



Translingual Writing and the Politics of Language Choice in Postcolonial Authors

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Abstract

This article examines translingual writing-literature composed by authors working across, between, or outside their first languages-as a central and unresolved political question in postcolonial literature. It surveys thirty years of scholarship on the topic, from the foundational language debate between Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Chinua Achebe through recent work on exophonic, self-translating, and code-meshing authors, in order to situate the theoretical frameworks of Yasemin Yildiz, Steven Kellman, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, and Gloria Anzaldúa within a wider and still-active field. The article argues that language choice in postcolonial writing is never a neutral aesthetic decision but a site where questions of audience, market, memory, and political allegiance are continuously negotiated. Rather than resolving the long-standing dispute between advocates of indigenous-language writing and advocates of appropriated colonial languages, the article proposes that translingualism itself-understood as a spectrum of practices rather than a fixed position-offers a more productive framework for understanding how postcolonial authors manage the competing demands placed on their linguistic choices.

Keywords: Translingualism, Postcolonial Literature, Language Politics.

1. Introduction

Postcolonial literature has, since its emergence as a field of study, been shadowed by a single recurring question: in what language should the formerly colonized write? Beneath this deceptively simple question lie disputes about audience and readership, about the relationship between language and thought, about literary markets centered in London, Paris, and New York, and about what it means for a writer to represent a community whose everyday speech may differ sharply from the language of the page. Translingual writing-literature produced by

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authors who write in more than one language, or in a language other than the one in which they were raised-sits at the center of this dispute. It is simultaneously celebrated as evidence of postcolonial literature's global reach and criticized as a symptom of ongoing linguistic and cultural dependency.

This article argues that the politics of language choice in postcolonial writing cannot be adequately understood through a simple binary of resistance versus complicity, in which writing in an indigenous language is coded as authentic and anti-colonial while writing in a colonial language is coded as compromised. Instead, drawing on three decades of scholarship spanning foundational postcolonial theory and the most recent work on exophonic and self-translating authors, the article proposes that translingual practice constitutes its own literary and political mode-one that reworks the dominant language from within, produces new readerships, and complicates the assumption that a single, stable mother tongue underwrites authentic literary expression.

2. Literature Review

Scholarship on language choice in postcolonial writing divides, broadly, into four overlapping waves.

2.1 The Foundational Wave: Decolonization and the Binary of Resistance vs. Complicity

The first, emerging directly from decolonization movements of the 1960s through the 1990s, staged the question as a political choice between indigenous and colonial languages. Chinua Achebe's early defense of a deliberately reshaped English (Achebe, 1975) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's subsequent call for a wholesale return to indigenous-language composition (Ngũgĩ, 1986) remain the field's most cited reference points, and the disagreement between them has been revisited by nearly every subsequent theorist of postcolonial language politics, including Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (1989), whose concepts of abrogation and appropriation gave the field its most durable vocabulary for describing how colonial languages are simultaneously refused and repurposed. Chantal Zabus's study of "indigenization" in West African Europhone fiction (Zabus, 1991) extended this vocabulary into detailed linguistic case studies, cataloguing the specific relexification and pidginization strategies by which Nigerian, Ghanaian, and Ivorian novelists inscribed indigenous speech patterns onto French and English prose. Salman Rushdie's essay collection *Imaginary Homelands* (Rushdie, 1991), and his coinage of "chutnification" to describe the blending of Indian idiom into English, offered a South Asian counterpart to the West African debate, while Homi Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity and the "third space" (Bhabha, 1994) supplied the wider theoretical scaffolding within which many subsequent language-focused studies have been read. Gayatri Spivak's "The Politics of Translation" (Spivak, 1993) added a feminist and poststructuralist dimension to this first wave, arguing that translation of Third World women's writing into English requires attention to rhetoric as well as logic if it is to avoid reproducing colonial power relations.

2.2 The Second Wave: Theoretical Expansions and the Postmonolingual Condition

A second wave of scholarship, running from roughly 2000 to 2015, shifted from the specifically postcolonial language debate toward a broader theorization of translingualism as a transhistorical literary phenomenon. Steven Kellman's *The Translingual Imagination* (Kellman, 2000) proposed the field's foundational typology, distinguishing "ambilingual" writers who compose important work in more than one language from "monolingual translinguals" who write only in a language other than the one into which they were born. Evelyn Ch'ien's *Weird English* (Ch'ien, 2004) examined the syntactic and grammatical innovations of writers such as Vladimir Nabokov, Maxine Hong Kingston, Junot Díaz, and Salman Rushdie, arguing that their nonstandard English constitutes a coherent new literary

register rather than a series of idiosyncratic deviations. Aneta Pavlenko's work on the psycholinguistics of bilingual cognition (Pavlenko, 2014) brought empirical grounding to claims about how multilingual writers experience and represent linguistic difference, while Suresh Canagarajah's *Translingual Practice* (Canagarajah, 2013) reframed translingualism away from bilingualism and code-switching and toward a practice-based model of "codemeshing," in which multiple languages are treated as a single, undifferentiated communicative resource rather than as discrete systems switched between. Yasemin Yildiz's *Beyond the Mother Tongue* (Yildiz, 2012) provided this wave's most influential historical intervention, tracing the "monolingual paradigm" to its eighteenth-century European Romantic origins and proposing the "postmonolingual condition" as an alternative frame. Rey Chow's *Not Like a Native Speaker* (Chow, 2014) returned directly to the Achebe–Ngũgĩ debate, introducing colonial and postcolonial Hong Kong as a third geopolitical site of postcolonial languaging alongside the more frequently discussed Anglophone African and Francophone Caribbean contexts. Rebecca Walkowitz's *Born Translated* (Walkowitz, 2015) closed this wave by examining how contemporary novels are increasingly written with eventual translation in mind, producing English-language texts that already carry the formal traces of other languages before any translator touches them.

