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## « Nigerian Literature in France: Translators' Prefaces as Insights into Postcolonial Literature », version originale en anglais

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# « Nigerian Literature in France: Translators' Prefaces as Insights into Postcolonial Literature », version originale en anglais

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## PLAN

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### Introduction

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### Introduction

- 1 Nigerian literature is often the outcome of two or more straddled languages, namely the indigenous language of the author, English (the official language in Nigeria) and pidgin, a *lingua franca* in the country. This fact is confirmed by author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie who has stated in an interview that “[b]esides, modern African stories can no longer claim anything like “cultural purity.” I come from a generation of Nigerians who constantly negotiate two languages and sometimes three, if you include Pidgin” (2008). This type of writing is widely tagged as postcolonial literature<sup>1</sup> because it was published during and after colonialism in Nigeria. It is usually written in English but, as Adichie indicated, permeated with indigenous languages and its structures which depict the Nigerian way of life.
- 2 Nigerian first-generation writers, such as Chinua Achebe and Gabriel Okara, encouraged this way of writing right from the 1960s when Nigeria became an independent country. Achebe, who rejected writing in indigenous languages<sup>2</sup> in order to have a wide readership, explains:

"I feel that English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experiences. But it will be new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings" (1975, 62). The alteration of English in Nigerian works is achieved in various ways: through semantic shifts resulting to attribution of new usages to English words and expressions, via incorporation of mother tongues or its structure and rhythms into an English narration, and by reduplications. This form of writing is not a "desecration of the language" according to Okara but a Nigerian English "which we can use to express our own ideas, thinking and philosophy in our own way" (1963, 15-16). Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) refer to this form of writing as "privileging of the 'margins'" (40), which emphasises the fact that the languages and culture of a colonised community are prioritised in this type of literature. Universal rules on the use of colonial languages language, such as English and French, are often abrogated and replaced with less common ones which reflect the worldview of a colony.

- 3 This study is aimed at investigating the construction of this type of writing in another culture as it examines the notes available in the French translations of Nigerian literature within six decades (1953-2013). A preface in this context includes forewords, afterwords, introductions, notes or any writing concerning the translation of a book. This is based on Gérard Genette's definition: "I will use the word *preface* to designate every type of introductory (preludial or postludial) text, authorial or allographic, consisting of a discourse produced on the subject of the text that follows or precedes it" (1997, 161). According to Genette, the preface is a paratext (an element attached to a text) and a peritext because it precedes or follows a text. The function of the peritext is to "present and comment on the text" (345). This role makes it possible to investigate how Nigerian works are construed through translators' prefaces. The preface is the only paratextual element examined in this research as it is often a text that is solely written by translators. Other paratextual elements, such as the title, cover image and blurb, are either produced exclusively by the publisher or with the translator and other publishing agents (illustrators and editors).

- 4 Six decades are considered in this article for some reasons. First, because of the paucity of translators' notes. As Lawrence Venuti (1995), Ellen Mcrae (2006) and María Toledano-Buendía (2013) have observed, translators' prefaces are few in translations and this factor has contributed to translator's invisibility. Fifty-five novels were translated into French and published in France<sup>3</sup> from 1953 to 2013 but only thirteen include prefaces. Second, a span of six decades will help in investigating evolution in the contents of the notes. As Genette explains, "the paratext, then, is empirically made up of heterogeneous group of practices and discourses of all kinds and dating of all periods [...]" (1997, 2).
- 5 Research works on the preface in translation studies have primarily focused on its functions and why it should be encouraged. For instance, Dimitriu (2009) discusses the benefits of translators' notes, especially to translation theorists, in some works rendered into Romania. On the other hand, Carmen Toledano Buendia (2013) describes the contextual, pragmatic and functional qualities of the prefaces found in the Spanish translations of English novels. McRae (2012) equally examines the role of prefaces in contemporary literature rendered into English. The present article builds on the ideas advanced in these publications by considering how translators' notes portray the reception of a given work in a target culture. Its focus on postcolonial literature reveals how complex translation issues, evoked by the salient features of the literature, are perceived. Furthermore, the study is a step further from Oloruntoba (2020), which demonstrates that Nigerian works are presented as ethnographies through the paratextual elements (titles, cover images, blurbs and preface) of their French translations, as it looks at another perception of Nigerian works particularly demonstrated in the prefaces of its French translations.
- 6 In the following sections, Nigerian literature as postcolonial writing and the method of analysis adopted in this research will be discussed. Afterwards, the article will go on to analyse the contents of the prefaces available in the considered works and then draw conclusions on the construction of Nigerian literature.

