

# STYLISTIC ISSUES IN NEW NIGERIAN LITERATURE

## The Nigerian literary tradition

Even before the West African country of Nigeria gained its independence from Britain in 1960, several of its writers had already published major works which were to leave an indelible mark on Anglophone literature. Chief among these seminal books is undoubtedly Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), a novel set around the time of colonization and written in a variety of English deliberately infused with proverbs and idioms from the Igbo language, the author's mother tongue. Another writer known for his masterful handling of English is the politically committed Wole Soyinka, who became the first African to win the Nobel Prize for literature in 1986. Following in the footsteps of these key figures, talented authors such as Ben Okri appeared on the international scene during the last two decades of the twentieth century.

## The new generation of Nigerian writers

The beginning of the twenty-first century marked the advent of the so-called 'third generation' of Nigerian writers, most of whom live in Europe or the United States. These younger authors are at once heirs to the Nigerian literary tradition and symbols of a new creative movement. Indeed, like Achebe and Soyinka, novelists such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Chris Abani and Chika Unigwe explore the cultural and social complexities of their country of origin, but they examine other themes as well, among which immigration to Europe and America. Beyond thematic innovation, the younger writers' work also conveys a new type of sensitivity: for example, their narratives show a particular interest in the exploration of characters' emotional development.

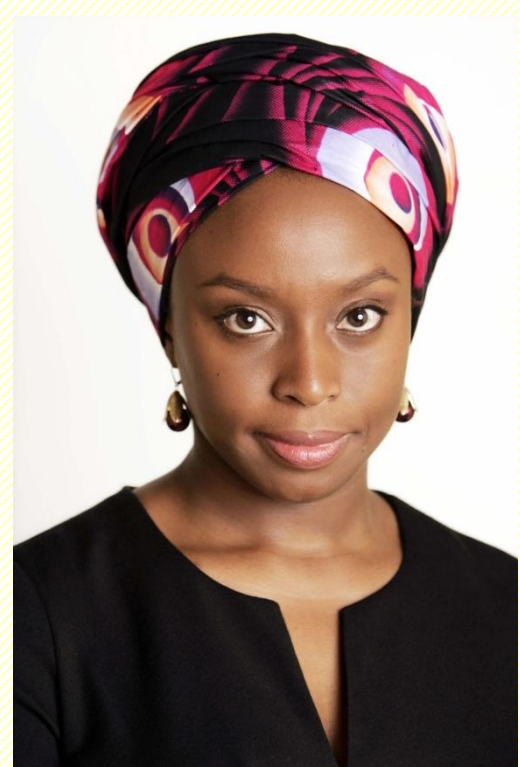
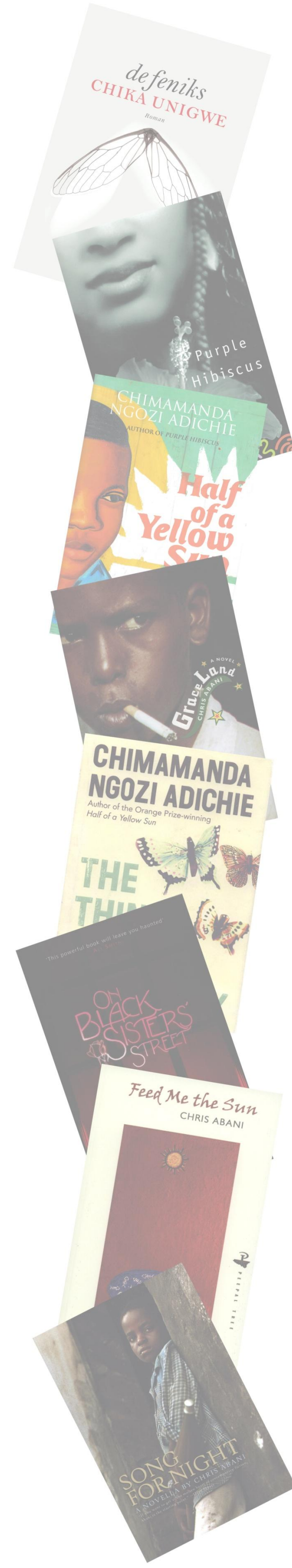
## The study of language in Nigerian literature

Scholarly investigations into the stylistic makeup of Nigerian literature have so far mostly focused on the typically 'African' linguistic features found in the works of first-generation authors. These elements include not only proverbs and idioms but also, for instance, the protagonists' use of Nigerian Pidgin, a language that mixes English and local mother tongues. It is generally acknowledged that, in the twentieth century, African writers' 'indigenization' of English allowed them to appropriate the former colonizer's language, and thus use literature as a tool of resistance against oppression.

