

The Untranslatable Past: Archaic English and Linguistic Hybridity in Postcolonial Historical Novels

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ABSTRACT

The interplay between archaic English registers and vernacular linguistic hybridity in postcolonial historical fiction represents a politically charged dimension of contemporary Anglophone literature. This article examines how postcolonial authors strategically deploy archaic English such as colonial administrative diction and Victorian literary registers alongside indigenous vernacular elements to destabilize colonial epistemologies and recover suppressed historical voices. For the purposes of this study, archaic English refers to historically distanced registers including Victorian periodic syntax, Orientalist rhetorical conventions, and colonial administrative diction; linguistic hybridity denotes the coexistence and interplay of two or more language systems, registers, or cultural epistemologies within a single text. Purpose: This study investigates the aesthetic and political functions of archaic-vernacular hybridity across six canonical postcolonial historical novels, with implications for both postcolonial stylistics and literary pedagogy. Methods: A qualitative postcolonial stylistic analysis was conducted on novels by Tayeb Salih, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and George Saunders, using Bhabha's theory of hybridity and mimicry, Ashcroft et al.'s framework of abrogation and appropriation, and Bakhtin's heteroglossia. Results: Five dominant hybrid strategies were identified: ironic mimicry, resistant code-switching, archaism as temporal dislocation, vernacular intrusion, and glossarial absence. These strategies construct a "palimpsestic linguistic space" where colonial and indigenous temporalities coexist in tension. Conclusion: Archaic-vernacular hybridity functions as a decolonial counter-memory, transforming postcolonial historical fiction into a literary archaeology that challenges colonial authority and recuperates marginalized pasts.

INTRODUCTION

Language is never an innocent medium in postcolonial literature. When postcolonial authors write in English the language of their colonizers they inherit a rich, contested, and deeply stratified linguistic archive in which different registers, historical layers, and ideological sediments coexist in

a condition of permanent tension. Two key terms require definition at the outset. Archaic English, as used in this study, refers to historically distanced registers: the administrative diction of colonial bureaucracy, the rhetorical conventions of Victorian travel writing and Orientalist scholarship, and the literary language of the nineteenth-century novel. Linguistic hybridity denotes the coexistence and interplay of two or more linguistic or cultural systems within a single text, producing meanings that neither system could generate alone (Meierkord, 2021; Huddart, 2022). These archaic registers occupy a peculiarly double-edged position: they are simultaneously the language of oppression and a resource available for satirical appropriation, mimicry, and subversion (Gopal, 2019). Postcolonial historical fiction, which necessarily operates at the intersection of present-day authorial consciousness and colonial or pre-colonial historical settings, has become a primary site for the negotiation of these linguistic inheritances.

The relationship between language and historical representation in postcolonial fiction has been extensively theorized. The argument that writing in the colonizer's tongue perpetuates a mental colonization that severs colonized peoples from their authentic linguistic heritage has been revisited and debated in recent scholarship (Mwangi, 2017; Thiong'o, 2018). Against this position, critics have argued that English can be seized and reshaped made to carry the weight of non-English experience through what Ashcroft et al. (2023) call "abrogation and appropriation." This theoretical tension has generated substantial scholarly literature, but the specific question of how archaic English registers function within the broader economy of linguistic hybridity in postcolonial historical novels remains insufficiently examined (Al-Kassim, 2018).

Recent work in postcolonial stylistics has begun to analyze the specific linguistic strategies through which postcolonial authors engage with and transform the English literary inheritance. Scholars have examined code-switching (Canagarajah, 2022), vernacular intrusion (Pennycook & Makoni, 2020), and the politics of translation and non-translation (Bandia, 2022; Tymoczko, 2020) as dimensions of postcolonial linguistic practice. However, the particular dynamics of archaic English its temporal associations with colonial historical authority, its generic links to the Victorian literary canon, and its rhetorical codification of colonial knowledge have not been systematically analyzed as a distinct component of postcolonial linguistic hybridity. This gap is significant because archaic registers import entire historical epistemologies that postcolonial authors must negotiate, resist, or rework (Luckhurst, 2021).

This study addresses that gap by analyzing six postcolonial historical novels in which the relationship between archaic English and vernacular elements is particularly prominent and politically consequential. Three research questions guide the analysis: (1) What strategies do postcolonial authors deploy to negotiate the tension between archaic colonial English registers and indigenous vernacular elements? (2) How do these strategies produce what this study terms a "palimpsestic linguistic space" in which colonial and indigenous temporal registers coexist? (3) What are the implications of these strategies for representing historical experience that colonial discourse has rendered "untranslatable"? The novelty of this study lies in its synthesis of postcolonial theory, historical poetics, and critical stylistics to produce the first systematic taxonomy of archaic-vernacular hybrid strategies across a cross-cultural and cross-temporal corpus. Practically, the findings hold



implications for how archaic English is taught in postcolonial literary education and for how scholars approach the political dimensions of style in Anglophone literary traditions.