# 1. Nigerian Literature as Postcolonial Writing

- 7 Literary works from Nigeria are not only considered postcolonial literature because they were written during colonisation and after the country had gained its independence in 1960, but also due to the manner in which they are written which is related to other postcolonial works.
- 8 Ashcroft et al., (1989) state that post-colonial writing “defines itself by seizing the language of the centre and re-placing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place” (37). Maria Tymoczko (1998, 2000) sheds further light on the peculiarity of postcolonial literature as she compares it with translation. She posits that they both involve the transfer of “culture and language” (2000, 148) and use common procedures in resolving diversity in culture. In addition, they are both comprised of “perturbations in lexis (including imported lexical items, unusual collocations, non-standard frequency distributions, variant semantic field and neologisms), unusual syntax and defamiliarized language, including unexpected metaphors” (2000, 148) and unfamiliar language structure. Her argument is demonstrated in Ahmadou Kourouma’s remark on his novel *Les Soleils des Indépendances* (1968):
- Ce livre s’adresse à l’Africain. Je l’ai pensé en malinké et écrit en français en prenant une liberté que j’estime naturelle avec la langue classique [...] J’ai donc traduit le malinké en français en cassant le français pour trouver et restituer le rythme africain<sup>4</sup> (Taken from Bad-day, 1970, 7).
- 9 Like the Ivorian author, writers from Nigeria often imagine conversations in their indigenous languages and then translate them word for word into a European language. This procedure often leads to unusual structures in their English texts. Paul Bandia (1993, 56) emphasises this tendency when he posits that the translation of an African work is in two stages: the transfer of African thought in an indigenous language to a European language, which results in a hybrid text, and the translation of the African thought from one European language into another. According to him, those who translate this type of liter-

ature are working “between two languages of divergent sociocultural backgrounds” (56): the source language, which, although is a European language, is an “expression of Africa thought” (61) and the language into which the text is to be translated (target language).

- 10 Today, African literature, especially from Nigeria, is comprised of two or more languages as stated by Adichie in an earlier citation. Unlike other translators, the translator of a postcolonial text is, therefore, faced with a series of languages and cultures and is expected to “operate at the level of the author” (BANDIA, 1993, 62) in order to successfully create a target text that will retain the specificities of the source text. This research on the notes written by some of the translators of this type of writing will reveal how they perceive these peculiarities and cope with them.
- 11 The method of analysis is descriptive for it makes it possible to consider the norms operative in the production of a particular preface. The prefaces in the target novels were first extracted. Afterwards, their contents were analysed and compared in order to find recurrent patterns which revealed how Nigerian literature is construed.

## 2. Analysis of translators' notes

- 12 As mentioned earlier, among the fifty-six novels, only thirteen include notes. The contents of the prefaces are classified into different headings and analysed to determine how they construe Nigerian literature. However, the labels overlap; there are no clear divisions between them.

### 2.1 Cultural specificity of the Novels

- 13 One of the most prevalent factors in translators' prefaces concerns the linguistic aspect of Nigerian works. It is mentioned in seven out of the thirteen target novels with prefaces that the use of language in the works is distinct. For example, Raymond Queneau who translated the first literary work in Nigeria, *The Palm-wine Drinkard*, into French informs the target reader that “L'auteur de ce récit, Amos Tutuola, est actuellement planton à Lagos (Nigeria Britannique). C'est un Yorouba. Il a écrit directement en anglaise [...]. La traduction présentait quelques problèmes particuliers. L'auteur par exemple, utilise les

conjonctions de la langue anglaise (notamment *but* et *or*) d'une façon inhabituelle qui m'a donné bien du souci<sup>5</sup> (QUENEAU 1953, n.p).

