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**Erasure and Ecological Narratives: An Ecolinguistic Reading of *The Headstrong Historian***

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**Abstract**

This article reflects upon Adichie's *The Headstrong Historian* (2008) through an ecolinguistic review considering Stibbe's (2015) concept of erasure. Ecolinguistics is the study of language as it relates to human interactions with culture, identity, and the environment. Stibbe states that erasure occurs when language removes, covers, or otherwise dilutes significant aspects of life, thereby obscuring or weakening the discursive dimensions of life, leading the public to consider such facets unworthy of attention. This study aims to illustrate the narrative's depiction of the neglect of indigenous ecological knowledge resulting from colonialism. The study illustrates a range of erasures, including deletion, silence, covering, and naturalizing or backgrounding. Such patterns arise when colonial agents rename the Igbo, dismiss their rituals, silence women, distort the faith of the locals, and promote alien education as the only valid knowledge. Such erasures dilute the ecological ties the Igbo people had with their land, descendants, and traditions. This study adopts a qualitative textual analysis to capture how the narrative constructs these patterns. It concluded that colonial discourse constructs a unique narrative that appears concealed when it seeks to marginalize indigenous ecological discourse. After analysing her work, the author argues that Adichie shows how language can erase ecological and cultural knowledge, highlighting the importance of silencing and reclaiming indigenous voices.

**Keywords:** Ecolinguistics, *The Headstrong Historian*, Erasure

**Introduction**

Ecolinguistics is concerned with the interaction between language and the environment. It examines how language and discourse influence our understandings of life, nature, culture, and one another. Words have a profound impact on how individuals value and regard nature, as well as how they appreciate and sustain particular ways of life. With the prevalence of specific narratives, the life experiences of individuals and entire communities can become invisible, making the concerns of Ecolinguistics particularly relevant. Ecolinguistics is concerned with narratives that have become dominant, as well as those that have become silenced; it is about illustrations of language that either advocate for or undermine the sustainability of a particular ecological and cultural milieu. In postcolonial contexts where the imposition of foreign languages and narratives profoundly influences local worldviews and histories, these concerns take on particular significance.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *The Headstrong Historian* embodies the tremendous impact that colonial language can have on a community. The novel chronicles the experiences of the Igbo people as values and governance shift in response to colonial encroachment. These value shifts permeate the community through educational institutions, places of worship, and systems of foreign knowledge. Ecolinguistics offers a lens for understanding how these language changes influence shifts in ecological thinking. There is a slow, colonial-inspired disregard for land, ancestors, rituals, and communal living that overshadows and supplants traditional ways of thinking. Thus, the narrative serves as a testament to how language shapes the ecological and cultural landscape of a people.

A significant domain within Ecolinguistics is the phenomenon of erasure. Erasure accounts for cases in which language obliterates or conceals significant realities. Erasure may take on different forms. It may erase names, mute the voiceless, silence cultural practices, and obliterate ways of life from the documents. Arran Stibbe describes erasure as occurring when narratives instruct people that something is trivial or forgettable. In *The Headstrong Historian*, erasure manifests itself in characters losing their names, their religion being dismissed as odd, their practices being described as primitive, their history being omitted and replaced with the colonial narrative, and their history being lost. All these instances bear on how society perceives itself and its surroundings.

This article examines Stibbe's theory of erasure in relation to how the narrative under consideration represents the Nu Igbo socio-cultural contexts and ecologies. The study employs a qualitative approach, utilizing narrative analysis to uncover patterns of erasure within the text. The study aims to uncover how and in what ways the use of colonizing language erases and diminishes traditional ecological knowledge, the cultural expression of the people, and the representative voice of the colonized. The study employs the theory of Ecolinguistics to argue that the effects of erasure are broader: it impacts memory and identity, as well as the ecological relations that tie individuals to their land, community, and spirituality. The article discusses how, in Adichie, these constraints of language prompt the reconsideration of the positive role language may play in relation to indigenous ecologies.

The research is based on the following objective and subsequent research question.

### **Research Objective**

To examine how *The Headstrong Historian* employs language to reveal various forms of erasure and to explain how these erasures influence the representation of Igbo culture, identity, and ecology.

### **Research Question**

How does Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *The Headstrong Historian* employ linguistic and narrative strategies that reflect the ecolinguistic concept of erasure as theorized by Arran Stibbe (2015)?

### **Literature review**

#### **Ecolinguistics: An Overview**

Couto (2013) suggests that Ecolinguistics involves the study of the interactions between a given language and its environment. More generally, it involves the various aspects of the relationships between language and environment, as well as the debates surrounding the reciprocal influences of language and environment (p. 122). Building on Jabeen's (2024) work, this study explores the relationships between a given language and its environment (p. 14).