2.3 The Third Wave: Case Studies in Contemporary Exophonic and Translingual Authorship

A third wave, concentrated in single-author and single-text case studies published between roughly 2017 and 2022, tested these general theories against specific translingual careers. A cluster of scholarship on Yoko Tawada's German- and Japanese-language writing—including Flora Roussel's analysis of exophonic strategy in Tawada's fiction (Roussel, 2020)—examined how a single writer's oscillation between two languages produces what Yildiz's framework would call a sustained postmonolingual practice. A parallel cluster addressed Jhumpa Lahiri's turn to Italian: Esterino Adami's study of identity and "split-self" narrative in Lahiri's *In altre parole* (Adami, 2017), Elena Natalia Ravizza's account of Lahiri's self-translation as an encounter with linguistic otherness (Ravizza, 2019), Fabrizio De Donno's comparative reading of rootlessness and romance in Lahiri and Tawada together (De Donno, 2021), Lahiri's turn to Italian has been interpreted as a sustained negotiation between linguistic otherness, identity, and self-translation (Adami, 2017; Ravizza, 2019; De Donno, 2021). Wangtaolue Guo's reading of Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* as a "rhizomatic" translation zone (W.Guo, 2018) extended this case-study approach to a Chinese-British context, while a growing body of Nigerian-focused scholarship, including Edit Fazakas's study of multilingualism in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (Fazakas, 2024) and Mona Arhire's analysis of how that novel's Igbo, Nigerian English, and Nigerian Pidgin registers survive or fail to survive translation into Romanian (Arhire, 2023), demonstrates that the Achebe-era language debate remains an active concern for writers, a full generation younger than Achebe himself.

2.4 The Contemporary Wave: Synthesizing Postcoloniality, Multilingualism, and Translation Studies

A fourth and most recent wave, from approximately 2023 onward, has begun to synthesize the postcolonial and general-translingual strands of scholarship while extending the field into new linguistic and geographic terrain. Paul Bandia's essay on translation, postcoloniality, and literary multilingualism, published in *PMLA* (Bandia, 2023), explicitly bridges translation studies and postcolonial literary criticism, arguing that literary multilingualism should be read as itself a mode of translation rather than as translation's raw material. Suresh Canagarajah's more recent work on translingual orientations in anti-racist academic communication (Canagarajah, 2023) extends codemeshing theory beyond literary texts into scholarly writing itself. Charles Forsdick's study of the Hungarian-French writer Katalin Molnár (Forsdick,

2024) applies translingual poetics to a European rather than postcolonial context, usefully testing whether frameworks developed for anglophone and francophone postcolonial writing travel to translingual writing motivated by aesthetic rather than colonial displacement. Asa Zhang's 2025 reexamination of Spivak's politics of translation (Zhang, 2025) revisits the first wave's feminist-postcolonial synthesis in light of subsequent decolonial translation theory, and Jhumpa Lahiri's own essay collection *Translating Myself and Others* (Lahiri, 2022), alongside the 2025 English translation of Yoko Tawada's *Exophony: Voyages Outside the Mother Tongue* (Tawada, 2025), mark a moment in which the field's primary subjects have begun to theorize their own translingual practice directly rather than leaving that work to critics. Most recently, Mei Yi Kuo's study of translingual bodies in early colonial Taiwanese children's readers (Kuo, 2026) extends the field chronologically backward, into the early twentieth-century colonial Pacific, and formally sideways, into pedagogical rather than literary texts, suggesting that the theoretical apparatus built around Achebe, Ngũgĩ, and their successors has applications well beyond the anglophone and francophone postcolonial novel with which the field began.

2.4 Recent Synthesis: Postcoloniality, Multilingualism, and Translation Studies

Read together, these four waves show a field that has moved from a relatively narrow debate over African-language versus English-language fiction toward a broad, comparative theorization of translingual writing that spans German, Japanese, Italian, Chinese, Hungarian, Romanian, and colonial Taiwanese contexts. What remains constant across this expansion, however, is the persistence of the original Achebe–Ngũgĩ opposition as the field's central reference point: nearly every subsequent theorist, from Chow (2014) to Bandia (2023), returns to it in order to position a new theoretical intervention. The sections that follow trace this opposition in detail before showing how the frameworks it generated—abrogation and appropriation, translingual typology, code-meshing, and code-switching as resistance—have been extended by the case studies surveyed above.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 From the Monolingual Paradigm to the Postmonolingual Condition

A useful starting point for any study of translingual postcolonial writing is Yasemin Yildiz's account of the "monolingual paradigm," the historically specific but widely naturalized assumption that individuals possess a single, primary language—typically figured as a "mother tongue"—through which they think, feel, and belong to a national community (Yildiz, 2012). Yildiz traces this assumption to the late eighteenth-century European Romantic tradition, particularly the writings of Johann Gottfried Herder and Friedrich Schleiermacher, who reconceived language not as a neutral instrument of communication but as constitutive of a people's inner life and national character (Yildiz, 2012). Once consolidated, this paradigm treated multilingualism as a deviation from the norm rather than, as it has been throughout most of human history, an ordinary condition of contact, trade, migration, and empire.

Yildiz's intervention matters for postcolonial studies because the monolingual paradigm did not stay confined to Europe; it traveled with colonial education systems, missionary schools, and administrative bureaucracies, all of which imposed a metropolitan language as the sole legitimate medium of formal thought and literary expression, even in societies that had never been monolingual to begin with (Yildiz, 2012). The postcolonial writer who works across languages is therefore not simply choosing between two equally available options. That writer is negotiating a paradigm that was exported alongside colonial rule and that continues, in modified form, to structure how national literatures are defined, taught, and canonized. Yildiz's proposed alternative, the "postmonolingual condition," describes the

uneven, often contradictory coexistence of monolingual ideology and actual multilingual practice—a condition that describes the postcolonial literary field with particular precision (Yildiz, 2012). Aneta Pavlenko's psycholinguistic research provides an empirical complement to this claim, showing that the monolingual assumptions long embedded in language-and-cognition research treated bilingual subjects as anomalous rather than as ordinary objects of study, a bias with the same intellectual ancestry that Yildiz locates in Herder and Schleiermacher (Pavlenko, 2014).

