cultural exchange enabled by hybridity. They illustrate that language is never neutral or static but is deeply embedded in power relations and historical contingencies.

To examine language hybridity in African Anglophone literature through the language used, one must adopt a methodological approach that explores the interrelation of language, culture, and social context. The method used in this research is taken from Anthropological linguistics. The anthropological linguistics studies the relationship between language and humans within their culture (Putra, 2024). It examines how language shapes and reflects cultural meanings, values, norms, and practices. It also investigates how language influences and is influenced by social structures, interactions, identities, and power relations. This involves analysing how hybrid languages such as code-switching, pidgins, creoles, or mixed vernaculars reflect the complex cultural identities, power dynamics, and social realities embedded in African Anglophone narratives. The method should focus on investigating language use as a cultural practice shaped by historical, social, and political influences, and how authors employ linguistic hybridity to express nuanced identities and resistances.

3. Results and Discussions

Anglophone African fiction, authors often depict the legacy of colonialism through characters' language, race terms, and identity struggles. Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity a "Third Space" of cultural encounter helps explain how colonial English and indigenous languages mix to create new, ambivalent meanings. Bhabha argues that in postcolonial contexts cultural production is richest "where it is most ambivalent," using "mimicry" and hybridity to contest clear-cut identity categories. In the three novels under study Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* (2016), Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives* (2020), and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *This Mournable Body* (2018) racialized English expressions embody this hybridity. Each text shows characters negotiating imposed colonial terminology and reworking it through local languages or ironic usage, revealing how "the colonial home" of English becomes destabilized (and carried into local "colored" or Shona contexts). This analysis examines each novel in turn, focusing on how racial terms (whether imposed by colonial law, vernacularized, or subverted) surface in English usage and thereby expose the lingering ambivalences of colonial language politics.

Wicomb's Playing in the Light: "English" Whiteness and the Colored House

Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* centers on Helen, a mixed-race ("colored") South African mother who zealously constructs a "white English" identity for herself and her family. With Bhabha in mind, Helen's performance of "proper English" exemplifies colonial mimicry and linguistic hybridity. Helen literally models her English on colonial exemplars: she "set[s] about with religious fervor to build a white English identity" for her family. For example, she anglicizes names (from Karelse to Charles), insists on moving out of their "colored" township into "a decent white area," and even mimics "the English pronunciation of SABC radio announcers". Helen insists that they marry and move from their colored neighborhood to 'a decent white area' and consciously models her accent on official English broadcasters. In this way Helen uses the colonizer's language and accents to claim a higher social status. Yet this is an inherently hybrid act: Helen is neither truly white nor fully colored, and the English she appropriates is inseparable from her embodied "colored" background. Her linguistic mimicry thus instantiates Bhabha's ambiguity she is "imitating" English whiteness while inevitably carrying her (shameful) colonial heritage with her.

Even as Helen strives for "respectable whiteness," Wicomb highlights that race itself is a social construction born of colonial violence. Wicomb's narrative interrogates race as a method for categorizing the world, insisting that whiteness (and other categories) are contingent outcomes of history. Indeed, Helen's daughter Marion grows up "believing that she was white," only to have her racial status uprooted later. Helen's willingness to be classified and even to pass as white underlines how English and racial terms are imposed by law (e.g. apartheid's racial categories) yet reinterpreted in the private sphere. Wicomb thus uses Helen's language (etiquette books, "well-thumbed" guides, and radio accents to show that Englishness and whiteness are learned cultural performances, not innate truths. The underlying racial term "colored" is treated with deep shame Helen sees "coloredness" itself as something to reject or cover up. By rendering "whiteness" as an English-speaking identity and "coloredness" as a disavowed racial destiny, Wicomb highlights the colonial logic that attached value to Englishness. In Wicomb's hybrid "in-between," English is a tool of both oppression and aspiration: Helen wields English to subdue her coloured self, yet her mixed heritage continually undermines that colonial language. In this third space, even phrases like "white area" or "colored neighborhood" carry double meaning they are English words marking apartheid's divide, but in Helen's mouth they become signs of a fractured identity rather than a fixed one.