According to Tulasi and Rao (2023), the discipline of Ecolinguistics originated with Einar Haugen's 1972 work on language ecology. This shift was marked by a new paradigm within the

1990s, which, in contrast to sociolinguistics, encompassed a broader ecological scope. This shift was primarily a result of M.A.K. Halliday's query, which encouraged the study of language functions in relation to other environmental factors. Such maturation led to the diversification of the domain into four major interpretive strands, each with varying perspectives on what constitutes a language's environment. (pp. 1-4).

According to Jabeen (2023), Ecolinguistics is crucial because it demonstrates that language is not an objective medium; it actively shapes how people perceive different environmental issues. Through the careful selection of words and phrases, such as "climate crisis" and "climate fight," and the use of fiery imagery, Ecolinguistics demonstrates that discourse can frame climate issues as urgent, responsible, and resolvable. All these efforts work together to shape public awareness of an issue and galvanize people to act on it sustainably (pp. 17-19).

### **Ecolinguistics and Post-colonialism**

Hutcheon (2013) argues that there is a conjunction between colonialism and environmental destruction, and for good reason. He argues that they emanate from the same ethos of hegemony and control. He explains that colonial powers would take land and resources from indigenous people, viewing the people and the land as disposable resources. He notes that this would be done through language by renaming and claiming territories, making the exploitation appear normal. Both postcolonial studies and Ecolinguistics aim to dismantle this oppressive regime and shed light on the logic that subjugates people while plundering the planet's cultural ecosystems, advocating for a healthy, sustainable relationship with them.

Penz and Fill (2022) state that there is a relationship between Ecolinguistics and postcolonial scholarship. This is especially evident in its interdisciplinary focus on the interrelation of different languages. There is scholarly consensus that colonial rule was a significant factor in the reduction of the world's linguistic diversity. For instance, the educational policies of colonizers led to the suppression of many native languages and all their local variants. Ecolinguistics is therefore concerned that when a language is lost, an irreplaceable worldview is rendered invisible. That is a culturally genocidal process. Consequently, the field of Ecolinguistics champions the preservation of linguistic rights as a corollary to the marginalization of many indigenous languages. This suggests that Ecolinguistics is a response to the legacy of colonial language policy. A clear example is found on the fifth page of the document, where it is stated that the reduction of linguistic diversity is a direct result of the systems established during colonial rule (pp. 236-237).

### **Ecolinguistics and African Literature**

For Prasanth (2019), a significant characteristic of African literature is the role of nature, which is not merely a backdrop but a contributor to the plot. African authors demonstrate a notable affinity and comfort with nature. In their literature, rural settings become the centre of the plot, with the city serving as a contrast and an undesirable setting. There is an overarching nostalgia for the serene rural countryside, and a hero in the plot is the land itself. This illustrates the struggle to reclaim the countryside and the land as the dominant form of anti-colonial resistance. A prominent example of this is Ngugi wa Thiong'o's work, in which the countryside actively participates in the rebellion. Where there is a conflict between old traditions and modern life, as in Soyinka's play *The Lion and the Jewel*, this conflict is illustrated through a contrast between two landscapes: the old, serene mountains and the modernized railroad. There are also specific, constant (and often spiritual) symbols of nature which are especially important, such as the oil palm tree in many Nigerian stories. Okri's 'The Famished Road', while primarily set in the spirit world, is intricately woven with the physical world through the protagonist and illustrates the connection to nature. In African literature, the environment serves as a backdrop to explore identity, struggle, and the preservation of culture (pp. 40-46).

The various forms of damage inflicted by multinational corporations are showcased in a wide array of African literature, including Khan and Riaz's (2024) article, which focuses on the novel *How Beautiful We Were*. American multinational oil companies engage in drilling in African rural suburbs and are responsible for water and air pollution and the creation of vile, diseased-suffering, infertile land. The colluding governments of the African rural suburbs and the oil corporations guarantee and provide an environment for 'community growth' that cloaks an advanced case of destructive development. The novel's chapters illustrate how villagers are stripped of their means of subsistence and forcibly removed from their territories as advancing technologies of environmental progress advance (pp. 372-375).

Amrutbhai (2023) discusses the methodology and fundamental principles of eco-critique in African literature. The study identifies and examines, as its primary consideration, two main themes: the linkage between literature and environmental transformations, and the literature of deforestation and land loss resulting from colonialism. The study recommends incorporating eco-critique and environmental literature into the school curriculum as a valuable pedagogical approach (pp. 52-54).

