

*Precarious Discourse, Discursive Precarity: Chris Cleave's (Postcolonial) Refugee Novel Little Bee (The Other Hand) (2008)*

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**Introduction**

Flight narratives and asylum accounts give voice to refugees to allow them to convey their extreme experiences of persecution, precarity, and poverty during their often life-threatening journeys to host countries, where they also often face unwelcoming hostility. Alongside the need to provide refugees and asylees with physical and psychological support, flight and asylum accounts,

in addition to their focus on the hardships and terrors, often posit the critical importance of language. On the one hand, the vital resources of knowledge and power that come with language are crucial for survival in the foreign, precarious, and dangerous environments that refugees inevitably face and often illegally inhabit. On the other hand, language also plays a central role for refugees in providing their accounts in order to be granted official refugee status. Yet, language also controls the representation of refugees in the dominant social and media discourse in the host country, since their reception and treatment (and, accordingly, social inclusion or exclusion) are strongly affected by existing prejudices and stereotypes.

Chris Cleave's 2008 novel *Little Bee* (a.k.a. *The Other Hand*, henceforth: *Little Bee*) recounts the story of 16-year-old Little Bee, a refugee from the violent oil conflicts in Nigeria, who is illegally released from a British detention centre and turns to Sarah O'Rourke, a white middle-class British woman who works as a magazine editor. Sarah is Bee's only English acquaintance: previously, during an incident on a Nigerian beach, Sarah allowed attackers to cut off one of her fingers in exchange for them sparing the young Nigerian girl's life. Later, following an incident in which Sarah's four-year-old son was nearly lost, Bee, in the act of rescuing him, is caught by the police and deported, despite the futile efforts of her two English friends (Sarah and her lover) to save her.

The novel foregrounds Little Bee's transformation following the traumatizing events in her home country and her arrival in the UK, where she is faced with the necessity of either assuming an artificial identity of exemplary Britishness, or, alternatively, selling her body. In spite of official recognition of Nigerian English as a "legitimate national variety" of English (Kperogi 2015, 4), Bee is obliged to learn the Queen's English, which she does during her two-year confinement in the detention centre. In order to be granted the right to engage in dialogue with representatives of the host country, she is also schooled in appropriate conduct. The novel thus emphasises the consequences of the postcolonial encounter as well as the on-going colonial linguistic imperialism, which exposes its postcolonial 'others' to the efficiencies of the harsh British immigration system. Especially since the invocation of former Home Secretary Theresa May's "hostile environment" policy in 2012, this system has even enforced conditions for refugees and asylees that result in what can be said to constitute post-colonial precarity.

In what follows, I will draw on postcolonial discourse theories in order to address the function of language in the perception and treatment of refugees in the UK, arguing that language not only operates as a means of 'othering', but also plays a decisive role in the worsening of the precarious position of those already at the bottom of the social and political ladder. The main focus of my analysis will be on refugee identity and the response

of refugees to the various demands of acculturation in a system that has already placed them socially, culturally, and linguistically on the fringes. The speech acts of the persecution victims in the novel will be approached through an inquiry into the semantic layering of their (social) voices and, ultimately, into their position of symbolic hybridity. Accordingly, my paper will also look at the formulation and stylisation of Little Bee's narrative as well as the function of the literary devices employed, especially Cleave's use of irony, as these particularly emphasise the two-way nature of the dialogue, which draws attention to the postcolonial precarity epitomised in the binary construction of tourist/host and refugee/homeless, clearly portraying the different positions as conceptualised in the "us" and "them" paradigm. Even though the tourists in this case (Sarah and her husband Andrew) become involved in the precarious situation of the 'other', their position towards Little Bee, at the moment of crisis, is brought into moral question. To that extent, I argue that although refugees are faced with the necessity of learning the host country's language, which Bee does, they can nevertheless, through imitation, achieve a subversive refraction of its negative discourse. As Bhabha has stated, this can be defined as a form of hybridity that is viewed as producing the symbolic displacement of colonial power and domination, thereby achieving a form of subversion through evoked ambivalence (Bhabha 1994, 111-112). This ambivalence, which is derived from the interplay of mimicry and mockery, sets out to unsettle the unitary ideals of the colonial authority (Bhabha