3.2 The African Language Debate: Ngũgĩ versus Achebe, and Its Afterlives

No exchange has shaped the politics of language choice in postcolonial literature more decisively than the disagreement between the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe. In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ argues that language is never merely a vehicle for content but is itself bound up with a people's collective memory, worldview, and relationship to their environment; to write African experience in a European language, he contends, is to remain trapped within a form of mental colonization even after political independence has been achieved (Ngũgĩ, 1986). Ngũgĩ's own literary practice enacted this argument: after 1977 he abandoned English in favor of Gikuyu, his first language, later translating his own work into English rather than composing directly in it (Ngũgĩ, 1986).

Achebe, by contrast, argued in his essay "The African Writer and the English Language" that English, however implicated in the colonial project, had become an unavoidable and even generative medium for African literature, capable of reaching readers across a linguistically fragmented continent and of carrying African experience into global circulation (Achebe, 1975). Achebe called for a deliberately reshaped English, adapted to the rhythms and idioms of African speech, that could remain internationally legible while bearing the imprint of a specifically African sensibility (Achebe, 1975). Chantal Zabus's detailed linguistic case studies of West African Europhone fiction give this position empirical texture, cataloguing the specific pidginization, calquing, and relexification strategies through which writers such as Achebe, Ayi Kwei Armah, Gabriel Okara, and Ahmadou Kourouma made French and English carry indigenous speech patterns (Zabus, 1991).

Rey Chow's *Not Like a Native Speaker* returns to this exchange from a Sinophone rather than Anglophone-African vantage point, arguing that the colonized subject's encounter with the colonizer's language offers a privileged, if painful, vantage point onto the postcolonial condition precisely because that language was imposed from without (Chow, 2014). By introducing British and post-British Hong Kong into a debate that had been conducted almost entirely in Francophone and Anglophone African terms, Chow demonstrates that the Achebe–Ngũgĩ opposition is not a regionally bounded dispute but a structural feature of postcolonial languaging wherever it occurs (Chow, 2014). Paul Bandia's more recent synthesis pushes this generalization further still, proposing that literary multilingualism across postcolonial contexts should itself be read as a mode of translation, collapsing the presumed distinction between a text that is multilingual in its composition and one that has been translated after the fact (Bandia, 2023).

What is often lost in summaries of the Ngũgĩ–Achebe debate is that both writers were responding to the same underlying condition—the imposition of a monolingual colonial standard onto multilingual societies—but drew opposite conclusions about where resistance should be located: in the wholesale rejection of the colonizer's language, or in its subversive occupation from within. Read through Yildiz's framework, the debate can be understood as two distinct strategies for exiting the monolingual paradigm rather than as a simple disagreement over vocabulary choice (Yildiz, 2012). Ngũgĩ seeks to restore multilingual and indigenous-language legitimacy by refusing the colonial language altogether; Achebe seeks to destabilize the paradigm by denaturalizing English itself, revealing that it was never a fixed, pure medium to

begin with.

3.3 Abrogation and Appropriation: Postcolonial Textual Strategies

The theoretical vocabulary that best names Achebe's strategy, and much translingual postcolonial practice more broadly, comes from Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin's *The Empire Writes Back*. The authors describe two linked textual strategies through which postcolonial writers contest the authority of the imperial language: abrogation, the refusal of the colonial language's claim to correctness, normativity, and cultural authority, and appropriation, the process by which that language is nonetheless retained and reconstituted to bear the weight of a different cultural experience (Ashcroft et al., 1989). Crucially, the two processes are not sequential but simultaneous: the postcolonial text abrogates standard usage at the very moment it appropriates the language for new purposes, producing English or French inflected by glossed vocabulary, untranslated terms, syntactic patterns borrowed from indigenous languages, and rhythms drawn from oral tradition.

Salman Rushdie's own account of "chutnification"—his metaphor for the newly created, polymorphous idiom in which several tongues blend and clash within English—offers a South Asian literary enactment of this same double process (Rushdie, 1991). Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity supplies the wider conceptual frame within which this simultaneity becomes legible: for Bhabha, cultural production is most productive precisely where it is most ambivalent, occupying a "third space" that is neither fully the colonizer's language nor a recovered precolonial one (Bhabha, 1994). This framework reframes translingual writing not as code-switching for local color but as a sustained formal argument. When a novelist embeds untranslated words from an indigenous language into an English-language text, or restructures English syntax to mimic patterns of address from a first language, the text performs abrogation and appropriation simultaneously: it rejects the assumption that a single correct English exists while claiming the language as fully available material for a non-metropolitan literary project (Ashcroft et al. 1989).

3.4 Translingualism as a Literary Category

Steven Kellman's *The Translingual Imagination* offers the most sustained attempt to theorize translingual authorship as a category in its own right, extending beyond the postcolonial context to include exiled, immigrant, and diasporic writers more broadly. Kellman distinguishes between "ambilinguals," writers who compose important work in more than one language, and "monolingual translinguals," writers who compose in only one language but not the one into which they were born (Kellman, 2000). Evelyn Ch'ien's *Weird English* builds on this distinction by examining the specific grammatical and syntactic innovations of writers such as Vladimir Nabokov, Maxine Hong Kingston, Junot Díaz, and Salman Rushdie, arguing that their nonstandard English constitutes a deliberate revolt against Standard English's claim to dominance rather than mere linguistic incompetence (Ch'ien, 2004).

