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LANGUAGE, LOSS AND DOMESTIC ESTRANGEMENT: A SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF WESTERNIZATION IN YAMBO OUOLOGUEM'S TO MY HUSBAND

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Abstract: *This paper presents a critical textual analysis of Yambo Ouologuem's poem "To My Husband", exploring how postcolonial disillusionment, gendered alienation, and cultural mimicry intersect within a domestic setting. The poem, written as a dramatic monologue, unravels the speaker's emotional and cultural estrangement following her husband's symbolic adoption of a Western identity. Through careful examination of poetic devices such as repetition, irony, enjambment, and juxtaposition, the study reveals the thematic tensions between tradition and modernity, intimacy and alienation, indigeneity and colonial mimicry. The poet's strategic use of diction, cultural symbols, and tonal shifts constructs a compelling critique of Western imperialism's lingering effects on African identity, marriage, and self-worth. Ultimately, the analysis concludes that Ouologuem's poem encapsulates the psychological and emotional toll of cultural dislocation and the failure of colonial modernity to deliver meaningful transformation within postcolonial African realities.*

Introduction

Yambo Ouologuem's poem *To My Husband* presents a sharply ironic, emotionally layered portrait of a woman alienated within her own marriage by the insidious forces of colonial modernity. First published in *Présence Africaine* in 1966, the poem narrates the erosion of indigenous identity through linguistic, cultural, and emotional dislocation. Domestic acts such as eating, dressing, and naming, which ordinarily symbolize intimacy and cultural cohesion, are reimagined as mechanisms of estrangement and ideological conquest. In analyzing this poem, this paper engages three interlinked linguistic concepts: semantics, semantic fields, and linguistic shifts, as well as the broader socio-

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symbolic implications of language use and undertones in postcolonial contexts.

Semantics, broadly understood, concerns the meaning of words and the relationships between signifiers and their social referents. In literary studies, semantic analysis allows scholars to interrogate how specific word choices encode cultural ideologies or emotional states (Lyons 114). Semantic fields, or lexical sets, refer to clusters of related words that belong to a shared cultural or experiential domain. For instance, the contrast between indigenous food items like “calabash” and Western imports such as “grapes” forms a semantic field that reveals both material and symbolic shifts. Linguistic shift, in this context, refers to the substitution or erosion of native vocabulary with foreign ones, a phenomenon well documented in postcolonial linguistic theory (Bamgbose 9). In *To My Husband*, these shifts are not only linguistic but psychosocial, signaling ruptures in cultural continuity and emotional coherence.

This paper contends that language functions as both a tool and a terrain for colonial power and that shifts in linguistic behavior especially within the domestic sphere can reflect broader cultural displacements. Ouologuem’s poem dramatizes how everyday language use within marriage mirrors the loss of cultural rootedness and emotional authenticity. The protagonist’s ironic tone, choice of words, and repetitive appeals to the past reveal the deep fissures caused by the husband's symbolic adoption of Western modernity through his name, dress, diet, and behavior.

The objective of this paper is to examine how Ouologuem uses semantic contrasts and linguistic choices to portray the disintegration of marital intimacy and cultural selfhood in the postcolonial African context. Through the changes in diction from indigenous to foreign names, and from communal eating to individual dining, this paper argues that emotional alienation is not merely interpersonal but ideological. It is driven by an interest in how language shapes experience, particularly in societies navigating the tension between indigenous heritage and imposed modernity.

The theoretical framework for this study draws primarily from postcolonial linguistics and critical discourse theory. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o asserts that language is the "carrier of the soul of a people" and cannot be detached from their cultural memory (Ngũgĩ 87). Frantz Fanon extends this idea by emphasizing that colonialism also operates through psychological domination embedded in language and self-perception (Fanon 25). In a critique of postcolonial modernity, Achille Mbembe describes it as an "empty edifice" that often substitutes foreign superficialities with local authenticity, masking deeper cultural dislocation (Mbembe 104). These theorists collectively illuminate how the semantic shifts in *To My Husband* act as metaphors for broader cultural and emotional ruptures.

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Methodologically, this paper adopts a close semantic reading using tools from stylistic and discourse analysis. Semantic juxtapositions such as *Bimbinbirokak* against *Victor Emile Louis Henri Joseph*, and traditional gourd and couscous against pasteurized milk and cornflakes, highlight issues of cultural erosion. Elements such as tone, irony, and repetition underscore the speaker's emotional disillusionment and subtle resistance. These linguistic features are not incidental; rather, they serve the ideological critique embedded within the poem.