1994, 85). Yet, unfortunately, Bee's mimicry does not help her to move beyond her precarious postcolonial condition, as she is stuck in what I will term a 'limbo' situation, exemplified at the end of the novel as she is once again persecuted by Nigerian soldiers. Her fate may become the same as that of her sister, who unlike Bee, was not able to flee to England but gang raped, tortured, and eventually killed.

### **The Nigerian Oil Wars, Rape, and Asylum-Seeking in the UK**

Ever since the discovery of crude oil in the Niger Delta in 1956, the inhabitants of this region, in particular, have faced a surge of European explorers, and, following independence in 1960, of their own state authorities (Ukeje 2011, 84). As a result of oil export revenue, the Nigerian Delta is the most militarised region in the country (Ukeje 2011, 83). However, in addition to inter-communal violence, governmental security forces also commit crimes against the people of this region, including rape, sexual torture, and homicide. Lenning and Brightman's 2008 study on state crimes in Nigeria reported a widespread abuse of women by military officials for the purpose of instilling fear in Nigerian citizens and asserting "the state power over rebel forces and their communities" (Lenning and Brightman 2009, 41; also 35-36). A 2006 Amnesty International report presented numerous cases of rape as well as individual

testimonies confirming the state terror being carried out on Nigerian citizens. Women's rape claims against police officers, however, are either left uninvestigated, or, if insufficient evidence is provided under the prevailing law (e.g. under Sharia law, four male witnesses for a court case), may result in punishment of the victim for having had an extramarital affair (Amnesty International 2006, 25-27). Flight is also an unfavourable option, given that gender persecution (e.g. the threat of rape) is not considered a valid reason for seeking asylum in many host countries, among them, the UK.

The Human Rights Watch report "Detention and Denial of Women Asylum Seekers in the UK" states that more than half of all women who seek asylum in the UK are victims of sexual violence (2010). In addition, the report highlights the fact that the victim's ability to testify to sexual violence before the United Kingdom Border Agency (UKBA) officers and legal representatives is often hindered not only by the language barrier (and mistrust), but also due to cultural differences that exacerbate the asylum seeker's difficulty, or even inability, to give an account of their traumatic experiences.

This state of uncertainty, in which refugees and asylees in the UK dwell, is represented in Chris Cleave's novel *Little Bee*, and is particularly detailed in the portrayal of the protagonist's experiences in the Black Hill Immigration Removal Centre. During the time Cleave was writ-

ing the novel, Nigeria ranked among the top ten nationalities of asylum applicants in the UK. Between 2006 and 2007, it was among the top eight nationalities for asylum removal and, in 2007, had the highest number of asylum detainees (Home Office Asylum Statistics 2006 and 2007). The case of the fictional character Little Bee is therefore exemplary of many contemporary cases of refugees facing an institutional and bureaucratic struggle to seek asylum.

### **Chris Cleave's *Little Bee* (2008) – Precarious Discourse, Discursive Precarity**

*Little Bee* (2008) is Chris Cleave's second novel, preceded by *Incendary* (2005), an epistolary novel recounting the mourning of a young mother after her husband and four-year-old son are killed during a bombing at a football match. In this subsequent novel, the prevalent topics include global political conflicts alongside the themes of violence and terror, as Cleave sheds light on the Nigerian oil wars, the inadequacies of the British immigration system, and the inhuman treatment of refugees by the former colonial power. The author constructs his narrative along the lines of a dual perspective in order to portray the two contrasting worlds: "the developed and the developing" (Cleave Q&A 2008). Cleave's career as a journalist arguably contributed to the representation of Sarah and Andrew's work environments, and his depiction of the detention centre was informed by his work