### **Chinua Achebe and Ecolinguistics**

As stated by Hariati et al. (2025), in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the Igbo people seem to possess an enriched ecological consciousness. This encompassed several interrelated features. They employed regenerative agricultural practices, including intercropping and leaving the land fallow. They understood the interdependence of their lives and the natural cycles that governed them. There was an earthy spirituality, as nature was believed to embody an earth goddess. They thought sacred sites, such as particular trees, were ancestral. They engaged in collective environmental stewardship, a communal responsibility. This dimension of their ecological wisdom was interrupted by colonialism, which fractured their relationship with nature (pp. 255-259).

Zhang and Umeanowai (2023) analyze the translation of *Things Fall Apart* into Chinese using Eco-Translatology. This study includes five aspects. The first aspect is linguistic, involving reordering sentences according to Chinese grammar. The second aspect is cultural, which involves the translation of specific Igbo items, such as kola nuts, and the occasional use of footnotes. The third aspect is communicative, focusing on the clarity of the author's message, particularly in proverbs and local time references. The fourth aspect is the book's poetic beauty, such as the descriptions of a night, which is an aesthetic aspect. The fifth aspect is rhetorical, employing powerful imagery, such as a sun that breathes fire. The translator must select and utilize all the described aspects for the text to survive in a new language (pp. 3-7).

Anwar et al. (2024) extend the field of ecological linguistics and relate it to eco-feminism. They quote Achebe, arguing that for him, to hurt women is to hurt the earth. The symbolism of Ani, the goddess of the earth, is that of a protector and preserver of the earth's produce, as well as the distributor of justice. Numerous studies draw parallels between the treatment of women and the treatment of the earth. Women are viewed as like the earth, fertile and productive, but within a patriarchal system, women are also viewed as property. This system is exploitative of women and the earth, which means the oppression of women is associated with the oppression of nature (pp. 154-156).

Reflecting on Roshan (2024), Achebe's work engages in an ecocritical analysis of the thematic concerns in Igbo culture that underscore the sustainability of farming and the spirituality of nature. This analysis illustrates the community's unique ecological relationship. Their ecological spirituality, reverence for the land, and respect for the sacred python and certain trees are well documented. The analysis illustrates the colonial exploitative predicaments of deforestation and

the killing of the sacred python, which resulted in ecological predicaments and the exploitation of the Igbo spirituality towards nature. (pp. 5-7)

### **Research Methodology**

Research design is defined by Kothari (2004) as "a conceptual structure which consists of the blueprint for data collection, measurement, and analysis of data" (p. 31). The paper employs a qualitative research design because the researcher analyzed descriptive data from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's short story, *The Headstrong Historian*, published in *The New Yorker* in 2009. Tenny et al. (2022) stated that qualitative research helps explore and gain insight into real-world issues. Whereas quantitative research answers 'how many' and 'how much' questions by collecting numerical data points, qualitative research answers open-ended questions of 'how' and 'why.' Qualitative research explains processes and patterns that are hard to quantify.

According to Kothari (2004), research design is "a conceptual structure which consists of the blueprint for data collection, measurement, and analysis of data" (p. 31). For this paper, we have chosen a qualitative approach, as the researcher engages with the descriptive data from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's short story, *The Headstrong Historian*. According to Tenny et al. (2022), qualitative research seeks to examine and understand real-world problems. While quantitative research seeks to answer 'how many' and 'how much' through the collection of numerical data, qualitative research addresses open-ended questions of 'how' and 'why'. Qualitative research addresses the processes and patterns of the phenomena that are otherwise difficult to measure.

The researcher carefully analyzed Adichie's short story, *The Headstrong Historian*, using textual analysis. As Arya (2020) states, every researcher surely knows little about textual analysis. It is a qualitative research design in which text is closely observed and understood. Textual analysis is not concerned with the structure of the text, but rather with deciphering the meanings it may convey. It is how you interpret the text. Since we do not have universal meanings, we can go beyond the surface of the written words. In addition, textual analysis is an objective process of exploring possible interpretations, rather than maintaining which ones are more true (pp. 173–175).

The researcher has collected the data through a close reading of the *short story concerned*. To identify various types of erasure and their intricate manifestations, the researcher has read and re-read passages, dialogues, and narrative sections. For each new dimension, a systematic approach was taken, focusing on passages most central to the short story's thematic complexity. The purpose of this study is to choose textual excerpts related to the research inquiries to examine the central research question and objective. The researchers attempted to understand each textual segment and its relationship to other parts of the story.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study draws on the concept of erasure espoused by Arran Stibbe in his 2015 book *Ecolinguistics: Language, Ecology and the Stories We Live By*. Arran Stibbe attempts to elucidate how language can remove, conceal, distort, or attenuate significant aspects of life. Stibbe portrays erasure as 'a story in people's minds that an area of life is unimportant or unworthy of consideration'. Stibbe asserts that erasure can manifest in absence, backgrounding, distortion, and silence (2015, 146). Moreover, Stibbe elucidates the explicit erasure of a phenomenon, in which a fully represented topic is removed from a discourse (2015, 149), and masking, in which an important reality is replaced by a less significant distortion (2015, 149). In particular, Stibbe notes that masking can denature reality by altering its presentation (2015, 150). Stibbe also describes the phenomenon of naturalization, in which certain propositions are presented as taken for granted or unchangeable, albeit erroneously (2015, 157). Stibbe also describes silence as a form of erasure