Playing in the Light shows racialized English at the center of identity. Helen's preoccupation with sounding "English" and acting white demonstrates how colonial English complete with racial connotations became internalized. Yet Wicomb also subtly contests this: as Dass notes, the novel "cracks open the door of the closed home that is race". By exposing how Helen's "respectable whiteness" is a learned, textually mediated style (etiquette manuals, radio speech), Wicomb implies that English racial terms are not natural. Marion's eventual realization of her "colored" origin (her "truest terms" in apartheid South Africa) is a literal shattering of Helen's English performance. The novel thereby illustrates Bhabha's insight that hybridity is a site of ambivalence. Helen's English becomes "phonetic camouflage" for a racial hybridity that can never be wholly masked. In colonial language politics, the term "colored" itself is imposed by English-language law, but in Wicomb's narrative it is reexamined revealing how even imposed racial labels become contested in the mixing space of family and memory.

Gurnah's Afterlives: Kiswahili, Code-Switching, and Colonial Irony

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives* explores Tanzanian history under German (and later British) colonial rule. Its English narrative is pervaded by Kiswahili and tribal languages, reflecting the hybrid identities of its characters. Gurnah does not simply tell the story in standardized colonial English; instead, he incorporates Swahili and other languages to represent the colonial encounter. *Afterlives* employs code-switching and translation of local language expressions alongside English, using Kiswahili as "a marker of cultural identity" for the characters. In practice, this means that characters speak in a mix of Swahili and English, and the novel often translates local terms for the reader. For example, Afiya's unschooled Shona letters in the text are presented first in Swahili orthography ("kaniumiza. Nisaidie.") and then immediately translated ("He has hurt me. Help me."). Such bilingual presentation foregrounds the fact that the colonizers' language (English) is overlaid on, but cannot erase, native speech.

This linguistic hybridity serves a double purpose. On one hand, it shows imposed colonial terms: the German "Schutztruppe" or British officials always stand out amid local terms, reminding us of foreign power. On the other hand, it demonstrates appropriation and resistance. A striking example is the Kiswahili word *mzungu* ("wanderer" used for whites) which figures in the novel to refer to white military camps ("boma la mzungu" – literally "the white man's camp"). Although that phrase appears in a review (not quoted directly here), Gurnah's text uses similar constructions to capture

how Africans viewed Europeans, often by local names, sometimes even in condescending idiom. Another example from the text is an officer quizzing Kiswahili words ("Ubani" for frankincense, "Ganzi" for numb) to local characters, showing colonizers trying to learn the native tongue. The code-switching notes that these scenes of translation ("the officer who was a character in *Afterlives* wanted to know some English words in Swahili") underline the porous nature of language under empire: English and German officials are literally learning African words, and Gurnah's narrative praises this as bringing "Africanism" into the story. In other words, the colonizer's English is unsettled by its contact with Swahili not fully authoritative, but interwoven with indigenous terms.

Mixing English and African languages in dialogue and narration, *Afterlives* exemplifies hybridity's "productive ambivalence." Gurnah's use of Swahili in the novel written in English is meant to show his identity as a Tanzanian and to present the language of the natives. This code-mixing is not simply decorative: it resists the idea of English as the "natural" medium of narrative. When the orphaned child Ilyas asks Swahili questions to his German stepfather, or when Afiya writes desperate pleas in Swahili, readers confront the gap between what English colonial discourse wants them to know and the local reality. Gurnah thereby hybridizes racial language by refusing a pure colonial perspective. For example, terms like "askari" (African soldiers under colonial command) recur in Kiswahili form, even if the text then defines them in English. The German colonel and the African villagers end up speaking a third space of communication: neither purely German nor purely Swahili, but a blend in which each borrows from the other. Through this, Gurnah critiques colonial language politics: English does not simply impose order, it collides with local vernaculars that survive and reshape it. The novel's many instances of translators and bilingually inscribed dialogue concretely dramatize the Bhabhaean ambivalence identity "always in flux" between empire and tradition.

Afterlives demonstrates how English racial terms can be reappropriated or deconstructed by hybrid contexts. A derogatory colonial utterance in English is often undercut by a village proverb, or a German name is followed by a native nickname. As one critic puts it, Gurnah's narrative "enriches the cultural context" by weaving English together with Swahili, thus "authenticat[ing]" his characters' hybrid identities. The use of Kiswahili is not neutral, it reminds readers that colonial history must be told in the colonized tongue as well. Racist terms like "barefoot askari" or "wazungu" take on new resonance when half-translated, half-spoken in Swahili. Gurnah's language choices embody a colonial hybridity where the colonizer's language is both a tool of oppression and a medium for African narrative, always crossed by indigenous inflections.