at Campsfield House at Oxfordshire, which, he admits, has enabled him to identify humour as a survival strategy in the accounts of numerous asylum seekers (Cleave in Wood 2012), to which his more recent work also testifies (Cleave 2016, 25-34)<sup>1</sup>. In an effort to provide a vivid narrative of serious incidents and to create a balance between joy and grief, Cleave incorporates humour in his writing as a counterbalance to the horror that people in precarious situations have had to endure (Cleave Q&A 2008; Seattle Reads 2011). Borrowing from Judith Butler, I claim that the novel thus more generally solicits “images of distant suffering in ways that compel our concern and move us to act, that is, to voice our objection and register our resistance to such violence through concrete political means” (Butler 2012, 135). In addition, the novel addresses the idea of “ethical relations” that are necessary for developing a willingness for cohabitation with even those who are distant, or “‘human’ in the abstract” (Butler 2012, 138).

Cleave asserts that *Little Bee* is not based on a true story, but that his main inspiration for the writing of this novel was the 2006 case of Angolan refugee Manuel Bravo, who hanged himself shortly before he and his 13-year-old son were due to be deported. With his suicide, Bravo wanted to ensure his son’s stay in the UK as an unaccompanied minor (Cleave Q&A 2008; Herbert and Judd 2006). At the age of 16, the Nigerian girl Little Bee is also an unaccompanied minor, who nevertheless faces

deportation due to her illegal status in the UK. Another child character in the novel is Charlie, based on Cleave's 4-year-old son, who at that time identified with Batman (Cleave Q&A 2008). The author additionally researched Nigerian English and Jamaican English to create distinctive speech styles appropriate to the different characters in the novel (Cleave Q&A 2008). In order to highlight the 'haves' and 'have-nots', the socially accepted and the wilfully 'othered', Cleave differentiates not only between the perception of the two narrators, Little Bee and Sarah, and the overlaps and gaps in their knowledge, but also between their usage of vocabulary, grammar, and idiom (Cleave Q&A 2008).

Cleave's *Little Bee* is a novel told from the alternating explicitly intradiegetic homodiegetic narrative perspectives (Genette 1980, 248) of the two main characters, Little Bee and Sarah, in which each change of the narrating I is clearly demarcated by the opening of a new chapter. Interestingly, the two different titles of the novel, *Little Bee* (in the USA) and *The Other Hand* (in the UK)<sup>2</sup>, also allude to the two protagonists, thereby also engaging in a triangular transatlantic dialogue. Despite the different vocabulary, style, and impressions of the two narrators, the idea of survival unites them by interweaving their perceptions in a moving dialogue. The two narrative perspectives interrelate at several levels: firstly, they complement each other in the retelling of the story; secondly, they inter-lap, as each of the narrators represents the

other in the recounting, adding, accordingly, to each woman's image as both character and narrator. Thirdly, as the creation of the image of each of the narrators is inevitably a constructed one, in and through the representation of the other, the commentary on the other character-narrator also serves as an implicit self-characterisation. This complex interaction of the two main characters highlights the narrators' unconscious responses to the descriptions of the actions by the other, confirming, rejecting, or adding to them. As Laura Savu argues, the shared construction of the narrative by the two voices "challenges the politics of subject formation that necessitates the making of 'the other' [...] which have been relegated to the global periphery and to the static identities without agencies" (Savu 2014, 92). The predominant presence of Bee as narrator of her story over the other parallel plot of Sarah's life also plays an important role in the novel's emphasis on the refugee narrative, highlighting her ambivalent identity. Although Bee finds herself denaturalised and robbed of her identity (Cleave 2008, 19), her conscious adoption of the Queen's English is still influenced by Nigerian English, both in her effort to distance herself from it, and in the usage of culture-specific idioms and words. Ironically, Sarah earns her living through writing in the British English idiom, hence the two narrative voices interact to develop an argument regarding the prestige and profitability of the British Standard.