Suresh Canagarajah's *Translingual Practice* reframes this typology in explicitly practice-based terms, proposing the concept of "codemeshing" to describe how multilinguals merge their own languages and values into English without treating the languages in play as discrete, separable systems (Canagarajah, 2013). This is a meaningful departure from earlier code-switching models, which tend to assume that a writer alternates between two bounded linguistic codes; codemeshing instead treats the writer's full linguistic repertoire as a single, integrated resource. Canagarajah's more recent work extends this framework to academic writing itself, arguing that scholarly communication can be diversified along translingual lines to resist the linguistic domination embedded in disciplinary norms (Canagarajah, 2023). Rebecca Walkowitz's *Born Translated* identifies a related but distinct phenomenon at the level

of the contemporary novel as a genre: novels increasingly are written with translation already built into their design, producing English-language texts that anticipate and internalize their own eventual translation into other languages (Walkowitz, 2015).

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This article employs a qualitative, comparative textual-analysis approach to examine how language choice operates as both a formal literary strategy and a political practice in postcolonial and translingual writing. Rather than treating language choice as a binary decision between an indigenous language and a colonial language, the study examines a spectrum of practices through which writers negotiate multilingual experience, including exophonic writing, code-switching, codemeshing, linguistic appropriation, self-translation, and the incorporation of untranslated or partially translated language.

The analysis combines close reading of primary literary and theoretical texts with comparative reading of secondary scholarship. The primary corpus includes selected works by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Gloria Anzaldúa, Xiaolu Guo, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Yoko Tawada. These texts were selected because they represent different relationships to dominant and nondominant languages: rejection of the colonial language, appropriation and transformation of English, sustained code-switching, exophonic composition, movement into an adopted language, and literary self-translation. The study uses secondary scholarship to contextualize these textual practices within the major theoretical traditions of postcolonial and translingual studies, particularly Yildiz's concept of the postmonolingual condition, Ashcroft et al.'s concepts of abrogation and appropriation, Kellman's translingual typology, Canagarajah's concept of codemeshing, and Anzaldúa's account of linguistic resistance.

The methodology is therefore interpretive rather than statistical. It does not attempt to measure the frequency of multilingual features across a representative sample of texts. Instead, it identifies recurring formal and political patterns across strategically selected cases in order to develop a comparative model of translingual practice.

4.2 Corpus Selection and Case-Study Rationale

The corpus was selected purposively to represent different positions along the spectrum of translingual literary practice proposed in this article. The selection brings together writers from African, Latin American, Chinese-British, South Asian, German-Japanese, and colonial Taiwanese contexts, while recognizing that these contexts cannot be treated as historically or linguistically equivalent.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind* provides the foundational case for the position in which indigenous-language writing is explicitly advanced as a strategy of decolonization. Ngũgĩ's argument that language carries collective memory, cultural experience, and political consciousness establishes one end of the spectrum against which subsequent practices of colonial-language appropriation can be considered (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986).

Chinua Achebe's theoretical intervention is examined alongside Ngũgĩ's because his defense of a reshaped English provides the contrasting position in which the colonial language is retained but transformed to express African experience (Achebe, 1975). Achebe's position is therefore treated not simply as the opposite of Ngũgĩ's but as an alternative strategy for negotiating the same colonial linguistic condition.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* provides a later African case in which

English, Igbo, and Nigerian linguistic varieties coexist within ordinary narrative and social interaction (Adichie, 2003). The text is particularly useful for examining whether multilingual literary practice necessarily functions as an explicit confrontation with the dominant language or can instead operate as a normalized feature of contemporary postcolonial writing. Existing analyses by Fazakas (2024) and Arhire (2023) provide complementary perspectives on the novel's multilingualism and its treatment in translation.

Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* expands the corpus beyond the African postcolonial context and provides a particularly explicit example of code-switching as linguistic and political resistance. The text moves among English, Spanish, Chicano Spanish, Tex-Mex, and Nahuatl, making linguistic plurality inseparable from questions of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and border identity (Anzaldúa, 1987).

Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* provides a case in which language acquisition itself becomes a central component of narrative form. The narrator's developing English makes grammatical instability and linguistic incompleteness visible within the text, allowing the study to examine how translingual identity can be represented through the formal properties of literary language (Guo, 2007). Wangtaolue Guo's (2018) reading of the novel as a "rhizomatic" translation zone provides an important critical framework for this case.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *In altre parole* introduces a different form of translingual practice because the author deliberately moved from English, the principal language of her earlier literary career, into Italian (Lahiri, 2015). Its English translation, *In Other Words*, translated by Ann Goldstein, also permits comparison between the author's Italian-language composition and its subsequent movement into English (Lahiri, 2016). The Lahiri case is therefore particularly valuable for examining the relationship between language acquisition, self-translation, linguistic identity, and literary authorship (Adami, 2017; Ravizza, 2019; De Donno, 2021).

Yoko Tawada's *Schwager in Bordeaux* provides the principal exophonic case in the corpus. Tawada's writing across Japanese and German allows the study to examine a form of translingual authorship in which movement between languages is not necessarily organized around colonial resistance but around linguistic displacement, estrangement, and the destabilization of national-literary identity (Tawada, 2008; Roussel, 2020). Tawada's later theorization of exophony further supports this interpretation (Tawada & Hofmann-Kuroda, 2025).

The corpus therefore does not assume that all multilingual writing is politically identical. Instead, it deliberately juxtaposes cases in which linguistic movement emerges from different historical conditions, including colonial domination, migration, diaspora, border identity, linguistic experimentation, and voluntary movement into an adopted language.