- 14 In this note, Queneau notifies the French reader that although Tutuola, who is Yoruba, from Nigeria wrote his novel directly in English, his writing style is unusual. It is not clear what the translator means by the author 'wrote directly in English' but it is implied that his indigenous language, Yoruba, probably influenced his writing. Moreover, another translator, Michèle Laforest, who rendered Tutola's second novel *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954) into French, explains that Yoruba influenced his English and writing: "il a écrit en anglais, un anglais particulier, souvent calqué sur sa langue maternelle" (1988, n.p). Such type of writing was evidently uncommon in the French literary system at the time.
- 15 Amos Tutuola was the first Nigerian to write a literary work in English. He was not well educated when he released his novel in 1952. His appropriation of English was criticized at the time and was attributed to his lack of formal education. For instance, Babasola Johnson wrote to the editor of the novel stating that the work should not have been published:
- Now let us face facts. *Palm Wine Drinkard* should not have been published at all. The language in which it is written is foreign to West Africans and English people, or anybody for that matter. It is bad enough to attempt an African narrative in "good English," it is worse to attempt it in Mr. Tutuola's strange lingo (or, shall I say, the language of the "Deads"?). The language is not West African Patois as some think. Patois is more orderly and intelligible than the language of *The Palm Wine Drinkard*. Patois does not contain such words as "unreturnables," "weird" or such expressions as "the really road." To illustrate, you may compare the construction of the Kroo proverb – "When massa thief 'e take. When boy take 'e thief," with the construction of the simile "as flat as a football field" (1954, 322).
- 16 Nevertheless, this way of writing gradually became one of the yardsticks of African literature as Achebe and other authors who are highly educated chose to write in English in a way that represents the Nigerian worldview. While explaining the language specificity in Gabriel Okara's *The Voice* (1964), the translator (Jean Sévry) who titled his note as 'Avertissement' <sup>6</sup>reveals that "dès les premières lignes de

ce roman, le lecteur sera frappé, voire heurté par cette écriture insolite. Les mots ne sont plus à leur emplacement habituel, la syntaxe est bousculée, les redites abondent<sup>17</sup> (SEVRY, 1985, 5). Similarly, Mona de Pracontal explains the different levels of English used in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* published in 2006:

Un aspect très intéressant du roman de Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie est sa façon de rendre différentes langues. L'anglais de *Half of a Yellow Sun* recouvre en effet plusieurs langues ou langages en plus de l'anglais de la narration : celui de l'élite nigériane et des universitaires, qui s'expriment entre eux dans un anglais britannique soigné, parfois teinté par l'accent de l'idiome maternel, souvent un peu guiné ; celui des bulletins de la BBC et celui des journalistes américaines ; « le broken English » des Nigériens moins instruits, recourant à un anglais de bric et broc pour communiquer entre membres de communautés différentes ou avec des Blancs, en de rares cas le pidgin ; enfin, fréquemment, l'ibo de locuteurs ibos dialoguant entre eux, « traduit » en anglais pour le lecteur<sup>18</sup> (2008, 499).

- 17 In this note, the translator describes language peculiarity as *très intéressant* which means 'very interesting'. The perception of this type of writing appears to have changed. It is no longer viewed as an aspect that the target reader should consider abnormal.
- 18 The notes described above prove that the acculturation of English cannot be attributed to lack of sufficient education but as defiance of the imperial norms. Besides, Tutuola reveals in 1997 that "So far as I don't want our culture to fade away. I don't mind about English grammar – I should feel free to write my story. I have not given my manuscript to anyone who knows grammar" (1997:1299).
- 19 By pointing out the language specificities of these novels, the translators of Nigerian literature affirm and emphasize postcolonial writers' decision to use colonial languages differently. Ashcroft et al., (1989) state that postcolonial literature is characterized by its « refusal of the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standard of normative or 'correct' usage, and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning 'inscribed' in the words (37). This motive, with respect to Nigerian works, is upheld by those who render them into French. Lastly, information on language peculiarities reveals that the translators of Nigerian writing had anticipated



that the French reader would be shocked at the acculturation of English in the literature. Therefore, their prefaces address this aspect.