Apart from the symbolic dialogue between Little Bee and Sarah – due to the chapter division, they do not really communicate with each other – Little Bee also employs the communicative function of the narrator (Genette 1980, 255-256), as she occasionally directly addresses the reader using the second-person pronoun, thus buying into Butler’s idea of addressing the host and asking for “a willingness for cohabitation with even those who are distant, or “‘human’ in the abstract” (Butler 2012, 138). At the beginning of the novel, Bee contrasts the inquisitive and the amazed responses of “the [...] girls from back home” with a second-person ‘you’ (Cleave 2008, 6), who would immediately understand her expressions without interrupting her for clarifications. Thus, she positions herself as the narrator, who imagines the story as a dialogue with the addressee, as she comments on the fact that the reason for her spending two years learning the Queen’s English is “so that you and I could speak like this without an interruption” (Cleave 2008, 6). This relationship is not affected by the questionable reliability of each of the narrators, as both accounts are affected by specific traumatic experiences.

In addition, the novel incorporates dramatic irony into the characters’ knowledge gaps, which take place in each other’s absence, e.g. during conversations between Lawrence (Sarah’s lover) and Sarah concerning Bee’s faith, and in the disclosure that Bee has been hiding her knowledge of Andrew’s suicide. The symbolic dialogue

between the two narrators encoded in the novel's structure is therefore marked by ambiguity, and, as a careful reading reveals, by subtle implicit hints of foreshadowing that are skilfully incorporated into the subsequent narration. In what follows, I will investigate the construction of the novel's discourse more closely, with an emphasis on the postcolonial precarity of the refugees depicted, as it relates to their non-standard speech and the broken dialogue that pushes them to the margins of society.

Cleave's novel *Little Bee* shows differing yet predominantly negative attitudes of British citizens towards New Englishes, such as Jamaican English and Nigerian English, and thereby calls attention to the contemporary role of Standard British English and the Received Pronunciation (RP) for refugees who flee to the UK. The first major incident in which usage of non-native English is shown as a deficiency is when Yvette, one of the girls with whom *Little Bee* is illegally released from detention, is unable to call a taxi, and her directions "[...] the place I is right now is called Black Hill Immigration Removal" are met with the response "[y]ou people are scum" (Cleave 2008, 12; italics i.o.). Apart from the directness with which she formulates her expression, its indeterminability, foreignness, and distance from the British Standard, in conjunction with the name of the immigration centre, have an unsettling effect on the local taxi driver. When confronted with Yvette's hybrid language

and the identity he associates with it, he activates a defence mechanism through the use of generalisation and insult. Pidgins and creoles are recognised as prime examples of linguistic hybridity (Ashcroft, Griffith, and Tiffin 2007, 108), and according to Bhabha's description of hybridity, represents a questioning of authority (Bhabha 1994, 113). As Robert Phillipson points out, the production of a new language as a representation of the native identity is in opposition to the "linguistic ideology" (Phillipson 1992, 117) implicit in the imperial demands for uniformity and blind mimicking of what they consider to be their superior voice. Thus, by exemplifying the negative attitude towards linguistic hybridity, Cleave exposes the roots and modes of contemporary racism, and the continuing colonial practice of the uniformisation of linguistic imperialism.

The textbook *Life in the United Kingdom: A Journey to Citizenship* (Home Office 2005), which aims to assimilate refugees into British life, culture, and values, and to instruct them on "how to fit in" (Cleave 2008, 49), is a prime example of the misconceptions of postmodern missionaryism. Cleave opens his novel with a quotation from *Life in the UK*, which, ironically, contains a typographical error, and in one of his interviews he further criticises the low quality of the manual (Cleave Q&A 2008). In the initial stages of the spread of English as a world language, Braj Kachru points out that the colonizers did not teach their language too well "on 'non-group' Asians and Africans with the underlying idea