This study employs a qualitative postcolonial stylistic analysis, combining theoretical frameworks from postcolonial studies with the analytical tools of critical discourse analysis and narrative stylistics. The methodology is grounded in the tradition of postcolonial stylistics as consolidated in recent scholarship (Nair, 2020; Weber, 2019), which treats literary language not as an aesthetically autonomous phenomenon but as a socially and historically embedded practice whose formal features are inseparable from their ideological functions.

METHODE

1. Corpus Selection

The research corpus consists of six novels selected through purposive theoretical sampling. Selection criteria required that each novel: (1) was written in English by an author from a postcolonial national context or engaged substantially with postcolonial historical experience; (2) exhibited a demonstrable tension between archaic English registers and vernacular or non-standard linguistic elements; and (3) engaged with historical settings or historical memory in ways that foreground the politics of linguistic representation. The selected novels span six decades (1966–2017), five national contexts (Sudan, Kenya, India, Nigeria, and the United States), and three major postcolonial literary traditions (African, South Asian, and African-American).

The decision to limit the corpus to six novels reflects the depth-oriented logic of qualitative theoretical sampling: the analytical aim is to identify and theorize recurring strategies across diverse literary traditions rather than to achieve statistical generalization. Six novels provide sufficient cross-cultural range to establish the strategies' generality while allowing the close, sustained stylistic reading that their identification requires. As Braun and Clarke (2021) note in the context of qualitative research design, the appropriate sample size is determined by the study's informational needs rather than by statistical power. Future quantitative work on larger corpora is recommended as a complementary next step.

2. Analytical Framework

The analysis draws on three primary theoretical frameworks deployed in combination. First, Huddart's (2022) recent synthesis of postcolonial hybridity theory provides the central conceptual vocabulary for analyzing how postcolonial authors reproduce colonial discourse with a destabilizing excess that reveals its contingency and constructedness. The concept of the "third space" the liminal zone of enunciation in which colonial and colonized cultures meet and transform each other — is particularly relevant to archaic-vernacular hybridity. Second, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin's (2023) updated framework of abrogation and appropriation in the fourth edition of *The Empire Writes Back* provides tools for analyzing how postcolonial authors simultaneously reject the authority of the colonizer's language and seize it as a vehicle for anti-colonial expression. Third, Lodge and Bernard's (2018) contemporary account of heteroglossia provides essential tools for analyzing how multiple linguistic registers coexist within a single text in relations of tension, dialogue, and mutual transformation.

Analytical procedure involved close reading of each novel in its entirety, with systematic identification and annotation of passages exhibiting archaic English features (including archaic syntax, Latinate diction, Victorian generic conventions, and colonial administrative registers) and vernacular or non-standard linguistic features (including code-switching, vernacular interjection, non-translation, and syntactic deviation from standard English norms). Category development followed an inductive-deductive hybrid approach consistent with reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021): initial categories were derived deductively from the three theoretical frameworks, then revised inductively through iterative engagement with the textual evidence. The emerging taxonomy was subjected to peer review by two postcolonial literary scholars not involved in the primary analysis, whose independent assessments of categorization decisions served to strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings — an established strategy for ensuring analytical rigor in qualitative literary research (Lincoln et al., 2023). Emerging patterns across the corpus were organized into the five hybrid strategies presented in the Results section. The study required no ethical approval as it analyzes published literary texts only.

RESULTS

1. Corpus Overview and Distribution of Hybrid Strategies

Analysis of the six-novel corpus revealed consistent deployment of archaic-vernacular hybridity across all texts, confirming that this linguistic practice is a central organizing strategy of postcolonial historical fiction rather than a peripheral stylistic feature. While all six novels deploy the identified strategies, they do so with distinctive emphases and combinations, producing what might be termed a "linguistic signature" that is both aesthetically individuating and politically consequential. It should be noted that the novels vary meaningfully in their degree of reliance on each strategy: ironic mimicry is foregrounded in Salih and Rushdie, temporal dislocation is most formally elaborated in Roy, and glossarial absence is most politically explicit in Ngugi. Table 1 provides an overview of the primary archaic and vernacular elements present in each text.