In conclusion, this paper explores how *To My Husband* portrays the tragedy of colonial assimilation not through grand historical events but through subtle linguistic detractions. Through layered semantics and undertones, the poem reveals how the postcolonial woman's desire for existence and continuity is thwarted by a language that has lost both its function and its voice.

In sum, this paper explores how *To My Husband* captures the tragedy of colonial assimilation not through grand historical events but through minute linguistic betrayals. By focusing on semantic fields and undertones, it reveals how a postcolonial woman's longing for recognition and cultural continuity is thwarted by a language that no longer speaks to her or for her.

Theoretical Framework

The paper relies on the postcolonial theory of language and gives special attention to the writings of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 600, Frantz Fanon, and Homi Bhabha who delve into the subject of the correlation between language, identity, and cultural power in postcolonial societies. These models provide the conceptual apparatus required in the process of demystifying how colonial wind blows in all aspects without the need to directly touch anyone, and it affects the emotions of people and interpersonal relations. Among them, in Yambo Ouologuem *To My Husband* the marital microcosm of the most intimate of terrains is a microcosm of larger cultural dislocation, in which Westernization has been gnawing away at local semantic foundations, replacing them with Western borrowings as words or behaviors and ways of thinking. From the perspective of postcolonial theory, the language choices made by the writer are viewed as an act of colonial mimicry in behavioral patterns, whereas the wife is seen to respond by refusing to be colonized by linguistic nomenclature.

At the core of this system is the concept of linguistic decolonization presented by Ngugi wa Thiongo in the book Decolonising the Mind. To prove it, Ngugi claims that language itself is a vehicle of culture, as well as a vehicle of memory, and he states that the colonized subjects confront a sense of separation between the tongue they speak and the language they are subjected to. The result of this schism is not only a feeling of alienation with self but with community and intimacy (Ngũgĩ 16). This language schism is even played out in *To My*

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Husband where the husband abandons his native name, Bimbinbirokak, in exchange for a more European-sounding, Victor-Emile-Louis Henri-Joseph. This semantic replacement is no longer a change of identity but it is symbolic identity destruction, a change of familiarity to formal procedure, a spirituality of belonging to the official performance of civility.

This study is also supported by the theory of internalized colonialism posited by Frantz Fanon, especially in the book, Black Skin, White Masks. One of the few spaces of psychological colonization that Fanon points to is the use of language with the colonized population thus accepting the language of the colonist in a quest to win the favor, authority, or supremacy. However, this comes at the cost of emotional and cultural coherence (Fanon 18). The husband's adoption of imported items, imported food, and Western behavioral codes, such as placing a table between him and his wife, embodies this internalized inferiority complex. His new linguistic and material choices aim at assimilation but result in estrangement, manifesting in the wife's ironic, emotionally stifled narrative. Her language, while restrained, becomes a form of postcolonial testimony that critiques the emotional cost of assimilation.

Homi Bhabha's theory of mimicry further illuminates the speaker's conflict. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha argues that colonial mimicry produces a subject that is "almost the same, but not quite," a distorted reflection of the colonizer's ideals (Bhabha 86). The husband's transformation is a clear example of this mimicry. He performs European civility (tie, table manners, imported food), yet his efforts are both excessive and tragically ironic. His Westernization does not elevate his social standing to that of the colonizer (as implied in the speaker's sarcastic reference to "Rockefeller") but instead reduces him to a caricature. This study applies Bhabha's theory to show how mimicry in language and lifestyle, when internalized uncritically, leads to personal and relational incoherence rather than empowerment.

Finally, this framework draws on semantic field theory from linguistic analysis, which studies how words cluster into fields of meaning that reflect cultural, emotional, and ideological values. In *To My Husband*, the tension between indigenous and Western semantic fields (e.g., calabash vs. dinner service, gourd vs. pasteurized milk, Bimbinbirokak vs. Victor-Emile-Louis) demonstrates the erosion of one worldview by another. This loss of linguistic texture symbolizes the flattening of cultural identity and the emotional deprivation that follows. By analyzing the language in terms of its symbolic fields, the study exposes the deep interrelation between lexical choice and emotional reality.