being that the colonizers' code, if shared equally with the colonized, would reduce the distance between the rulers and the ruled" (Kachru 1990 [1986], 22). The unequal knowledge distribution in the detention centres resembles the imperialist modes of inadequate language education that is not only ill-suited to the cultural needs of the particular country, but is also deliberately poor. As the novel shows, Britain continues to give selective and unrefined knowledge to its potential, yet unwanted, subjects, and this can be interpreted not only as negligence, but also as a means of securing the superiority of the representatives of the British education system and nation. The stereotype of the uneducated, 'savage', and illegal immigrant that is thereby constructed, combined with the dehumanising depiction of refugees in the media (Esses and Medianu 2013; Allan and Blinder 2013), accordingly leads to a surge of racism, xenophobia and lack of empathy, as well as erasure. The erasure that follows the reduction of the language of the refugee (or, in other words, subaltern) to noise, gibberish, or animalistic utterances, similar to the Caliban-Prospero paradigm, is accompanied by the reduction of the asylee to a precarious position within the hegemonic (state) power and refugee regime. The widespread prejudice towards refugees as "a drain on resources" (Cleave 2008, 246) and as unable to integrate (Dempster and Hargrave 2017), is thus partly rooted in the restricted knowledge resources provided to detained victims of persecution and, more generally, refugees.

To counter the argument that the discrimination exemplified in the case of Yvette may be motivated solely by the taxi driver's individual xenophobic attitude towards detained immigrants, the novel provides another example of language usage. When Bee modifies her way of speaking and attempts to replicate the Queen's English in an assumed British identity, she succeeds in convincing another cab driver to come to the detention centre. However, her misinterpretation of the different meanings of the word "cock", and her kindly-meant calling of the driver one results in the following response, "[d] *on't they teach you monkeys any manners in the jungle*" (Cleave 2008, 57; italics i.o.), and his driving away. Here, the unusual semanticisation of the word "cock" not only breaks the dialogue, but is also met with degradation and dehumanisation in response. As a consequence, Bee learns that the markedness and difference of her utterances may stigmatise her as an outsider, and she thus tries to mimic the British means of expression in terms of content and formulation.

Little Bee's language learning is juxtaposed with the first-language acquisition of Charlie, who is taught the British standard by his mother, Sarah. As a four-year-old child, he also uses non-standard language, and is constantly corrected for the purpose of helping him to speak properly. Little Bee, however, who has been brought up and, presumably, educated in Nigerian English, is prevented from using her language, despite its

official recognition as a standard variety, and faces degradation and mockery during her learning of British English. This comparison shows the double standard epitomised in society's understanding of a child's language acquisition and, on the contrary, the humiliation faced by refugees in their effort to learn the host country's language, a situation which can be defined as "postcolonial linguistic precarity".

The significant role the language of the receiving country plays for the survival of the refugees is also represented in the case of the two unnamed girls who leave the detention centre with Little Bee and Yvette. One of these girls deliberately remains silent throughout most of her appearances in the novel and does not disclose her name, out of fear of the impending danger of her identity being revealed. Even though her case has been officially confirmed, the terror she has experienced prevents her from recognising any place as a safe place. This constant fear of being discovered by the terrorists from the home village is also revealed in the character of Little Bee, yet, in contrast to Bee's reliance on Sarah, the unnamed girl does not allow herself to trust anyone, and her lost belief in humanity permanently silences her. The other fully mute character, whom Bee calls "Sari Girl", is completely disempowered by her inability to speak the language of the host country. She is stuck in constant knowledge deprivation and disorientation, and her release from Black Hill is not characterised by

a feeling of freedom, but by being trapped in hopelessness, and metaphorically speaking, in utter precarity. Her suicide in the barn following her ‘release’, in conjunction with the many other suicide cases in the detention centre, signifies the fatal consequences of flight on the refugee’s mental health. Following the maxim introduced in the novel as “[t]o survive, you must look good or talk good” (Cleave 2008, 6; italics i.o.), refugees are deprived of an identity of their own and, to survive, must conform to the host country’s beauty ideals, speak in the way that is considered ‘proper’, or sell their bodies.