whereby people or ideas are represented in a text but are not afforded a voice (2015, 146). These concepts inform this study, which scrutinizes the colonial language in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *The Headstrong Historian* (2008), as it undermines Indigenous culture and knowledge. Stibbe's framework enables us to identify specific erasures in the text and explains their consequences for the worldview of the representation, as well as for the culture, ecology, and the people of the Igbo.

## **Analysis**

### **Erasure in *The Headstrong Historian***

According to Stibbe (2015), erasure is 'a story in people's minds that an area of life is unimportant or unworthy of consideration,' (p. 146) where the backgrounding patterns of erasure involve "absence, backgrounding or distortion" of a reality (p. 146). In this ecolinguistic reading of Adichie's *The Headstrong Historian* (2008), we identified several patterns of erasure that we are not collapsing. Each pattern is explained with examples and quotations from the text in accordance with Stibbe's definition. We argue that the colonial discourse in the story ignores and distorts recognition of the indigenous people, their knowledge and culture, and the ecology, and as a result, they are cast as peripheral or made invisible.

### **Selective Erasure**

Selective erasure is the process of ignoring specific actors and facts in a text to suggest a perceived lack of consequence. Baker and Ellece (2011) define erasure as when 'particular social actors do not appear in a text', and Leeuwen (2008) distinguishes between the total omission of actors and their being backgrounded (Stibbe, 2015, p. 147). In *The Headstrong Historian*, some selective erasure is evident in the narrative's omission of some stories and voices. One example is the colonial history book titled "The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of Southern Nigeria," which completely erases the African perspective in the title. Adichie illustrates the colonial text's omission of Indigenous people as the voices of the so-called Primitive Tribes, which are the passive objects to be pacified in the narrative. This omission signals the unimportance of Igbo voices and perspectives.

An example includes Grace's response to remarks comparing European and indigenous traditions. Savage, curious, and meaningless customs are what Sister Maureen, Grace's teacher, recalls regarding her grandmother's call-and-response songs. Maureen dismisses it as no poetry at all, claiming that primitive tribes lacked it. Grace's grandmother's tradition of poetry teaching is also ignored. The colonial narrative is also evident here as it selectively erases the existence of Igbo literary forms and practices. The narrative also captures the refusal of educated Nigerians, such as Mr. Gboyega, to integrate African history, which is often overshadowed by the dominance of the 'History of the British Empire' as the core of education. These are definitely designed to exclude indigenous history and culture as though it neither needs nor deserves it.

These examples depict selective erasure where key indigenous actors, such as tribes, grandmothers' community, African historians, and so on, are literally absent from the official narrative. The narrative is designed to diminish the relevance of local culture and history by preventing African stories from being told by anyone other than their conquerors. In Stibbe's terms, the absence of these participants in colonial discourse tells a story of their supposed unimportance.

### **Void: Explicit Erasure (Deletion)**

Explicit erasure or deletion occurs when a text overtly removes or denies the existence of something important. In Stibbe's framework, this is akin to the "void" of erasure, where something present in reality is completely omitted (Stibbe, 2015, p. 149). Adichie illustrates this with the missionaries' rewriting of identity and tradition. For instance, when Father Shanahan baptizes

Nwamgba's son, Shanahan exercises his authority by claiming "it was not possible to be baptized with a heathen name," and therefore required the child to take an English (Christian) name. In this single act, the child's Igbo name and heritage are expunged from the record: Anikwenwa is and was "Michael" (and later Peter) in colonial eyes. Adichie describes this as Nwamgba "agreed easily" because the white foreign priests demanded it. The effect is straightforward: the boy's original identity is erased, and a new one is imposed, replacing it with a Western identity. Stibbe (2015) notes that when a text uses phrases such as these without comment, it implicitly conveys to readers that indigenous names and languages are unworthy of consideration (pp. 149-150).

Similarly, the missionaries also renamed Anikwenwa's Igbo bride, Mgbeke, to Agnes. As Nwamgba remembers, "Anikwenwa said it was Agnes. ...she had been called Mgbeke before she became a Christian." The colonial narrative, however, clearly truncates her Igbo name. The grandmother even asks for Mgbeke's "real name," but Adichie's narrative shows the Christian name takes precedence. These renamings are not random; they reflect a purposeful removal of the indigenous legacy.