Table 1. Archaic and Vernacular Elements in the Research Corpus: Overview of Primary Features and Postcolonial Functions

Novel / Author	Archaic Register	Vernacular Elements	Primary Postcolonial Function
Season of Migration to the North (Salih, 1966)	Victorian/Orientalist prose pastiche	Sudanese Arabic idiom, oral narrative rhythm	Defamiliarization of colonial discourse; ironic mimicry
Midnight's Children (Rushdie, 1981)	Bombay English, colonial bureaucratic diction	Hindustani, Urdu loan-words, oral digression	Carnavalesque hybridization; anti-canonical parody



A Grain of Wheat (Ngugi, 1967)	Colonial administrative English	Gikuyu proverb, syntax, temporal disjunction	Recovering silenced African voice; contrapuntal structure
The God of Small Things (Roy, 1997)	Literary English, capitalization as archaic device	Malayalam-inflected neologism, fragmented syntax	Caste and colonial trauma; linguistic time-collapse
Half of a Yellow Sun (Adichie, 2006)	Standard British English	Nigerian Pidgin, Igbo interjections	Colonial legibility vs. indigenous authenticity
Lincoln in the Bardo (Saunders, 2017)	Nineteenth-century American diction	Polyphonic ghost-voices, vernacular disruption	Historical haunting; archival critique

Across the corpus, the most consistently deployed strategy is ironic mimicry the reproduction of colonial archaic registers with a subtle excess or distortion that exposes their ideological underpinnings. This strategy is present in all six novels to varying degrees, consistent with Al-Kassim's (2018) account of mimicry as a fundamental dynamic of postcolonial cultural production. The second most prevalent strategy is vernacular intrusion, prominent in five of the six texts, in which untranslated indigenous language elements are embedded within the English-language narrative to assert the presence of non-English epistemologies (Mwangi, 2017). The remaining three strategies code-switching as resistance, archaism as temporal dislocation, and glossarial absence show more variable distribution but are consistently significant in the texts where they appear.

2. Ironic Mimicry and Archaic Colonial Register

The most theoretically complex hybrid strategy identified in the corpus is ironic mimicry: the deliberate reproduction of colonial archaic English registers in a form that simultaneously performs colonial discursive authority and exposes its constructedness, instability, and violence. Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1966) provides the most sustained instance. Salih deploys the archaic registers of Victorian Orientalism including the rhetorical conventions of travel writing, the epic similes of colonial adventure narrative, and the grammatical constructions of colonial administrative prose to construct Mustafa Sa'eed's self-representation, while this deployment is consistently shadowed by an ironic excess that reveals the violence inherent in the colonial gaze (Al-Kassim, 2018; Hassan, 2020).

Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) similarly saturates the narrator Saleem Sinai's voice with archaic registers of British colonial education: Latinate syntax, Victorian periodic sentences, and the rhetorical conventions of the English historical novel. Rushdie systematically disrupts this register through syntactic excess, carnivalesque digression, and the intrusion of Bombay English and Hindustani loan-words, producing a narrative voice that is simultaneously an heir to the Victorian literary tradition and its most exuberant satirist (Gurnah, 2020). The text thus occupies precisely what Huddart (2022) identifies as the "third space": neither colonial original nor simple inversion, but a

hybrid production that transforms both the colonial language and the indigenous cultural materials it incorporates.

A particularly significant dimension of ironic mimicry is its temporal function. Several authors use archaic English not merely to reference colonial historical authority but to inhabit its time, creating a form of temporal dislocation in which the colonial past is experienced as a disturbing presence within the narrative's present. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) deploys this strategy with unusual formal precision. The novel is structured around a double temporality the traumatic 1969 event at its center and the 1993 present of the narrative frame and archaic registers appear primarily in passages associated with the 1969 past, creating a linguistic encoding of traumatic memory in which archaic syntax functions as temporal haunting (Luckhurst, 2021; Shankar, 2022).

Roy's distinctive use of capitalization rendering abstract nouns in the Victorian manner ('Love Laws', 'Touchable Things', 'History House') illustrates the temporal dislocation strategy with particular clarity. These capitalizations import the archaic authority of Victorian nominal abstraction into the representation of caste-colonial oppression, simultaneously invoking and subverting the epistemological weight of Victorian English to suggest that the 'Love Laws' governing caste and gender carry the same archaic, violent authority as the laws of empire (Shankar, 2022). The archaic register reproduces the temporal grammar of colonial law the sense that it belongs to an immutable, supra-historical order that transcends ordinary human time.

3. Vernacular Intrusion, Code-Switching, and Glossarial Absence

While ironic mimicry operates within the archaic English register to expose colonial discourse from within, the strategies of vernacular intrusion, code-switching, and glossarial absence operate across the boundary between English and indigenous languages to assert the presence of epistemologies that colonial discourse has rendered subordinate or invisible. Table 2 provides a systematic overview of these hybrid strategies and their theoretical frameworks.