To be more precise, Little Bee uses a form of linguistic hybridity – and in that sense, ambivalence – as she combines her imitation of the Queen’s English with references to expressions characteristic of her native country and culture, thus producing a unique process of hybridisation, which, according to Bakhtin’s discourse theory, can be described as a process of hybridisation that effectively illuminates the mimicked social voice (Bakhtin 1981, 361). Hybridisation, according to Bakhtin, is the mixture of two social languages, or in Bakhtin’s terms, of a two-fold linguistic consciousness within an utterance (Bakhtin 1981, 358). Bakhtin views the process of creating a new hybrid as an illumination of an individual’s language and ideology through someone else’s language, and an overcoming of the illusory otherness of another’s language (Bakhtin 1981, 361; 365). Applied to Little Bee’s use of language, it becomes obvious that

she does not identify with the Queen's English and its underlying conduct and values, but instead, engages in an imitation of its social ideal. Only after this 'mirroring image' is constructed, is she allowed to participate in a dialogue with the citizens of the receiving country in the sense of what Bhabha perceives as mockery, which complements the notion of mimicry, and thus the constant threat of having to use the civilising imperialistic discourse (Bhabha 1994, 86).

Throughout the novel, *Little Bee* alludes to the replacement of her native language and culture with the British one. She emphasises the artificiality of this act of masking her identity through the strong presence of the colour grey in her narrative, the colour she also chooses for the official flag of refugees (Cleave 2008, 76). In the paradoxical essence of being a person of colour who is yet without a colour, grey epitomises both the denaturalisation of refugees as well as their state of 'limbo', in other words their liminality – and, by extension, their postcolonial precarity. In fact, her description of a refugee as “a Halfling, a child of an unnatural mating, an unfamiliar face of the moon” (Cleave 2008, 8) represents the threshold position, or, as Michael Jackson claims, “the wild oscillations between polar extremes – here and there, past and present [...] immediate and imagined” (Jackson 2013, 101). Moreover, her statement fully incorporates the sense of Bakhtin's notion of intentional hybridity (Bakhtin 1981, 360-361), as her

narrative is formulated in a hybrid (double-voiced) language. The feeling of in-betweenness, which characterises the refugee's non-belonging, and thus, precarity, is given a strongly negative connotation in its depiction as an assumed impurity, a typification of the discourse of a supposedly corrupt and degenerate species (Cleave 2008, 8; 57). Here, the recognisable expressions of another's language are those that dominate the media and social discourse, and by imitating them, Bee exposes and mocks the derogatory discourse about refugees.

Little Bee not only learns the Queen's English but also successfully replicates the allegedly authoritative social voices that come along with it. This can be explained by Frantz Fanon's assertion that "[t]o speak a language is to take on a world, a culture" and just as in Fanon's experience, Little Bee is also given "honorary citizenship" by replicating the "white man's language" (Fanon 1986 [1967], 38). Eventually, her effort to sound non-refugee in her taxi phone call is rewarded with an affirmation "[...] you don't talk like one of them" (Cleave 2008, 15), enhancing the postcolonial "us and them" paradigm. Without her outer appearance as a black woman able to be seen, evaluated, and stereotyped by the host culture, her imitation of the prestigious standard language ensures her treatment as an individual who is British enough to make use of the public services provided.