Void also shows the complete prohibition of traditional rituals. When Anikwenwa refuses to take the customary initiation rite, he mirrors the missionaries' sentiment: "it was a heathen custom ... that Father Shanahan had said would have to stop." Here, Adichie foregrounds the colonial dictate ("have to stop") that a native practice must be extinguished. Nwamgba even reproaches him for allowing a "foreign albino" to dictate such a change, underscoring the sharpness of the removal. The narrative thus directly silences indigenous religious practices: the initiation rite is rendered valid within it.

To summarize, overt deletion occurs when colonial language completely removes a native component, such as a name, ceremony, or value, from a discourse. Because, as Stibbe points out, direct deletion serves as a clear indicator that the colonizers' perspective is to view the non-Western as irrelevant. It is such omissions that reveal, Adichie asserts, how language (baptismal regulations, academic policies) can completely erase an indigenous identity.

### **Masking**

Mask erasure occurs when an important truth is not absent but is intentionally distorted by language. Stibbe (2015) asserts that in masking, something important is replaced by a distorted version (p. 149). Further, Stibbe (2015) draws on Baudrillard to note that a mask representation "denatures" the profound reality (p. 150). Within Adichie's story, native traits and traditions are frequently obscured by colonial interpretation. For example, Father Shanahan speaks of Nwamgba's strength and assertiveness not in appreciation, but as wildness that has to be tamed. The narrator discusses: There was something troublingly assertive about her ... much potential to be harnessed if their wildness were tamed. This Nwamgba would make a marvellous missionary among the women. Here, the grandmother's confidence is framed in a negative "wildness", suggesting that she is an undomesticated force, as it were. The colonial gaze thus masks the true agency: Nwamgba's courage and potential for leadership were there, but only to be visible as something that needed to be suppressed for missionary ends. This distortion erodes her character's dignity, recasting it as primitive.

Likewise, the foreign priests imply that the indigenous form of communicating is inferior. The narrator mentions the priests' annoyance with the Igbo language: "It infuriated him, their overlong talk and circuitous proverbs, their never getting to the point." In this quotation, Father Shanahan concedes that the ability to share proverbs is a defect. In Igbo culture, proverbs are a treasure. However, missionaries redefined the proverbs to be "circuitous" and complained that they "never get to the point." Adichie demonstrates how the colonizers redefined indigenous proverbs. The

colonizers described a complex oral culture using the derogatory terms of using too many words and wasting time. The changes to the descriptions diminish the value of the proverbs.

Another form of masking also occurs in descriptions of culture. In Grace's schooling, the indigenous world is represented only in a mocking manner. The title of the administrator's book, "*Pacification of the Primitive Tribes*," conceals the existence of complex societies and refers to them as 'tribes' that require domination. The teacher's comment that her grandmother's poetry was impossible because "primitive tribes did not have poetry" is also a mask; it conceals a rich storytelling and singing tradition, labelling it as "not poetry" and thus as no art at all. This masking characterizes the native culture in a grossly oversimplified way. The 'savages' and their 'meaningless customs' (as the text describes them) are not explored in depth. Their customs are caricatured, and their practices are painted as absurd.

With these masked representations, the story shows how colonial language distorts. Aspects of indigenous culture and indigenous people are not completely erased but are included solely in colonial representations, calling them 'wild,' 'circuitous,' and 'primitive.' To Stibbe, these masks are, in his words, 'distorted versions' of reality. Adichie demonstrates that even in the presence of native people in the text, they are often portrayed in a distorted way, thereby remeasuring

### **Naturalization**

Naturalization is presenting a socially or historically specific construct as if it were natural, inevitable, or simply the way things are. When discourses suggest that customs practices must change, they obliterate the arena of alternative possibilities. In Stibbe's terms, this constitutes a faint historical erasure, rendering oppressive practices ordinary. In Adichie's text, there are numerous instances where colonial practices are said to be naturalized, and the alternative practices of the indigenous are deemed unnatural.

One of the clearest examples provided is the description of indigenous religion in the text as 'heathen'. Anikwenwa explains to his mother that the initiation rite is a 'heathen custom' that 'would have to stop'. Labeling his ancestors' customs as 'heathen' casts the narrative as framing it as evil or ungodly and so inferior. Christianity, on the other hand, is justifiably accepted as normal, representing the right and civilized. This suggests a destined and catastrophic change: their customs are to be obliterated once the white man is here. Nwamgba's gentle act of defiance is recognized, but the trend is that the colonial perspective renders the surrender of custom and practice as tradition and natural.

Likewise, the narrative frequently employs the pronoun "we," which encompasses nature alongside people as part of the human experience. Stibbe (2015) notes that colonial accounts often contain the expression "our ecological resources," which lays claim to the natural world (p. 157). Adichie does not utilize such a phrase, although a similar instance can be cited in Father Shanahan's portrayal of himself together with Nwamgba as partners in the possession of 'the People of the living God' while suggesting the exclusion of the natives. This creates a mask of human beings as part of "others."