While this still holds true for the new generation of Nigerian writers, the latter's work is more markedly characterized by the introduction of postmodern writing techniques, such as the presence of an unreliable narrator or the use of fragmented syntactic structures. These novel features of Nigerian literature have only received scant attention to date.

## The style of new Nigerian literature

My research aims at analysing these recent developments from a stylistic perspective, concentrating on a series of twenty-first-century novels and short stories by Nigerian authors (see a selection of these writers below). To carry out this study, I have adopted a methodological framework combining theories from four different (sub)disciplines: postcolonial studies, systemic-functional linguistics, cognitive linguistics, and the philosophy of language. My hope is to investigate the possible synergies between these theoretical approaches and eventually develop an original model of stylistic analysis for Nigerian fiction, with possible extensions to other fields of literary research.



### Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

- Born in Enugu, Nigeria, in 1977, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie spent most of her childhood in the university town of Nsukka. As a young adult, she left for the United States, where she studied communication, political science, creative writing and history. She currently divides her time between Nigeria and the United States.
- Some of the themes explored in her fiction include the influence of religion in contemporary Nigeria, the Biafran war, and immigration to the United States.

• Major prose works: *Purple Hibiscus* (novel, 2003), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (novel, 2006), *The Thing around Your Neck* (collection of short stories, 2009).

• A biography, an introduction to her work and a complete bibliography are available on my website about the author: <http://www.L3.ulg.ac.be/adichie>

### Chika Unigwe

- Born in Enugu, Nigeria, in 1974, Chika Unigwe moved to Turnhout, Belgium, in 1995. She has degrees in English from the University of Nigeria in Nsukka, the Catholic University of Leuven (Belgium), and the University of Leiden (the Netherlands).

- Some of the subjects examined in her work are physical and mental illness, immigration to Belgium, and prostitution.

• Major prose works: *The Phoenix* (novel, 2007, first published in Dutch translation as *De feniks*, 2005), *On Black Sisters' Street* (novel, 2009, first published in Dutch translation as *Fata morgana*, 2007).

• More information about the author is available on her official website: <http://www.chikaunigwe.com>



### Chris Abani

- Born in Afikpo, Nigeria, in 1966, Chris Abani published his first novel when he was sixteen years old. He was imprisoned in Nigeria because his writings were considered a threat to the government, and he left for Britain in 1991. He subsequently moved to the United States, and now teaches at the University of California, Riverside.

• His fiction broaches a wide range of topics, from the Biafran war to family relationships, and provides reflections on art, gender, race, violence and religion. Chris Abani is also a poet.

• Major prose works: *GraceLand* (novel, 2004), *Becoming Abigail* (novella, 2006), *Song for Night* (novella, 2007), *The Virgin of Flames* (novel, 2007).

• More information about the author is available on his official website: <http://www.chrisabani.com>

## ... and many other writers, including:

• **Sefi Atta**: Born in Lagos, Nigeria, in 1964, she first worked as an accountant and now lives in the United States. Her novels and short stories focus on themes including drug trafficking and gender relations in contemporary Nigeria.

• **Helon Habila**: Born in Kaltungo, Nigeria, in 1967, he worked as a journalist in Lagos before moving to Britain, and then to the United States. His fiction deals with questions such as political imprisonment, colonialism, and the exploitation of the oil resources of the Niger Delta.

• **Helen Oyeyemi**: Born in Ibadan, Nigeria, in 1984, she moved to London with her family at the age of four, and later studied social and political sciences at the University of Cambridge. Some of the topics explored in her work are mental illness, Yoruba and Cuban mythology, homosexuality and the supernatural.