4.3 Analytical Categories

The close readings are organized around six interconnected analytical categories.

First, language choice is examined as a political and aesthetic decision. The analysis asks which language or combination of languages a writer chooses and what historical, cultural, and institutional conditions make that choice meaningful. Ngũgĩ's movement toward Gikuyu, for example, is read differently from Lahiri's movement into Italian because the linguistic histories and political circumstances surrounding the two choices differ substantially (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986; Lahiri, 2015).

Second, code-switching and codemeshing are examined as formal strategies through

which writers challenge the assumption that languages exist as completely separate and self-contained systems. Anzaldúa's movement among English, Spanish, and related varieties provides the clearest example of sustained code-switching (Anzaldúa, 1987), while Canagarajah's concept of codemeshing provides a framework for understanding forms of multilingual writing in which linguistic resources are integrated rather than simply alternated (Canagarajah, 2013).

Third, linguistic appropriation and hybridity are examined through the ways writers reshape dominant languages by incorporating indigenous vocabulary, syntactic structures, oral rhythms, and culturally specific forms of expression. Achebe's reshaping of English and Adichie's incorporation of Igbo and Nigerian linguistic practices provide central examples (Achebe, 1975; Adichie, 2003). These cases are interpreted through Ashcroft et al.'s (1989) concepts of abrogation and appropriation.

Fourth, untranslated and partially translated language is analyzed as a means of producing what this article terms productive opacity. The analysis asks what happens when readers encounter words, phrases, or passages whose meanings are not immediately supplied in the dominant language. Anzaldúa's multilingual passages are particularly important here because they refuse to make every linguistic element transparent to the monolingual reader (Anzaldúa, 1987).

Fifth, self-translation and exophonic authorship are examined as practices through which writers destabilize the assumption that literary identity originates naturally in a single mother tongue. Lahiri's Italian-language writing and its English translation provide a case for examining self-translation and linguistic transformation, while Tawada's Japanese-German literary career provides a case of sustained exophonic authorship (Lahiri, 2015, 2016; Tawada, 2008; Tawada & Hofmann-Kuroda, 2025).

Sixth, readerly accessibility and linguistic legibility are examined in relation to publishing and translation. The study considers whether multilingual strategies preserve linguistic difference or accommodate readers through glossing, translation, contextual explanation, or the suppression of linguistic distinctions. This category is especially important in the analysis of *Purple Hibiscus*, where the distinctions among Igbo, Nigerian English, and Nigerian Pidgin become particularly significant when the novel moves into another language (Adichie, 2003; Arhire, 2023).

Together, these categories allow the analysis to move beyond the question of *which language* a writer uses toward the more consequential question of *what the writer does with and between languages*.

4.4 Comparative and Translation-Oriented Analysis

The study uses comparison at two levels. First, it compares literary practices across different authors and linguistic contexts. This makes it possible to distinguish between translingual practices that share formal characteristics but emerge from different political histories. For example, Anzaldúa's code-switching, Adichie's multilingual English, Tawada's exophonic writing, and Lahiri's movement into Italian all challenge monolingual assumptions, but they do so through different relationships to ethnicity, colonialism, migration, identity, and literary institutions (Anzaldúa, 1987; Adichie, 2003; Lahiri, 2015; Tawada, 2008).

Second, the study compares original texts with their translated forms where appropriate. The comparison between Lahiri's *In altre parole* and *In Other Words* makes it possible to consider how a translingual text changes when it moves into English through translation (Lahiri, 2015, 2016). Similarly, Arhire's (2023) analysis of the Romanian translation of *Purple Hibiscus* demonstrates how distinctions among Nigerian English, Nigerian Pidgin, and Igbo

may be altered or reduced when multilingual writing enters another linguistic market.

This translation-oriented approach is informed by Walkowitz's (2015) concept of the "born-translated" novel and Bandia's (2023) argument that literary multilingualism can itself be understood as a form of translation. Translation is therefore treated not simply as a secondary process occurring after literary composition but as an analytical site through which questions of linguistic hierarchy, readership, accessibility, and cultural difference become visible.

The comparative method consequently operates across languages, authors, genres, historical contexts, and stages of textual circulation. The purpose is not to establish that all translingual texts function according to a single model, but to identify recurring relationships between linguistic form and political positioning.

4.5 Methodological Scope and Limitations

The study is necessarily selective. Its corpus does not constitute a comprehensive survey of all postcolonial or translingual writing, nor does it claim that the selected authors are representative of their respective linguistic or national traditions. The cases are instead chosen for their analytical value in demonstrating different modes of negotiating linguistic plurality.

The study also recognizes that the category of "translingual writing" encompasses practices that emerge from substantially different historical circumstances. A colonial-language writer in postcolonial Africa, an exophonic Japanese-German writer, a Chicana writer working across English and Spanish, and a South Asian American writer adopting Italian cannot be placed on a single historical continuum without qualification. The proposed spectrum therefore describes forms of linguistic practice rather than a hierarchy of political experience.

This limitation is also a methodological principle: the political significance of a linguistic choice must be interpreted in relation to its particular linguistic ecology, readership, publishing infrastructure, and historical conditions. The article consequently avoids treating indigenous-language writing as inherently resistant or colonial-language writing as inherently assimilatory. Instead, it asks how particular texts use linguistic resources to negotiate the competing demands of identity, audience, circulation, memory, and political resistance.

5. Analysis

5.1 Code-Switching as Resistance: Anzaldúa and the Borderlands

Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* provides one of the clearest examples of translingual practice functioning simultaneously as literary form and political resistance. Rather than presenting English and Spanish as discrete languages between which the writer simply alternates, Anzaldúa constructs a linguistic continuum incorporating standard English, working-class English, standard Spanish, Chicano Spanish, Tex-Mex, and Nahuatl (Anzaldúa, 1987). The resulting linguistic plurality is central to the text's representation of mestiza identity: language does not merely describe a subject who occupies multiple cultural positions but becomes the formal medium through which that multiplicity is enacted.