Another example of naturalization in the story is Grace's later reminiscences of history. It describes how, on Empire Day, Grace, exhibiting loyalty to the King, sang while interacting with alien 'commodities' like 'wallpaper' and 'coffee and chicory' (Collins). These colonial elements form an unacknowledged backdrop to the education she receives. The colonial curriculum is her natural world, and African perspectives are conspicuously absent. The narrative thus portrays education as naturalized as a means of absorbing foreign culture.

Lastly, there is Adichie's reference to the gods being "converted." Following her history of having multiple miscarriages, she registers with astonishment that "even the gods had changed and no longer asked for palm wine but for gin." The use of palm gin, a colonial commodity, within the

context of a religious ceremony demonstrates the complete dominance of wine and the Christian culture that supplanted the ritualized traditional religion, as though it were part of the natural order. The narrative illustrates the acceptance of this spiritual alteration. This is, in fact, Adichie's demonstration that the military presence of colonialism has rendered the performance of indigenous customs ritualistically impossible, so much so that the "converted" alter the deceased. Examples such as these show the acceptance of colonial dominance and the colonial order, stripping indigenous alternatives of viability. This aligns with Stibbe's account of erasure patterns that function through backgrounding as a mode of naturalization. By the end of the narrative, colonial religion and values are depicted as simply the order of things, and any resistance is characterized as deviant.

### **Silence**

According to Stibbe (2015), silencing occurs when people or ideas are present but never get a voice. In the story, silencing overlaps with both erasure and backgrounding (p. 146). This suggests that individuals are often rendered voiceless. For example, when Anikwenwa departs for Lagos to study, there is a moment when Nwamgba screams, "How can you leave me? Who will bury me when I die?" This is the only time her opposition is included in the story. Then, when her son returned as a catechist, Nwamgba said nothing as he made the declaration. She hears the news, yet has no utterance to present any further accompaniment as to what she has to say. This part of the story depicts her actions (sharpening her hair comb), and yet no part of the narrative mentions any statement to her. Thus, her viewpoint is silenced when it is most prescriptive.

Mgbeke, too, undergoes silence. When she is beaten for refusing to worship the river goddess, the author only describes her as 'harassed' before Nwamgba soothes her. In this scene, Adichie remains silent on the Christian elders and the injured woman. Their rage is conveyed only through reported speech. Later, Mgbeke quietly confides to Nwamgba that she has suffered miscarriages, but she is very subdued. The narrative says Nwamgba "asked for the baby's real name. Anikwenwa cleared his throat and said she had been called Mgbeke...". Even here, Mgbeke does not speak; it is Anikwenwa who reports her name change. The native woman's own voice is missing entirely from the text.

When these characters are not invited to speak for themselves, the narrative is performing a form of erasure. Silencing is a powerful linguistic erasure: if no one hears a complaint or explanation, it is as though it never existed. This aligns with the definition of erasure provided by Stibbe (2015), whereby it is said to cover any means by which texts draw attention away (p. 146). The internal thoughts and feelings of Nwamgba and Mgbeke are backgrounded, and their voices are rendered absent, allowing missionary and elder male family members to dominate the narrative. The consequence is a text in which indigenous women are physically present but rhetorically absent, reinforcing the idea that their perspectives have been erased from history.

### **Backgrounding**

Backgrounding is a subtle type of erasure. In this, something still matters but is pushed to the side. In Stibbe's terms, an erasure pattern may not omit something entirely but backgrounds it, treating it as marginal (2015, p. 146). In *The Headstrong Historian*, the backgrounding of the indigenous characters is commonplace. For instance, Nwamgba often confronts situations, yet her responses are not given adequate room. When Anikwenwa mentions his new role as a Christian to her, the narrative states that "Nwamgba said nothing" as she continues carving her pottery. The narrative captures her silence, albeit in a basic manner, and does not offer readers a deeper understanding of her emotions. Instead, only a certain degree of shock or sadness is presented, without elaboration. A similar pattern appears during the Christian wedding ceremony, in which it is said, "Nwamgba bore it silently." The narrative captures her silence, albeit in a basic manner, and does not offer

readers a deeper understanding of her emotional perplexity. She quickly moves on to other issues in the narrative. A potentially important instance of resistance is relegated to a muted line in the background.

Let us further examine the reactions of the village women, particularly their initial response to the religious changes introduced to the village. For instance, the scene where Mgbeke refuses to participate in the river-bathing ritual, angering the village women, who believe she has offended the goddess Oyi. Although this worries them, they only mention this concisely. Shortly after, Father O' Donnell interjects and speaks to the elders, and the women are not allowed to express their beliefs and emotions, as there seems to be no waiting for their responses, and their perspectives are noticeably absent within the margins of the narrative.