Together, these theoretical models, Ngũgĩ's decolonial linguistics, Fanon's psychology of colonized language, Bhabha's mimicry, and semantic field theory, form the backbone of this analysis. They allow us to treat *To My*

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Husband not merely as a personal lament but as a rich, multi-layered critique of how Westernization infiltrates and hollows out the core of domestic and cultural life. Ultimately, they underscore the power of language not only to reflect but also to produce estrangement, loss, and cultural fragmentation in postcolonial societies.

Literature Review

Language has long been identified as both a tool and a site of colonial domination in postcolonial discourse. Scholars such as Adeleke Adeeko argue that language plays a critical role in shaping cultural identity and memory, asserting that the imposition of colonial languages leads to a rupture in cultural continuity. In *Language, Power, and Ideology in African Literature*, Adeeko contends that language is not simply a medium of communication but a means of encoding values, worldviews, and relationships (Adeeko 27). This perspective has influenced much of African postcolonial literature, where writers often depict how Western languages and cultural symbols erode traditional relationships and values. Yambo Ouologuem's *To My Husband* fits squarely into this tradition by dramatizing how the adoption of colonial forms of address, dress, and consumption results in emotional detachment and the disintegration of intimacy.

Mahmood Mamdani also contributes significantly to the discourse on linguistic alienation. In *Neither Settler Nor Native*, Mamdani discusses the psychological implications of speaking the colonizer's language, linking it to inferiority complexes and self-erasure (Mamdani 59). Scholars who follow this path, such as Nomsa Mbatha, have emphasized how postcolonial subjects are often caught in a paradox of expression: needing to use the colonizer's language to critique colonization itself (Mbatha 35). This tension is evident in *To My Husband*, where the speaker mocks her husband's transformation and the language he now uses, suggesting a loss of authentic selfhood. Studies of similar postcolonial poems, such as Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino*, often highlight this semantic divide as a source of gendered and cultural tension (Gichuhi 91).

Feminist critics of African literature have increasingly turned to the domestic sphere as a powerful metaphor for broader socio-political conditions. Scholars like Nomsa Mbatha and Obioma Nnaemeka have shown how the home, often romanticized as a site of nurture, becomes in postcolonial texts a space of struggle and ideological conflict. In the context of *To My Husband*, the speaker's lament emerges from a deeply personal space—the marital relationship—yet it represents a larger critique of how colonial ideologies infiltrate private lives. Mbatha emphasizes that when colonialism rewrites gender roles, women are often doubly marginalized, first by patriarchal customs, then by the imposition of Western standards that alienate them further from cultural traditions (Mbatha 41). In many African feminist texts, food, clothing, and naming serve as recurring

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symbols of this gendered dislocation. As shown in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* and Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*, women often critique the superficial promises of modernity that result in emotional or social deprivation (Nnaemeka 51). Similarly, the speaker in Ouologuem's poem experiences Westernization not as empowerment but as hunger, literal and emotional. This aligns with Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí's critique that colonial modernity imposes alien gender norms that render indigenous forms of womanhood invisible or inadequate (Oyěwùmí 123).

Within the domain of linguistic criticism, semantic field theory offers a valuable framework for analyzing how poets use clusters of related words to establish ideological or emotional contrast. As noted by Tanure Ojaide, words do not exist in isolation; they form fields of meaning shaped by cultural associations, connotations, and history (Ojaide 137). In African poetry, semantic contrasts are often deployed to reflect tensions between tradition and modernity, authenticity and imitation. Poems like Leopold Senghor's "Prayer to the Masks" and Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* illustrate this well, as indigenous terms are juxtaposed with imported or colonial lexicons to highlight cultural and spiritual loss. In Ouologuem's *To My Husband*, semantic fields are drawn between indigenous and foreign items: "calabash," "gourd," and "couscous" are pitted against "grapes," "cornflakes," and "pasteurized milk." These contrasts symbolize more than dietary change, they signal a shift in worldview, identity, and relational intimacy.

Literary critics such as Chielozona Eze have observed that such lexical juxtapositions are key to understanding the subtle ideological work done in African poetry (Eze 201). Eze's analysis highlights how language is not neutral; it encodes power relations and historical memory. In the same vein, Margaret Gichuhi emphasizes the role of postcolonial disillusionment in shaping poetic expressions of longing and loss, noting how African poets often depict emotional and psychological fragmentation as an effect of Western encroachment (Gichuhi 94). When applied to *To My Husband*, this insight helps unpack the speaker's ironic tone, which signals both grief and resistance.