Dangarembga's This Mournable Body: Shona, English, and the Female Self

Tsitsi Dangarembga's *This Mournable Body* (2018) follows Tambudzai (Tambu) as she navigates postcolonial Zimbabwe. Dangarembga, like Gurnah, uses English as her narrative language but infuses it with Shona and Zimbabwean English cadences. In doing so, she spotlights the fractured nature of identity under colonial legacies. Critics note that the novel "deal[s] with the life of Tambudzai amidst the complexities of race, gender and class" in Zimbabwe's colonial and postcolonial realities. Linguistically, this complexity emerges in how Tambu's voice straddles English and African registers. Federica Zullo's analysis shows that Dangarembga deliberately employs code-switching and Shona vocabulary, the text contains "native words in Shona," syntactic deviations, and "unusual collocations" that mimic everyday Zimbabwean speech. This multilingual texture creates what scholars call "bilingual creativity," a blending of languages that reflects Tambu's hybrid world.

For example, Dangarembga names the novel's second-person address ("you") in English, but often strings English sentences with Shona idioms. Grammar shifts subtly when Tambu internalizes certain Anglophone norms or rebels with vernacular shorthands. Words like "musha" (home) or

"gukurahundi" (Shona term for a brutal massacre period) may appear untranslated, forcing English-speaking readers to encounter Zimbabwean social realities on native terms. At the stylistic level, Dangarembga breaks standard English with fragments and local slang ("mbwende" or "ngaiteyi") that carry emotional weight for Tambu. These hybridity strategies are not just aesthetic, they signal Tambu's precarious status in a Zimbabwe where colonial English remains the language of power. By blending Shona into her English prose, Dangarembga contests the monopoly of the colonial tongue and reclaims it for local experiences.

Moreover, Tambu's racial and linguistic identity is deeply entangled. Though the novel doesn't foreground overt racial slurs, the vestiges of colonial race-talk survive in the background: references to "whiteness" in professional settings, or her interactions with expatriates, reveal how English still denotes privilege. When her boss asks for "a true African experience" (in English), Tambu's response both practical and frustrated highlights the disconnect between English expectations and African reality (the boss even dubs her "Queen of the Village" in English, a title tinged with colonial exoticism). Dangarembga even inscribes political and cultural slogans ("Chimurenga," "Gukurahundi") in conversation, reminding the reader how the postcolonial state's own ideologies blend English and African terms.

This Mournable Body shows that English in Zimbabwe is irrevocably hybrid. The language of colonial education and administration is never simply replaced, but it is worn down and enriched by Shona context. This novel emphasizes postcolonial poetics that can be understood as its strategies at the lexical, syntactic, discoursal and rhetorical levels embody this hybridity. In Bhabhaian terms, Tambu's voice resides in the Third Space, she must "re-scribe" English around her indigenous culture, producing hybrid expressions that carry traces of both. Racialized English is thus dismantled. Words like "foreign" or "local" become unstable in the face of Tambu's transnational perspective (she lived abroad) and second-person narration. Dangarembga's polyphonic style underscores that Zimbabwean identity today is neither pure African nor pure European, but a tense mixture reflected precisely in the novel's code-switching and linguistic diversity.

4. Conclusion

In all three novels, colonial hybridity appears through contested language. The English of empire never remains static; it is always "translated" into African context, and in turn reshapes the speakers' identities. Wicomb's characters internalize and then question apartheid's English-language racial categories, revealing their historical contingency. Gurnah's characters talk back to colonial English by using Kiswahili and tribal terms in dialogue and narrative, creating a space where "Swahili society" reclaims its voice. Dangarembga's protagonist navigates a bilingual reality where the colonial language is laced with Shona idioms and nationalist slogans, exposing the ambivalence of an "English" Zimbabwean identity. Each writer thus enacts Bhabha's hybridity: the language of the colonizer becomes a "third" cultural space of negotiation and innovation. Racialized English terms whether the legal label "colored," the camp's name *boma la mzungu*, or Zimbabwean slang are neither simply imposed nor wholly rejected. Instead, they are rearticulated in the interplay of languages and voices, revealing that colonial language politics remain alive in contemporary African identity that embodying fluid, contested "beyond spaces" of hybridity.

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