The examples above make evident the narrative background of indigenous agency in these scenarios. Although the actions and emotions of Nwamgba and the women are documented, their voices are relegated to the periphery, making them less significant. By backgrounding native resistance or discourse, the text implicitly erases it: readers must infer their feelings rather than hear them explicitly. As a result, the story centers on colonial or Christian actions while treating indigenous agency as a faint echo in the background.

### **Vocabulary Erasure: Overlexicalization/ Underlexicalization**

Stibbe (2015) cites Fairclough's observation that abstract language can cause people to be absent or backgrounded (p. 146). In addition to analyzing erasure, Stibbe also notes that specific vocabulary choices can obscure the truth. Overlexicalization refers to the use of abstract or generalized language that conceals a particular reality, whereas under-lexicalization is the absence of vocabulary for a specific reality, rendering it inexpressible. In the narrative, colonial discourse tends to use broad phrases to conflate different people and then describe their words and expressions for indigenous institutions in a vacuum. For instance, colonial authors refer to entire cultures as 'Primitive Tribes' or 'black heathens.' These broad labels erase the internal complexity of societies by reducing them to a singular category. Describing the Igbo as 'primitive tribes' or 'heathens' renders them as faceless, nameless people who are members of a generalized, simplified social unit. Such noun phrases contain a high level of generalization, and their complexity is often hidden.

Simultaneously, it reflects the colonizers' restricted vocabulary in relation to indigenous concepts. The missionaries repeatedly apply the term 'heathen' to classify all that is non-Christian. This one term substitutes a plethora of more nuanced indigenous beliefs. For example, the Igbo earth goddess, Oyi, is mentioned once by name, and subsequently, all indigenous gods are merely referred to as 'heathen.' The narrative never provides more specific designations for local deities or practices, rendering them lexically invisible to the colonizers. This is how the narrative under-lexicalizes Igbo spirituality.

On the other hand, significant aspects of local life are often described in a passive or abstract manner. Igbo food, rituals, and proverbs are often described in background neutral terms. After Nwamgba's son acquires a Western education, her mat-sweeping task is described as being 'neglected.' The narrative does not mention the sport Anikwenwa misses (wrestling) and only states that he rejoins his companions who 'swept the village square.' Such under-lexicalization conceals what is being lost. The text makes it seem trivial by not associating names with the games or songs he misses.

Overgeneralizing and abstracting indigenous lives in the story are consequences of the colonial language, and this is also true of Stibbe's overarching argument that any form of "lexicalization" is a site of erasure. While Stibbe does not mention these particular terms, his discussion of nominalization and abstraction suggests that replacing specific details with broad terms is intended

to erase the concreteness of the living. Examples of this are evident in Adichie's text, where colonial terms and abstractions culminate in a vocabulary of erasure, leaving the majority of the Igbo world unspoken and, therefore, erased.

### **Colonial Narratives and the Erasure of Indigenous Knowledge**

Adichie vividly shows how stories themselves can be erased when colonial narratives are imposed as absolute truth. Stibbe (2015) explains that erasure is a story in people's minds that something is absent or unimportant (p. 146). Stibbe stresses that erasure is centred on the narrative, in which the dominant narrative determines what matters and what does not. In the story, the imposed colonial story is that of missionary "civilization" and European supremacy, which eradicates or replaces the Igbo view. This is clearly seen in Grace's training, where she reads a colonial text written by a foreign administrator about local people, who "were titillated by their curious and meaningless customs." This represents the colonial narrative of the Igbo as a spectacle, as a curiosity. In contrast, when her grandmother teaches her poetry, Grace is told that 'primitive tribes did not have poetry.' The colonial narrative thus obliterates her own grandmother's art, as if it had never existed.

Another example is the way colonial history is taught as the only history. Grace is instructed to sing '*God Save Our Gracious King*' and is taught to perform arithmetic exercises on mixing coffee and chicory, subjects irrelevant to her own life. Simultaneously, African history is depicted as worthless: Mr. Gboyega resigned in disgust after being asked to teach it. The outcome is that Grace's education obliterates her own history. Only one colonial point of view is taught, and that too through dry history and narratives, in which foreign kings and men with guns are the only actors. Much later, Grace comes to understand that her schooling was constricted to the colonial narrative and that her people's reality (the destruction of their village with guns) was omitted. The colonial stories are the only ones "allowed" in her textbooks and at school, to the point that Grace has to visit libraries and consult oral histories to reconstruct her grandmother's world. The indigenous story is erased through narrative dominance. The colonizers' story becomes the only one told. The book Grace eventually writes is titled "*Pacifying with Bullets: A Reclaimed History of Southern Nigeria*", a direct inversion of the colonial title.