## 2.2 Strategies for translating culture-specific terms and justification for choice of strategies

- 20 In addition to informing the French reader about the peculiarities in the use of language in Nigerian novels, translators reveal how they dealt with the issues and justify their choices. For instance, Michel Ligny, the translator of *Things Fall Apart*, employs literal translation and gives reasons for his decision:

[...] La solution adoptée ici a été d'être le plus littéral possible, car les formes du langage sont modelées sur des croyances qu'il importe de ne jamais perdre de vue. Par ailleurs – mais ceci n'est qu'un détail – on a renoncé à franciser les noms Ibo. C'est ainsi que le e doit se lire é, le u ou, le g gue, comme dans les mots Ikemefuna et Ogene. Quant au nom de l'auteur, le ch s'y prononce tch. (Ligny 1966, n.p).

- 21 According to Ligny, the need to retain the structure of the language made him have recourse to literal translation. He goes further to explain that character's names are retained, in other words, the borrowing strategy is applied in addition to literal translation. This note that was written in 1966 shows that the translator of Nigerian works had already adhered to a source-text oriented translation which aims at producing a target text in accordance with the forms and structures of a source text. A translation procedure that is source-text oriented is equally applied in the first Nigerian work rendered into French, although the translator is not explicit about what prompted his choice of strategy: "un palm-wine tapster est un « tireur de vin de palme ». J'ai traduit cette expression par « malafoutier », bien que ce mot soit employé au Congo et non en Afrique Occidentale. « Gris-Gris » est pour juju et « féticheur » pour juju-man"<sup>9</sup> (QUENEAU, 1953, n.p) Queneau uses equivalent words in Francophone African countries, thereby reproducing a text that is still related to the source-text environment.

- 22 Over the years, theorists have debated on the translation strategies that should be applied when rendering a text from one language into another. According to Venuti (1995), translation procedures that favour a fluent (domesticated) target text as a result of the minimisation of the strangeness of its source text were generally prioritised in Western anglophone countries from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. On the contrary, the translation scholar promotes foreignization (source-text oriented translation) and posits that “insofar as foreignizing translation seeks to restrain the ethnocentric violence of translation, it is highly desirable today” (16). Unlike the Western anglophone countries, translators from France were already foreignizing their translations in 1953 when the first Nigerian work was rendered into French<sup>10</sup>. Nevertheless, it is implicitly portrayed in these notes that at the time, translations into French were often domesticated as translators underlined their choice for a source-text oriented translation and the reasons that prompted their choices as if to inform the readers why they were deviating from the norm of target-oriented translations. The choice of foreignizing strategies conforms with postcolonial authors' desire to decentralise colonial languages and use them in a way that best corresponds to their experiences. As Sévry puts it: “[...]Okara, soucieux d'exprimer une sensibilité africaine s'empare de l'anglais de sa majesté pour le soumettre à toute une série de manipulations linguistiques. [...] Traduire *La voix* revient, en quelque sorte, à retrouver l'écriture d'Okara”<sup>11</sup> (1985, 7).
- 23 In later publications, this strategy that brings the French reader to the source text and its culture persists. The French translation of *Half a Yellow Sun* (2004) which was earlier mentioned and of *Graceland* (2006) are cases in point. Mona de Pracontal goes further in her note on the translation of *Half a Yellow Sun* to indicate the strategy she employed: sentences that are mixed with Igbo (the author's language) expressions or that are structured based on the Igbo language are literally translated into French with the aim of retaining the language specificities of the source text, whereas the expressions in Igbo in the source text were transferred into the target text without translating them (borrowing): “Je l'ai reproduit en français en suivant l'original assez près afin de préserver l'effet de calque syntaxique, en adoptant quelques africanismes locaux pour les mots usuels et, bien évidemment, en maintenant les bribes d'ibo” (PRACONTAL 2008, 499-

500). As for the expressions in pidgin and broken English, the translator renders them into oral French spoken in Abidjan which is similar to the French Creole and the ungrammatical French spoken by the semi-literates in countries close to Nigeria (The Republic of Benin, Burkina-Faso and Ivory Coast). Pracontal's strategy, which involves having recourse to corresponding expressions and words in other African countries (and not in France), is similar to Queneau's procedure that has been discussed. This method exerts a similar effect to that of literal translation and borrowing since the French reader is equally made to discover a postcolonial culture, albeit in another African country.