Recent scholarship has also explored the intersection of food, language, and gender in postcolonial African literature. For instance, Lindsey Green-Simms argues that imported consumer goods, especially food and fashion, function as symbols of social aspiration and cultural loss in African women's writing (Green-Simms 159). In *To My Husband*, the shift from "pounded millet" to "cornflakes" embodies this contradiction: modernity offers aesthetic appeal but erodes rootedness and shared experience. The speaker's rejection of these imported foods is not just about taste but about values and memory.

Finally, Emmanuel Obiechina's work on oral traditions and written African literature reminds us that language in African poetry often draws

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from communal idioms, symbolism, and rhythm to affirm cultural heritage (Obiechina 19). Ouologuem's poem, though ironic and melancholic, adopts a performative tone reminiscent of lament songs in oral traditions, underscoring the emotional intensity of the speaker's critique.

In summary, the existing scholarship on postcolonial language, domestic gender relations, and semantic structures in African poetry provides a rich context for analyzing *To My Husband*. While Ouologuem is more widely known for his prose, this poem aligns with thematic and stylistic trends observed in postcolonial African poetry, particularly the use of everyday language to reflect complex cultural shifts. By drawing from postcolonial, feminist, and linguistic perspectives, this study positions the poem as a multifaceted critique of Westernization's impact on cultural identity and interpersonal relationships.

Textual Analysis

In Yambo Ouologuem's *"To My Husband"*, the poet crafts a poignant critique of colonial legacy and its infiltration into the domestic space, using rich semantic oppositions, bitter irony, and evocative imagery. The poem is a dramatic monologue delivered by a woman whose marriage becomes a microcosm of broader sociocultural dislocation wrought by colonialism. By examining the lexical fields, syntactic tensions, and tonal shifts in the poem, one discerns how Westernization, rather than uplifting, estranges. The poem draws strength from its blend of semantic clarity and emotional complexity, as well as its deft use of literary techniques such as repetition, juxtaposition, enjambment, and irony.

At the heart of the poem lies a profound sense of loss. The first lines set the tone: *"You used to be called Bimbinbirokak / And all was well then / But you became Victor-Emile-Louis Henri-Joseph / And bought us a dinner service."* This change in name represents more than a nominal shift—it signals the symbolic renunciation of indigenous identity in favor of Western mimicry. The semantic shift from *"Bimbinbirokak"* to the French-influenced name *"Victor-Emile-Louis Henri-Joseph"* captures the poem's central preoccupation: the violent disjuncture between a culturally grounded past and a performative, colonially-shaped present. The contrast, both auditory and cultural, between the two names foregrounds the psychological alienation that accompanies cultural assimilation.

Names in this poem are identity markers, but also emotional signifiers. The speaker associates her husband's indigenous name with harmony and intimacy, stating *"all was well then."* Conversely, the Western name coincides with emotional disconnection and material obsession. The irony in *"bought us a dinner service"* is biting; the acquisition of Western goods does not enhance love or connection, but replaces it with hollow appearances. The domestic imagery here—dinner service, table, eating habits—becomes a battleground for cultural authenticity versus artificial modernity.

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Throughout the poem, Ouologuem constructs parallel semantic fields: indigenous versus foreign, natural versus artificial, communal versus individualistic. The lexical field of traditional cuisine—*"Calabash and ladle / Gourd and couscous"*—is strategically placed against *"grapes, cornflakes, pasteurized milk."* This deliberate juxtaposition emphasizes the forceful erasure of indigenous practices, replacing them with sterile, imported substitutes. These changes are not only culinary but emblematic of larger cultural shifts: a lifestyle that once fostered closeness and shared identity is now mediated by consumption patterns dictated by colonial logic. The wife notes that these changes were not negotiated but *"dictated condescendingly."* This phrase exposes the power asymmetry that colonial mimicry fosters within the household; the husband becomes both the imitator and enforcer of colonial tastes.

A significant literary device used here is irony. The line *"We eat grapes cornflakes drink pasteurized milk / All imported goods / And eat little"* encapsulates the absurdity of the situation. The family now consumes expensive Western imports, yet ironically suffers deprivation. This leads to the poem's climactic punchline: *"Instead of being under-developed / I am now underfed."* This rhetorical reversal, hinging on the double meaning of "under," critiques the colonial development narrative. The speaker's hunger—both literal and emotional—is not alleviated by Westernization, but intensified. Thus, the poem inverts colonial expectations of progress and modernity.