This practice can be understood through Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin's concepts of abrogation and appropriation. By refusing the authority of standardized English and Spanish, Anzaldúa abrogates the assumption that either language possesses an exclusive claim to correctness. At the same time, she appropriates the dominant language by incorporating it into a heterogeneous linguistic system that answers to the experiences of Chicana/o communities

rather than to metropolitan linguistic norms (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1989). Her code-switching therefore exceeds decorative multilingualism. It redistributes linguistic authority within the text.

The political force of this practice becomes particularly visible in Anzaldúa's discussion of what she calls "linguistic terrorism" (Anzaldúa, 1987). The stigmatization of Chicano Spanish produces linguistic shame because speakers are positioned as deficient in relation to both English and standardized Spanish. Anzaldúa's refusal to regularize her language consequently becomes a refusal of the hierarchy that produces this shame. Her text does not translate every linguistic difference for the monolingual reader, and this refusal creates moments of partial accessibility in which the reader experiences, however temporarily, the limits of linguistic mastery.

Anzaldúa therefore occupies an important position within the spectrum proposed by this article. She does not reject English in the manner associated with Ngũgĩ, nor does she simply appropriate English as a replacement for an indigenous language. Instead, she destabilizes the boundary between languages themselves. Her practice demonstrates that translingual resistance may operate not only through the selection of one language over another but through the deliberate maintenance of linguistic plurality within the same textual space.

5.2 Exophony and Translingual Selfhood: Tawada and Lahiri

Yoko Tawada and Jhumpa Lahiri demonstrate a different form of translingual practice in which movement into another language becomes a means of questioning the assumption that literary identity must originate in a stable mother tongue. Their cases are particularly useful because neither writer's translingualism can be adequately described as a simple opposition between an indigenous language and a colonial language.

Tawada's writing between Japanese and German exemplifies what Kellman describes as ambilingual authorship, but her work also complicates Kellman's category by making linguistic displacement itself a literary subject (Kellman, 2000). In *Schwager in Bordeaux*, the movement between linguistic and cultural positions produces what Roussel describes as a form of "nomadic subjectivity" rather than a stable bilingual identity (Roussel, 2020). The significance of Tawada's practice consequently lies not simply in the fact that she writes in two languages, but in her refusal to treat either language as the unquestioned location of authentic selfhood.

Tawada's later authorial reflections reinforce this interpretation. *Exophony: Voyages Outside the Mother Tongue* explicitly theorizes the experience of writing and living outside the mother tongue, transforming what might otherwise appear as linguistic displacement into a source of literary experimentation (Tawada and Hofmann-kuroda, 2025). Read through Yildiz's concept of the postmonolingual condition, Tawada's work demonstrates how multilingual literary production can expose the instability of the very category of the "mother tongue" (Yildiz, 2012). Her translingualism does not simply replace one linguistic identity with another; it makes linguistic identity itself mobile.

Lahiri's movement into Italian produces a related but distinct configuration. Unlike Tawada's sustained production across Japanese and German, Lahiri's turn toward Italian involved an intense reorientation toward a language she had deliberately chosen to learn and

inhabit. In *In altre parole*, the difficulties of writing in Italian become inseparable from the transformation of the narrating self. Adami interprets this process through the notion of a “split-self,” while Ravizza emphasizes the encounter with linguistic otherness produced by writing in a language that initially remained imperfectly mastered (Adami, 2017; Ravizza, 2019).

Lahiri’s case is particularly important for the spectrum model because it demonstrates that translingual practice cannot be defined exclusively through multilingual textual surfaces. A text may be translingual even when its immediate linguistic form appears relatively monolingual if the writer’s relationship to the language of composition is structured by translation, acquisition, distance, and self-conscious linguistic displacement. Lahiri’s *Translating Myself and Others* makes this dimension explicit by treating translation between English and Italian as a form of personal and literary metamorphosis (Lahiri, 2022).

Taken together, Tawada and Lahiri demonstrate that translingual writing can function through exophonic displacement as much as through visible code-switching. Their practices therefore occupy a different position from Anzaldúa’s linguistic hybridity while supporting the same larger argument: the political significance of language choice lies in the way writers unsettle the assumption that literary identity naturally belongs to one stable linguistic system.

5.3 Codemeshing, Hybridity, and Linguistic Appropriation: Guo and Adichie

Xiaolu Guo and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie provide cases in which translingual practice operates through the transformation of a dominant literary language from within. Their texts are particularly useful for bringing Canagarajah’s concept of codemeshing into dialogue with the earlier postcolonial theories of appropriation and abrogation.

In *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, Guo makes linguistic acquisition visible within the form of the novel itself. The protagonist’s developing English is marked by grammatical irregularity, lexical uncertainty, and the transfer of structures from Chinese. These features are not simply representations of a character learning English; they make the process of linguistic negotiation part of the novel’s narrative and stylistic structure. Guo’s text therefore challenges the assumption that literary English must appear fully mastered before it can function as legitimate literary language. The “broken” language of the protagonist becomes a formal resource through which cultural and linguistic identity are produced.

This practice can be read through Canagarajah’s concept of codemeshing, which shifts attention away from the idea that multilingual speakers move mechanically between separate linguistic codes and toward the idea that speakers draw upon an integrated linguistic repertoire (Canagarajah, 2013). Guo’s novel consequently occupies an intermediate position within the spectrum: English remains the principal language of literary composition, but its authority and apparent stability are continuously disrupted by the presence of another linguistic system.

Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* produces a different form of linguistic hybridity. The interaction among English, Igbo, and Nigerian Pidgin does not primarily represent linguistic deficiency or a transitional stage toward standardized English. Instead, the coexistence of these varieties establishes a multilingual social environment in which linguistic choice communicates distinctions of intimacy, authority, class, religion, and cultural belonging (Fazakas, 2024). The political significance of Adichie’s practice therefore lies partly in its normalization of multilingualism. Rather than announcing linguistic difference as an

exceptional act of resistance, the novel incorporates it into ordinary social interaction.

The contrast between Guo and Adichie is consequently important. Guo foregrounds linguistic acquisition and the instability of the learner's English, whereas Adichie presents multilingual practice as embedded within an established social and cultural world. Yet both writers challenge the assumption that English functions as a transparent and autonomous literary medium. Their texts instead demonstrate what appropriation looks like when linguistic difference becomes structurally embedded in the dominant language.

The translation history of *Purple Hibiscus* further reveals the political stakes of this multilingual form. Arhire's analysis of the Romanian translation demonstrates that distinctions among Nigerian English, Nigerian Pidgin, and Igbo can be reduced or flattened when transferred into another linguistic system (Arhire, 2023). The example shows that translingual meaning does not reside solely in the source text's vocabulary. It also depends upon the social distinctions carried by different varieties of language. Translation can therefore preserve narrative information while simultaneously weakening the sociolinguistic architecture through which that information acquires political significance.

5.4 Translingualism Beyond the Postcolonial Binary: Molnár and Kuo

The cases of Katalin Molnár and the colonial Taiwanese readers studied by Mei Yi Kuo extend the analysis beyond the principal Anglophone postcolonial contexts. Their inclusion is methodologically significant because they test whether concepts such as hybridity, linguistic appropriation, and translingual practice remain analytically useful when the historical conditions of linguistic contact change.

Molnár's Hungarian-French writing demonstrates that translingual disruption is not necessarily dependent upon a direct colonial relationship between the languages involved. Forsdick's analysis emphasizes the phonocentric and orally inflected qualities of Molnár's French, showing how a writer can disturb the assumptions of a national literary language from within (Forsdick, 2024). This case complicates an exclusively postcolonial understanding of translingualism. Linguistic normativity can be challenged not only through the appropriation of a colonial language but also through the encounter between languages within a European literary space.

Kuo's study introduces a different complication because her material concerns colonial Taiwanese language readers produced in the early twentieth century. Here, translinguality is not primarily the self-conscious literary strategy of an adult author but part of a pedagogical apparatus involved in constructing the colonial subject. The Kokugo readers used between 1900 and 1913 demonstrate that language politics can operate through institutions that attempt to produce particular linguistic and cultural identities rather than merely through literary texts that resist those institutions (Kuo, 2026).

Together, Molnár and Kuo demonstrate that translingual analysis must remain sensitive to the historical conditions under which languages come into contact. The same formal phenomenon-linguistic mixture, translation, hybrid expression, or movement between languages-cannot be assigned an identical political meaning in every context. Its significance depends upon the power relations among the languages involved, the institutions that regulate their use, and the readership to which the text or linguistic artifact is directed.

These cases therefore strengthen rather than weaken the spectrum model. They show that the spectrum should not be understood as a universal hierarchy running from “less translingual” to “more translingual.” Instead, it represents a range of relationships to linguistic authority. A writer may reject a dominant language, appropriate it, combine it with other linguistic resources, adopt a new language, or work within an institutional system that attempts to regulate multilingual identity. What matters analytically is how the particular practice negotiates the linguistic hierarchy in which it occurs.

6. The Market, The Reader, and The Politics of Legibility

6.1 Productive Opacity and Readerly Access

A recurring tension across all of these frameworks concerns the reader the translingual text imagines. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin note that appropriated, glossed, or partially translated language produces what might be called productive opacity: moments where meaning is only partially available to the outsider reader, forcing an acknowledgment of the limits of that reader’s access (Ashcroft et al., 1989). Publishing markets centered in London, Paris, and New York, however, exert continuous pressure toward greater transparency-glossaries, italicization, footnoted translation-that can domesticate a text’s linguistic difference for metropolitan consumption even as the text’s content addresses colonial and postcolonial experience. Mona Arhire’s comparative study of *Purple Hibiscus* in Romanian translation offers direct evidence of this pressure, documenting how the novel’s carefully differentiated Nigerian English, Nigerian Pidgin, and Igbo registers are frequently collapsed into a single undifferentiated target-language voice, eroding the very sociolinguistic distinctions the source text works to preserve (Arhire, 2023).

6.2 Publishing Markets and Metropolitan Legibility

This tension helps explain why the Ngũgĩ–Achebe debate has never been definitively resolved and continues to resurface in contemporary discussions of world literature, translation studies, and the global publishing industry. Writing in an indigenous language, as Ngũgĩ insists, secures a direct relationship with a local readership and refuses the demand for translatability into metropolitan taste, but it also risks limiting circulation in the absence of robust local publishing infrastructure (Ngũgĩ, 1986). Appropriating the colonial language, as Achebe argues, secures wide circulation and international visibility but risks producing a text pre-adapted to metropolitan legibility (Achebe, 1975). Rebecca Walkowitz’s account of the “born-translated” novel suggests that this tension has, for a certain class of contemporary writers, become productive rather than paralyzing: novels are increasingly designed from the outset to travel across languages, treating translatability itself as a formal resource rather than an external constraint imposed by the market (Walkowitz, 2015). Paul Bandia’s recent argument that literary multilingualism should be read as itself a form of translation extends this logic further, collapsing the presumed opposition between an “original” multilingual text and its later translated versions (Bandia, 2023).