24 To justify her choices of translation strategies, Pracontal explains that she opted for literal translation and borrowing in a bid to retain the local effect of the source text. In addition, she decided to leave the Igbo words and expressions in the source text untranslated in order to respect the choice of the author who did not explain them either. It is the responsibility of the reader to find their connotations: "[...] Adichie emploie également de nombreux mots ibos sans en fournir l'explication- à charge au lecteur de savoir ce dont il s'agit, ou de le comprendre. A l'exception de quelques notes de bas de page, l'édition française respecte ce choix" (450). Similarly, Michèle Albaret-Maatsch who rendered *Graceland* into French reveals that thanks to Marc Saint Claire, she used Cameroonian expressions so as to retain the local colour of the source novel (2008, n.p).

25 By indicating that their translations are source-text oriented and providing reasons for their choices, French translators underscore the motive of postcolonial writers, which is to make their literature serve as their identity. They present Nigerian works as a separate literary system from French literature that should be studied in its own right. In other words, the French reader is encouraged to discover the works in their authentic state as they are not rendered to adhere to the French literary system. Adichie expresses the same notion in an interview:

I've always had Igbo [in my writing]. And I've always had well-meaning advice, often about how American readers will be confused, or they won't get something. I don't set out to confuse, but I also think about myself as a reader. I grew up reading books from every-

where and I didn't necessarily understand every single thing – and I didn't need to. So, I think for me, what was more important, for the integrity of the novel, was that I capture the world I wanted to capture, rather than to try to mold that world into the idea of what the imagined reader would think. (2008).

- 26 Through their notes, the French translators of Nigerian works equally affirm that they have not conducted their activities in a way that will correspond to the expectations of the target audience but that their translations intend to represent the source-text community and its worldview.
- 27 Indeed, in a bid to achieve their intent, translators often seek the help of Africans who are accustomed to the African culture. This is stated in Albaret-Maatsch's preface above. Queneau and Pracontal also acknowledged some experts who contributed to their translation. This act guarantees the French reader on the authenticity of their renderings.

## 2.3 Explanation of foreign words and expressions

- 28 As remarked earlier, Ligny points out that he preserved names of characters of the source novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958) in his translation and guides the target reader on how the names should be pronounced. In this preface, Ligny serves as an instructor, leading the French reader out of their horizon into discovering the Igbo language. Likewise, target novels such as *L'hibiscus pourpre* (*Purple Hibiscus*), *Le conte du squatter* (*A squatter's tale*) and *L'homme qui revint du diable* (*The Man who came in from the back of Beyond*) only contain glossaries (for example, *foufou*, *egusi* and *garri* which are Nigerian food) in which foreign terms and expressions are explained to facilitate readers' comprehension. The presence of these lexicons in the novels reveals that foreignization is the strategy employed in the translations<sup>12</sup>. In these cases, translators' prefaces perform a prescriptive function, teaching readers vocabulary found in postcolonial literature as regards Nigeria. They transmit Nigerian languages and promote postcolonial literature.

### 3. Reflections and Conclusion

- 29 According to Carmen Toledano-Buendia (2013), prefaces perform two major roles. They act as a “supplement”, fulfilling “an explicative and informative function” or as a “commentary”, having a “discursive or performative” role (157). The thirteen notes found in Nigerian novels rendered into French from 1953-2013 play more of the former role. They serve as a documentary on Nigerian literature and postcolonial literature at large.
- 30 The notes portray the specificities of Nigerian novels which are considered to be problematic when rendered into French. Then, the reader is informed about the strategies adopted by the translator in order to tackle the difficulties and the reasons for choosing such strategies. In addition, they are sometimes provided with glossaries to enable the comprehension of some cultural words and expressions in the translations.
- 31 These renderings demonstrate that Nigerian literature is construed as a disparate literature that the French reader is, however, spurred to discover. Translators attempt to bridge the gap between the source and target cultures through their prefaces but without eroding the traits that distinguish one from the other.
- 32 This study has not investigated the real impact of these notes on the target reader, which would be a logical sequel, but it posits that French readers are envisaged to receive the translations as works from a different literary system that should be studied in depth.