Bee's understanding of the attitude she needs to replicate is grounded in the colonial savage-civilised binary

construct imposed on her encounters with the Western world. Ironically, her image of the savage is constituted by the overly polite expression of gratitude (Cleave 2008, 3-4) and the linguistic richness of the native variety of her own tongue, which are exact opposites of the occidental stereotype of the savage as unrefined, crude, and barbarian. The shifts to Nigeria-specific expressions in Cleave's novel are often indicated by the expression "in my country" (Cleave 2008, 46) and set apart from "in your country" (Cleave 2008, 189). In her exploration of the demands of the host language and culture, Little Bee also puts varying degrees of Nigerian-ness and their effect on the English locals to the test to determine the assimilationist needs within the framework of her own self-construction. For example, culture-specific proverbs help to build a symbolic bridge between the two worlds and provide basis for transcultural communication. Yet, Little Bee invents proverbs, which are met with two contrasting responses: the friendly approval of Sarah, who appreciates Bee's imagination, and the negative disregard of Lawrence, whose response is demeaning. The invented proverb "*A wolf must be a wolf and a dog must be dog*" (Cleave 2008, 180; italics i.o.) is itself a hybrid construct that employs non-African symbols (e.g. wolf and dog) to signify an assumedly Nigerian identity, and thus mocks the inscription of her own national identity. Lawrence's statement that people in Europe "[a]re a little more house-trained" (Cleave 2008, 186), is intended to safeguard Western superiority and to secure the divide between the supposed First and Third Worlds. Through-

out the novel, Lawrence's hostile attitude towards Little Bee becomes apparent in his repetition of the derogatory use of "civilization" (Cleave 2008, 216), which he uses to assert the image of Bee as an underdeveloped subject of inferior status ("born-again citizen of the developing world", Cleave 2008, 8; italics mine), and thus to retain a distance in their power relation, putting Bee in a position of postcolonial precarity. In another instance, Little Bee mocks Lawrence's and the overall Western world's distorted conception of civilisation by exposing their perverted pride of killing with a computer mouse click (Cleave 2008, 241), and contrasting it to the insane barbaric soldiers in her home country. This is only one of numerous instances in which Bee employs irony and wit to respond to the precarity that dominates her life.

To be more precise, Bee's language is richly stylised with a great number of literary devices, among them, metaphors, such as "creature [...] whose past has crumbled to dust" (Cleave 2008, 19), simile, "I felt like the Queen of England" (Cleave 2008, 141), paradox, "I had killed myself back to life" (Cleave 2008, 49), and complex imagery that makes use of personification or the rhetorical question:

Who says a Nigerian girl must speak in fallen English, as if English had collided with Ibo, high in the upper atmosphere, and rained down into her mouth into a shower that half-drowns her and leaves her choking

up sweet tales about the bright African colors and the taste of fried plantain? (Cleave 2008, 8)

Bee's narrative, as the quotations reveal, revolves around finding the means to describe the unspeakable refugee experience, starting from life before the crisis, through the traumatic persecution and flight, up until the ill treatment and stereotypical representation in the host country. Yet, Bee also engages in an inherent critique, which is often achieved through irony, something that "happens' between the said and the unsaid" (Hutcheon 1995, 12) where the unsaid is not simply an inversion of the said, but is always different (Hutcheon 1995, 12). The quotation above also reveals a type of colonial missionary idea that imposes English on its colonial subjects, leading to a hybrid concept of language in which the stereotypical (tourist) Africa discourse is related as if in an orientalisising fairy tale.

In another instance, Bee replicates Western discourse when she refers to Yvette's purple outfit, remarking that "[o]ne has to go through a very great number of charity boxes [...] to put together an outfit that is truly an *ensemble*" (Cleave 2008, 9, italics i.o.). The irony of this statement is multi-layered, as Bee initially mocks the detainees' reality, as they are not allowed to work and therefore do not have any choice but to live off charity, ironically addressing the precarious situation that they find themselves in. The subsequent use of the word "en-

semble”, which originates in the French language, hints at some subtle criticism of the supposed linguistic imperialism of British English, a language that has its roots in a diversity of languages and so can also be viewed as a hybrid language, but whose contemporary speakers denounce pidgin, creole, and other varieties.