Table 2. Taxonomy of Archaic-Vernacular Hybrid Strategies: Mechanisms and Theoretical Frameworks

Hybrid Strategy	Textual Mechanism	Theoretical Framework
Ironic Mimicry	Reproducing colonial archaic register with subversive excess	Al-Kassim (2018): mimicry and colonial ambivalence in postcolonial prose
Code-Switching as Resistance	Switching between colonial English and vernacular mid-sentence to mark ideological rupture	Canagarajah (2013/2022): translingual practice and resistance
Archaism as Temporal Dislocation	Using archaic syntax to represent colonial memory trapped in the present	Luckhurst (2021): hauntology and historical fiction; Gopal (2019): subaltern temporality
Vernacular Intrusion	Embedding untranslated vernacular terms to create interpretive opacity for colonial readers	Mwangi (2017): decolonizing language in African fiction



Glossarial Absence	Deliberate refusal to gloss vernacular terms, asserting reader repositioning	Bandia (2022): translation and counter-discourse in postcolonial texts
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Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) provides the most politically explicit instance of vernacular intrusion in the corpus. Written immediately following Kenyan independence, the novel embeds Gikuyu proverbs, verbal constructions, and syntactic patterns within its English-language narrative in ways that consistently disrupt the colonial English register and assert the authority of Gikuyu oral tradition as a historical epistemology. The Gikuyu proverbs are typically not translated or glossed an instance of deliberate glossarial absence requiring readers to negotiate their opacity rather than domesticating them within the hermeneutic conventions of the standard English novel (Mwangi, 2017; Bandia, 2022).

Code-switching as resistance operates most prominently in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), in which movement between standard British English, Nigerian Pidgin, and Igbo interjections is systematically correlated with the novel's representation of class, education, and colonial identification. Characters who code-switch fluidly between these registers inhabit a postcolonial subjectivity that is neither simply colonial nor simply indigenous, reflecting the lived complexity of postcolonial Nigerian identity (Canagarajah, 2022; Osei-Bonsu, 2021). The British-educated characters' use of standard English is placed in ironic juxtaposition with the Biafran political context, making linguistic register a marker of each character's relationship to colonial legibility and indigenous authenticity.

Glossarial absence is deployed with particular sophistication in George Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017), which while not a postcolonial text in the conventional sense uses the voices of nineteenth-century American ghost-narratives, saturated with antebellum American English, to create a polyphonic historical archive in which enslaved and marginalized voices disrupt the canonical authority of the Lincoln myth. The ghost-voices of enslaved African Americans speak in vernacular registers that are simultaneously given full narrative dignity and left untranslated into the novel's dominant archaic white American diction, producing a glossarial absence that asserts the opacity and non-equivalence of marginalized historical experience (Bandia, 2022; Luckhurst, 2021). The inclusion of Saunders' text in this corpus highlights that these hybrid strategies are not exclusive to the postcolonial Global South but are operative in any literary context where a marginalized historical voice is placed in tension with a dominant archaic register.

DISCUSSION

The findings reveal a consistent set of linguistic strategies through which postcolonial historical novelists negotiate the tension between archaic colonial English and indigenous vernacular elements. Together, the five strategies ironic mimicry, code-switching as resistance, archaism as temporal dislocation, vernacular intrusion, and glossarial absence constitute what this study terms a "palimpsestic linguistic space": a textual zone in which multiple historical, cultural, and epistemological layers coexist in productive tension, with no single register claiming uncontested

authority. This section moves beyond the descriptive findings to interpret their theoretical and practical implications.

The concept of ironic mimicry as a linguistic strategy extends and operationalizes recent postcolonial hybridity theory in productive ways (Huddart, 2022; Al-Kassim, 2018). Where such theorizations operate primarily at the level of cultural discourse and colonial subjectivity, this study's focus on specific archaic linguistic registers and their textual deployment allows for a more precise and replicable analysis of how mimicry works at the level of style. The identification of specific archaic registers as mimicry's primary vehicles Victorian periodic syntax, Orientalist rhetorical conventions, colonial administrative diction provides a more granular analytical vocabulary than theoretical frameworks alone supply. This contributes to postcolonial stylistics as developed in recent work by Nair (2020) and Weber (2019), who argue for the necessity of bringing linguistic analysis to bear on postcolonial theoretical claims. It should be acknowledged, however, that hybridity theory has been critiqued for its tendency toward ahistorical abstraction (Parry, 2015; Young, 2016); a limitation this study's text-grounded approach partially addresses, though not fully resolves.