These impositions of story traumatize culture. The author demonstrates her robust linguistic control by telling a story that highlights the savagery of the colonizers' indigenous knowledge, as they drive the local culture to the very edge of the narrative, to the point of total oblivion. The indigenous knowledge of the people is erased. The Europeans have closed off native discourse with a single powerful narrative. In *The Headstrong Historian*, colonial ideology is the pervasive story that erases sustainable indigenous ways of living, requiring the heroine, Grace, to "reclaim" what was lost.

### **Trivialization**

Trivialization refers to the practice of giving significant matters scant attention, as if they are inconsequential. Stibbe (2015) notes that erasure often acts like an appraisal, declaring something bad to be unimportant or giving the impression that it is unworthy of one's attention (p. 146). The colonial characters in *The Headstrong Historian* exhibit this attitude regarding the numerous issues raised by the indigenes.

For instance, 'native parents pampered their children too much,' says one priest, referring to how missionaries flog children for being slow or for disobedience. This attitude invalidates the Igbo culture of parenting by perceiving it as lenience or carelessness. The real issue, i.e., an unexpressed harsh treatment of children in schooling, is swept under the rug. The text illustrates how the foreign instructor disrespects Nwamgba and Ayaju by trivializing their care, as if it were mere spoilage.

Nevertheless, another example is the colonial reaction to Mgbeke's tears. After the rejection of her faith hurts Mgbeke, Nwamgba "silently carve[s] designs on her pottery while Mgbeke cried, uncertain of how to handle a woman crying about things that did not deserve tears." The phrase "things that did not deserve tears" is the narrator's own voice, indicating that the story itself considers Mgbeke's suffering trivial. This neglect of the universal sadness over the long-enduring and immediate loss of the numerous and uncounted pregnancies is disturbing. This small but prominent condescension to emotional ostentation is present in the neglect of the long-enduring impact of colonially induced sadness.

Likewise, the story mocks indigenous marriage rites. When Nwamgba protests the substitution of Christian vows for traditional ones, her concerns are dismissed. The impression is given that what Nwamgba calls sacred and purposeful is merely a "strange" ceremony. For instance, Grace recalls puzzling over imperial songs like "God Save Our Gracious King" and colonial textbook terms like "wallpaper" and "dandelions," which she could not even picture. The complex reality of her schooling is portrayed as a comedic misunderstanding in the text. Here again, indigenous students' legitimate confusion is treated as a trivial puzzle.

From these examples of trivialization, Adichie showcases the negative consequences of language. The drawing of the native world as minor takes shape when descriptions are filled with oddities, insignificance, and things of no worth. This parallels Stibbe's view of how something can be erased through negative expressions without needing to substantiate it. As a result, unique local customs and feelings are often left out of the dominant colonial narrative.

Overall, applying Stibbe's erasure theory to Adichie's work demonstrates how language manifests colonial violence. From the wholesale erasure of names and traditions to the more nefarious practices of backgrounding and the trivialization of the life of the colonized, the text abounds with omissions that make the Igbo people, their culture, and their ecology untraceable. Each of the examples above illustrates the pattern of linguistic erasure, whether through erasure, metaphorical masking, trivialization, the naturalization of a colonial viewpoint, the subjection of indigenous people to silence, or the abstraction of language, all of which are manifestations of the systemic undermining of indigenous existence by colonial discourse. The analysis underscores Stibbe's central claim that when an area of life is systematically erased from discourse, it becomes treated as unimportant. In *The Headstrong Historian*, the stories we hear are essentially those of the colonizers, and Adichie skillfully exposes how this erasure of voice and knowledge sustains harmful ideologies.

## **Conclusion**

This article analyses Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *The Headstrong Historian* and employs Arran Stibbe's framework of erasure. The analysis examines various forms of linguistic erasure in the text, including selective erasure, deletion, masking, naturalization, silence, backgrounding, and vocabulary erasure. In the text, erasure takes the form of character name changes, the Igbo religion and customs being disregarded, women being muted, indigenous knowledge being overruled, and colonial education being selective. The study addresses the colonial attitude that, in the narrative, the Igbo culture and people are perceived as a lower-response, less significant, and, in all respects, a curious culture. It also describes the extent to which this form of erasure is likely to conceal the importance of indigenous ecology, identity, and history. In the world of the text, the study demonstrates, through qualitative textual analysis, that the colonial narrative is the only acceptable narrative within the realm of normal civilization. Adichie exposes these elements to demonstrate how the consequences of these patterns and the remnants of native cultures are embedded in memories and, as a form of culture, remain unexercised. The study advocates for indigenous cultures, where erased knowledge requires attention to memory and preservation.

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