Another instance in which Bee’s irony fulfils its subversive function is her commentary on refugeeism. By voicing the irony of being a refugee in a world where there is no refuge (Cleave 2008, 46), she exposes the misconceptions about the image of the host country as an embodiment of the Promised Land, where trauma is supposed to end, but where, rather than rescue, precarity awaits. The posed emphasis on the transience of the condition of refugees and the impossibility of the host country actually functioning as a refuge is also achieved through the symbolic subversion of established social prejudices that view refugees as economic migrants harboured in the safe haven of the social benefits provided by the government and the host country, which Lawrence also addresses when he uses “harbour” to describe Bee’s place in Sarah’s home and life (Cleave 2008, 185). Bee’s narrative continuously aims to refute this image through the thread/threat of her imagined suicides running throughout the novel, which also attest to immense impact of her trauma. The precariousness of refugee life is already illustrated in Bee’s imagined design of their official flag: a worn-out grey brassiere on a broom handle (Cleave 2008, 76), which ironically characterises

the refugees' poverty, low social status, hiddenness, and expected servile behaviour. The stereotypical image of illegal immigrants stealing jobs and burdening the economic system of the host country (Page 2009, 3), which is also often projected onto refugees, is parodied in Bee's account of the refugees' struggle and their inadequate treatment in the UK immigration institutions.

A considerable number of the ironic remarks in the novel are marked by an intrinsic dark humour. However, Bee's gradual elaboration on the real agents behind her tragic past increases the bitterness of her irony, and distances it from humour. One such instance can be found in her observation at a gas station: "[t]he gasoline flowing through the pump made a high-pitched sound, as if the screaming of my family was still dissolved in it" (Cleave 20078, 181). This synesthetic image voices a social critique towards the continuous exploitation of African natural resources in Nigeria's "neo-colonial" (McLaughlin 2013, 60) reality. The echo of the struggle in the West to produce the essential and unquestioned commodity of gasoline shows, as Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg maintains, the unembellished truth of the violated economic, social, and cultural rights of the inhabitants of the Niger Delta (Swanson Goldberg 2015, 66). Thus, the use of irony here serves to demystify the social injustice of a neo-capitalist continuation of colonial exploitative practices and to subvert the profiteer's belief that this is the proper world order.

## Conclusion

In my paper, I have provided numerous examples that illustrate Chris Cleave's skilful utilisation of irony to express subtle criticism through the 'unsaid'. He thereby points his finger at the burning issues of flight, precarity, asylum-seeking, and refugeeism in the UK. The often humorous undertones of the account reflect, as Reichl and Stein argue, the postcolonial subject's desire for agency and liberation from the power imbalance (Reichl and Stein 2005, 9). Little Bee's narrative therefore achieves its liberation from the usual silencing authoritative discourse of us/them, rich and poor, state authority and asylum seeker, which she exposes, refutes, and subverts. In this framework, the refugee's identity undergoes intricate changes during and after the journey to the host country. The deliberate survival strategy behind this constant re-construction of the refugee's identity draws not upon assimilation, but rather, upon replication, which, at the bottom line, is grounded in language. As Chris Cleave's character of Little Bee demonstrates, language functions as a powerful tool for combatting passivity. Irony, in this particular instance, serves as a stylistic device not only to assert the creative agency of the postcolonial precarious subject, but to facilitate its highly intellectual means of resistance, and to thus unsettle the stereotype of the wild and savage stranger who is only able to speak in a "fallen English" (Cleave 2008, 8). Little Bee's narrative – in contradistinction to Sar-

ah's – in its replication of the Queen's English and the usage of ironic and humorous undertones, addresses the underlying social inequality of host culture and refugee, in spite of the intricately interwoven colonial past and postcolonial present that both have shared. After having examined the function of the multiple voices employed in *Little Bee*, the conclusion drawn highlights the novel's critique of a plethora of issues, ranging from global neo-colonial exploitation and linguistic imperialism to local mistreatment of refugees in the UK. The dialogical structure of the novel thus proves to effectively facilitate a necessary debate about the precarious lives of refugees under the conditions of a double-edged degrading discourse and the practice of a refugee regime that also enhances the discursive precarity of the participants.

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