The tone of the poem oscillates between lament and sarcasm. This dual tone is managed through a clever manipulation of poetic voice. The speaker does not directly accuse her husband in every stanza; instead, she reflects, questions, and even pleads: *"Look at me / How do you find me."* This is not a moment of vanity but of vulnerability. It reveals the psychological effects of erasure—not only has the speaker's culture been diminished, but her visibility and relevance within her marriage have also been compromised. The man, now obsessed with maintaining a foreign identity, no longer sees her in the same light. His refusal to engage in dialogue (*"you start sulking when I point this out"*) silences her further, deepening the chasm between them.

The poem's content is supported by formal elements. Its free form or lack of rhyme scheme is in a sense conversational and intimate, which makes it sound more like an oral lament. The continuous enjambment is the reflection of the emotional stream of the speaker- continuous, interrupted, and overburdened. Another stylistic element that is so strong is repetition, the lines *"I refer to", "You used to be called Bimbinbirokak"* and *"All was well"* then repeats themselves and remind the whole poem about a chorus, that contributes to feelings of nostalgia and the increased seriousness that the past used to have.

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The tie that is worn by the husband becomes a powerful visual image: *your tie is with your neck forever / it may choke you.* The tie is a popular accessory related to the Western way of doing business, this time it can be called the image of self-strangling. He refuses to part with it even when he is literally baking in the tropics indicating the blind compliance with the foreign standards. This failed-to-breathe, never-ending conformity is an indication of his alienation not only to his wife but also to himself.

The nature of the power structure between men and women is also indicated implicitly in the poem. The transformation of the husband makes him feel superior, which gives him permissibility in the power to dictate and sulk, two verbs that indicate power and childishness. The economically disempowered wife is at the same time more acutely aware of the cultural loss and emotional decay that they experiences. She talks in a way that penetrates the pretensions of the husband, but it is she who is silenced in the hierarchy of the marriage. This interplay projects the postcolonial criticisms that portrayed the colonial ideologies as institutionalizing novel patriarchs at home.

Ultimately, *"To My Husband"* is not just a poem about a failed marriage—it is a critique of cultural mimicry, a lament for a lost indigenous intimacy, and a protest against the illusion of Western superiority. Yambo Ouologuem uses everyday symbols—food, names, clothes, and household items—to tell a story of national and personal alienation. The language is accessible yet layered, rich with semantic contrasts and poetic irony. Through repetition, enjambment, contrastive diction, and tonal shifts, the poem dramatizes the lived consequences of colonialism on love, identity, and sustenance. It is a carefully constructed indictment of Westernization's false promises, spoken from the deeply personal perspective of a woman whose life has been restructured but not redeemed by modernity.

Summary and Conclusion

Yambo Ouologuem's *"To My Husband"* is a potent poetic reflection on the corrosive effects of colonialism on African identity, domestic life, and cultural authenticity. Framed as a monologue from a disillusioned wife to her Westernized husband, the poem uses sharp irony, cultural symbolism, and emotional vulnerability to critique the imposition of foreign values that alienate individuals from their roots and from each other. Through the symbolic renunciation of the husband's indigenous name and the replacement of native food and customs with imported goods, the poem foregrounds the deep tension between modernity and tradition, particularly within African postcolonial households. The once intimate, culturally grounded marriage is transformed into a hollow performance of foreign norms, where even shared meals and language become sources of division.

The poem's strength lies in its layered structure—linguistically simple, yet symbolically profound. Literary techniques such as repetition,

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enjambment, juxtaposition, and irony deepen the emotional impact, while metaphors like the ever-tight tie and the "underfed" wife render a haunting image of the contradictions within colonial mimicry. The speaker, though positioned as the traditionally voiceless wife, emerges as a keen observer and critic of her husband's transformation, exposing the futility of imported sophistication and the emptiness of performative Westernization.

In conclusion, *"To My Husband"* serves as a powerful poetic indictment of postcolonial alienation. It critiques the internalized colonial mentality that leads individuals to abandon their heritage in pursuit of a modernity that ultimately marginalizes and diminishes them. By turning the domestic space into a site of ideological struggle, Ouologuem reveals how the personal becomes political—how colonialism extends its reach not just through policies or economies, but through names, tables, ties, and taste. The poem ends not with reconciliation but with a bitter resignation, reinforcing the emotional and cultural toll of losing one's essence in the quest to belong to a world that was never truly one's own.

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