7. Discussion: Toward A Spectrum Model of Translingual Practice

7.1 Beyond the Indigenous/Colonial Language Binary

Taken together, this body of scholarship suggests that the politics of language choice in postcolonial writing is best modeled not as a binary between authentic indigenous-language writing and compromised colonial-language writing, but as a spectrum of translingual practices, each carrying distinct political affordances and constraints. At one end sits the writer who, like Ngũgĩ, exits the colonial language altogether in favor of an indigenous one, prioritizing direct address to a local readership and the survival of that language as a literary

medium (Ngũgĩ, 1986). At the other end sits the writer who composes exclusively in the colonial or adopted language while, in Kellman's terms, remaining a monolingual translingual—someone whose relationship to the language of composition is itself marked by distance, translation, and non-nativeness even without formal code-switching, as in Lahiri's turn to Italian (Kellman, 2000; Lahiri, 2022). Between these poles lies the terrain mapped by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin's abrogation and appropriation, Canagarajah's codemeshing, and Anzaldúa's sustained code-switching: writers who retain the dominant language but rework it so thoroughly, and mix it so persistently with other tongues, that the boundary between languages becomes an active site of meaning rather than a settled fact of composition (Ashcroft et al., 1989; Canagarajah, 2013; Anzaldúa, 1987).

7.2 The Spectrum as a Comparative Model

This spectrum model has two advantages over a binary framework. First, it accounts for writers who move across positions over the course of a career, as Ngũgĩ himself did, or who occupy different positions in different genres or texts, as the Tawada and Lahiri case-study literatures both demonstrate (Roussel, 2020; De Donno, 2021; Adami, 2017). Second, it allows the political weight of a translingual choice to be assessed contextually—according to the specific language ecology, publishing infrastructure, and readership a given text addresses—rather than assumed in advance from the identity of the language itself, a point Fazakas's and Arhire's contrasting readings of *Purple Hibiscus*'s composition and translation illustrate concretely (Fazakas, 2024; Arhire, 2023). Yildiz's postmonolingual condition underwrites this contextual approach: because the monolingual paradigm was never fully successful in erasing multilingual practice, even in colonial and postcolonial societies, no single position on the spectrum can claim to have escaped that paradigm entirely; each represents a different mode of living within and against it (Yildiz, 2012). Mei Yi Kuo's extension of translingual analysis into early colonial Taiwanese pedagogical texts (Kuo, 2026) and Charles Forsdick's application of translingual poetics to a European rather than colonial context (Forsdick, 2024) both suggest that this spectrum model is not confined to the anglophone and francophone postcolonial contexts in which it originated, but describes a more general condition of literary production under conditions of linguistic contact and asymmetry.

7.3 Implications for Postcolonial Literary Studies

The spectrum model proposed here contributes to postcolonial literary studies by shifting the question of language choice from a binary of linguistic allegiance to an analysis of *degrees and forms of linguistic negotiation*. Existing frameworks provide essential but distinct accounts of this negotiation: Ngũgĩ foregrounds the political importance of indigenous-language production; Achebe demonstrates the possibility of appropriating the colonial language; Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin conceptualize this process through abrogation and appropriation; Yildiz exposes the historical assumptions underlying the category of the mother tongue; Kellman identifies translingual authorship as a literary category; and Canagarajah emphasizes multilingual practice through codemeshing. The spectrum model brings these approaches into a single comparative framework by asking not simply *which language a writer chooses*, but *what relationship the writer establishes with linguistic authority through that choice*.

This shift has two implications. First, it prevents translingual writing from being evaluated according to a predetermined hierarchy in which indigenous-language writing is automatically resistant and colonial-language writing automatically compromised. The cases examined here demonstrate that political significance emerges from the interaction among language, history, readership, textual form, and institutional power. Second, the spectrum makes it possible to account for movement and change within individual literary careers. A writer may move from one position to another, combine several positions within a single text, or occupy different positions across genres and historical moments. Translingualism is

therefore better understood as a *dynamic field of linguistic practices* than as a stable authorial identity.

The contribution of this model is consequently synthetic rather than taxonomic. It does not seek to replace the theoretical frameworks developed by Ngũgĩ, Achebe, Yildiz, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, Kellman, Canagarajah, or Anzaldúa. Rather, it places their insights into a comparative structure capable of explaining why apparently contradictory forms of language practice can all constitute negotiations with linguistic power. In this sense, the spectrum model offers a way of reading postcolonial language politics that preserves the historical force of the indigenous-versus-colonial language debate while accounting for the increasingly complex forms of exophony, code-switching, codemeshing, self-translation, and literary multilingualism that characterize contemporary translingual writing.

8. Conclusion

The politics of language choice in postcolonial literature resists resolution because it is not, finally, a purely literary question. It is entangled with the legacies of colonial education, the infrastructure of global publishing, the survival of indigenous languages under conditions of ongoing linguistic endangerment, and the competing loyalties a writer owes to a local community and to a wider readership. Translingual writing, understood through Yildiz's postmonolingual condition, Ngũgĩ and Achebe's foundational disagreement and its many afterlives, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin's model of abrogation and appropriation, Kellman's and Canagarajah's typologies of translingual practice, and Anzaldúa's practice of code-switching as resistance, does not offer a single answer to that entanglement. What it offers instead is a set of formal strategies through which postcolonial authors make that entanglement visible on the page, refusing the fiction of a neutral, transparent literary language and insisting instead that every choice of words carries a history of contact, coercion, and survival. As the growing case-study literature on Tawada, Lahiri, Guo, Adichie, and Molnár suggests, this entanglement is neither resolved nor exhausted by the field's founding debate; each new translingual career restages the underlying tension in terms specific to its own linguistic and historical situation. Future research might extend the spectrum model proposed here empirically, tracing how individual translingual careers move across these positions in response to changing publishing markets, digital circulation, and the shifting institutional status of indigenous-language literatures in the twenty-first century.

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