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## NOTE DE FIN

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1 The spelling postcolonial and not post-colonial is employed in this article since it does not solely consider works that were published after the colonial era but also those that were released during the colonial period.

2 Other African authors such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o advocated writing in African indigenous languages as "language carries culture and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we perceive ourselves and our place in the world. (Thiong'o 1986: 16).

3 This is discovered after checking on different sites (Wikipedia, National University Catalogue Sudoc). There is no definite information on the total number of Nigerian works translated into French, even on sites like Index Translationum or BnF (National French Library).

4 Translation by the author of this article: This book is intended for Africans. I considered it in Malinké and wrote it in French, exercising the freedom I think is normal in the classical language [...]. Therefore, I translated Malinké into French by breaking French in order to find and reproduce the African rhythm.

5 Translation by the author of this article: The writer employs the English language conjunctions (for example *but* and *or*) in an uncommon way and it created real difficulties for me”.

6 Warning in English

7 Translation by the author of this article Right from the first lines of the novel, the reader will be shocked and even jerky at the strange writing. Words are no longer in their usual place, syntax is shoved, repetitions are numerous.

8 Translation by the author of this article: An interesting aspect of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel is her way of using different languages. Half of a *Yellow Sun* includes many languages in addition to the English of the narration: that of the Nigerian elite and of the university lecturers, who communicate with one another in perfect British English, often tainted with mother tongue idioms and awkward; that of the BBC reports and the American journalists; “the broken English” of less educated Nigerians, using random English words to communicate with different community members or with Whites, in rare occasion pidgin ; and then, the Igbo of the Igbo speakers when communicating with one another, “translated” into English for the reader.

9 A palm-wine tapster is a “drawer of palm wine”. I translated this expression as “malfoutier”, even though the word is used in Congo and not in West Africa. “Gris-Gris” is for juju and “féticheur” for juju-man.

10 The globalization of English has contributed to the prevalent domestication in Western anglophone countries. There are numerous works in English that the few translated into the language are rid of their foreignness to attract the target reader.

11 Translation by the author of this article: Okara captures Her Majesty's language and subjected it to various linguistic operations in order to express an African sensibility. Translating *La voix* somewhat involves rediscovering Okara's writing.

12 A domesticated translation will not require a glossary as the aim of this strategy is to rid the target text of all foreign features and to produce a fluent text.



## RÉSUMÉS

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### English

One of the distinctive features of postcolonial literature is its language. It is often written in European languages, such as English and French, but are remoulded to new usages that fit a colonised community. This attribute demarcates it from other literatures that are not postcolonial and makes them less comprehensible to readers outside the colonised community from which a work emanates. It is even more challenging when rendered into another language. This article investigates commentaries found in the translations of postcolonial works. It examines how Nigerian writing is construed via the prefaces in the French translations of Nigerian novels published between 1953 to 2013. It posits that translators present Nigerian literature as a literary system in its own right and propagate the tenets of the writing. In other words, the notes are considerable insights into postcolonial literature.

### Français

L'une des caractéristiques de la littérature postcoloniale, c'est sa langue. Celle-ci est écrite en langues européennes, tels que l'anglais ou le français, mais sont remodelées pour produire de nouveaux usages correspondant à une communauté colonisée. Cet attribut la différencie des autres littératures non-postcoloniales et la rend moins accessible aux lecteurs extérieurs d'une communauté colonisée. C'est encore un défi quand cette littérature est traduite vers une autre langue. Cet article examine les notes qui se trouvent dans les traductions des œuvres postcoloniales. Il étudie comment la littérature nigériane est conçue à partir des préfaces en romans nigériens traduits vers le français et publiés de 1953 à 2013. Il affirme que les traducteurs représentent la littérature nigériane comme un système littéraire à part entière et qu'ils propagent les principes de l'écriture. Autrement dit, ces notes sont des aperçus de la littérature postcoloniale.

## AUTEUR

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