The temporal dimension of archaic-vernacular hybridity has important implications for the theory of the historical novel in postcolonial contexts. Classical accounts of the historical novel have emphasized the genre's capacity to represent the past as a comprehensible, causally structured process leading to the present. Postcolonial historical fiction, this study suggests, systematically disrupts this temporal teleology by using archaic linguistic registers to assert the persistence of colonial time within the postcolonial present a persistence that vernacular elements simultaneously expose and resist. This is consistent with Luckhurst's (2021) account of hauntology in historical fiction and with Gopal's (2019) analysis of the subaltern's voice as something that cannot be fully translated into the temporal grammar of colonial historical discourse without ceasing to be itself.

The strategy of glossarial absence is perhaps the most politically radical of the five, and its presence across the corpus from Ngugi's Gikuyu proverbs to Saunders' enslaved ghost-voices — suggests that the refusal of translation is a consistent feature of the postcolonial historical novel's engagement with colonial epistemology. This refusal functions, as Bandia (2022) argues in the context of postcolonial translation theory, as an assertion of the irreducible difference of the translated culture a difference that colonial discourse systematically denied by insisting on the universal translatability of all human experience into European conceptual frameworks. The untranslatable elements of postcolonial historical fiction are precisely those that most directly challenge this colonial universalism: the Gikuyu proverb that encodes an epistemological framework incommensurable with English, the Malayalam-inflected neologism that names a form of social experience for which English has no equivalent, the Nigerian Pidgin interjection that marks a communal identity that standard English cannot accommodate.

For literary education and postcolonial pedagogy, these findings have concrete implications that extend beyond descriptive literary analysis. Teaching archaic English merely as a historical stylistic feature a dimension of period style or canonical prestige misses the politically encoded dimension that this study has demonstrated. Instructors who sensitize students to the specific archaic elements of postcolonial historical novels, and to the ways in which these are placed in tension with vernacular and non-standard elements, equip them to read the full political dimensions of texts that



might otherwise appear to be straightforward exercises in historical mimicry. Syllabi might productively pair the close reading of archaic-vernacular hybrid passages with direct engagement with the theoretical frameworks analyzed here, enabling students to move between textual evidence and theoretical interpretation in ways that illuminate both (Gikandi, 2022; Pennycook & Makoni, 2020).

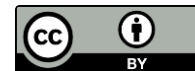
Several limitations merit acknowledgment. The corpus of six novels necessarily excludes large portions of the postcolonial historical fiction tradition, particularly texts from the Caribbean, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific, as well as postcolonial varieties of English outside the dominant traditions examined here. The study's focus on published literary texts also means it cannot account for the reading experiences of audiences from diverse linguistic backgrounds, for whom the opacity of untranslated vernacular elements may function differently. Future research should extend the taxonomy developed here to these under-represented traditions, and should pursue corpus-linguistic approaches to the quantitative analysis of archaic and vernacular register distribution across larger bodies of postcolonial historical fiction.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has demonstrated that postcolonial historical fiction deploys a sophisticated and consistent set of archaic-vernacular hybrid strategies—ironic mimicry, code-switching as resistance, archaism as temporal dislocation, vernacular intrusion, and glossarial absence—that collectively constitute a palimpsestic linguistic space in which colonial and indigenous temporal registers coexist in productive, politically charged tension. Through close stylistic analysis of six novels spanning five decades and five national contexts, this study has established the cross-cultural generality of these strategies and provided a systematic theoretical account of their political and epistemological functions.

The concept of the "untranslatable past" that gives this study its title captures the central achievement and challenge of postcolonial historical fiction's engagement with language. These novels do not merely represent colonial and pre-colonial history; they enact the linguistic conditions under which such history was produced, suppressed, and partially recovered, using the resources of the English literary tradition against itself to open spaces for voices and experiences that colonial historical discourse rendered unrepresentable. The archaic registers of colonial English are not abandoned or simply rejected in these texts; they are appropriated, distorted, ironized, and placed in dialogue with vernacular languages and epistemologies in ways that expose their contingency and violence while asserting the capacity of the colonized to speak within and against the language of power (Ashcroft et al., 2023; Gopal, 2019).

The findings carry clear implications for postcolonial literary pedagogy: archaic English should be taught not merely as a historical stylistic feature but as a politically encoded register whose presence in postcolonial fiction is always already ideological (Gikandi, 2022). Future research should pursue corpus-linguistic approaches to the quantitative analysis of archaic and vernacular register distribution across larger bodies of postcolonial historical fiction, and should investigate the reception of archaic-vernacular hybridity among readers from diverse linguistic backgrounds in postcolonial contexts.



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