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**PIERRE MEUNIER**

**French Background, Nigerian Themes**



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# 3. Meunier's Language in *Barriers* and *Chinyelu*

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## 1. Introduction

Meunier, the French born naturalised Nigerian, has done quite a lot and has succeeded to a large extent in his use of language to delineate social class in Nigeria in the plays, *Barriers*<sup>1</sup> and *Chinyelu*<sup>2</sup>. *Chinyelu* is modelled on Moliere's *Don Juan* and reflects the writer's familiarity with the classics and shows evidence of his assimilation into the Nigerian society as well as his understanding of the way Nigerians of various levels of education and occupation behave and talk. Aside from attempting to make his characters speak naturally as befits their levels of education and status in life, Meunier's use of language is very figurative and at times even poetic. The impression one has is of a highly educated writer whose characters speak very cultivated language, and in the case of *Chinyelu*, at times better than one would expect of them. Meunier succeeds writing his plays in a language form which is at once simple and complex, so that the average reader with the minimal educational standard finds no problems with the texts.

See ... the new literary journal of Contemporary Nigerian Life and Literature Vol III, No II, pp 22-32 1995 on Pierre Meunier: French Background, Nigerian Themes.  
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## 2. Barriers

The first thing that strikes the careful reader of *Barriers* is the difference between the way Paul and John speak. Both are very educated business executives who find themselves stuck at a road barrier and have to wait until they are allowed to pass by the illiterate but very dutiful Timothy, the road keeper, who regulates the passage of cars. Whereas John's language is refined and polite, Paul's is abusive and coarse, his level of education notwithstanding. Speaking of their predicament, they say:

John: Two barriers keeping us out.

Paul: This tree trunk and that man: we're undone!

John: One concrete, one abstract but far more difficult to by-pass or eradicate! If only that old fellow would understand. If only he knew us!

Paul: I If only he were dead! The rascal! The stupid idiot! The moron! That lump! That dunderhead! That mug!

John: Paul Stop it. (pg 4.)

Paul's vulgarity in language also manifests itself when like the typical Nigerian businessman he offers Timothy a bribe to let them pass:

Paul: (going towards Timothy) Eh, you louse! (Holding the paper out to him) Take this your scrap of paper and let us pass on! (Shoving banknotes under his nose making expressive gestures) Fill your pockets, while we empty ours. You don't have to do much! Just lift this tree trunk only for a minute no more. That would give us enough time to crawl through and slip away! It's 5 Murtala for a minute's work. Well paid! Now hurry up!

Timothy: You wan buy me! No good think master. Me understand well well! You no good! You no go! You 24 hours go wait here! no much! (page 6).

Paul's vulgarity embarrasses his friend, John, when the former describes his lust for Kuchelli, Timothy's daughter. Kuchelli who pretends to be an illiterate village girl enjoys his ignorance of this fact as this allows Paul reveal his lust in an earthy and almost poetic language:

Paul: ... I must first taste her sweet lips, her gold tongue and her black ebony thighs and what between them lies. (P.16)

He goes on:

Paul: I would screw her with such gusto!

I can hardly wait.

John: A beautiful and gracious girl so good at repartee cannot be had so easily. She demands respect. (P. 16)

It is not difficult for the honest Timothy to immediately assess the characters of John and Paul from their utterances and when there was an occasion to entrust his daughter, Kuchelli, to either of John and Paul, the lot naturally falls on John.

He tells Paul: " You be bad man, master, you want break fence."

And latter:

"You no good man, you want buy me."

But to John he says:

"You good, you gentle, so you to look up Kuchelli like sister". (p. 20)

Kutchelli also agrees that John is a better man when she says: "You big brother to me ... (to Paul) you devil too much." (p. 20)

They are not wrong in their assessment because aside from his crude impolite language it is Paul who offers a bribe to Timothy. Paul thinks

Timothy is stupid, not kind, to offer them food and drink without charging any money, suggesting that they take advantage of Timothy's absence, lift the barrier and sneak away. It is John who counsels against this because of the consequences this may have for Timothy:

John: Do you know what will happen to poor Timothy if we fled after raising the barrier?

Paul: ... Let him be hanged for all I care!

Paul emerges as a typical rich and educated Nigerian. He is arrogant and snobbish. He is condescending to the less privileged in society. He has little respect for woman. He has no qualm about bribery and would do it to get through all obstacles in his way. John has some finesse. His higher level of education could be responsible for his humility and tendency to show consideration for others. He recognises that though uneducated and unpolished Timothy could not be bribed and accepts that the likes of Timothy are not the savages. They may be rustic in their attitude, but certainly not savage.

John: He is the kind of man who would offer the little he has! With all the kindness at his command.

Paul: You believe that John? You with a Doctorate in politics.

John: The so called savages, are far more kind-hearted and well behaved than the rest of us! We are the savages not they! We will barely spare a glance at somebody lying unconscious on the sidewalks or on the city streets! Whereas they will do anything within their power (P. 10).

Timothy and his brother use broken English, described as *turanci*, in the play. When Kuchelli poses as an illiterate village girl she also uses *turanci*. Like honest village folks their language sounds more real than the rude language of Paul, for instance. When Kuchelli declares her love for John and reveals her true identity as an English teacher in a local school, she starts speaking like John and Paul. John observes:

John: Kuchelli, you are so fluent in your fluid pidgin I am beginning to wonder which of your Englishes is the

more real. The one you share with me seems so artificial. Give me your love only on your pidgin (P.39)

Meunier's deployment of language shades to differentiate characters is very interesting indeed. Whereas the educated Paul, John and Kuchelli (the teacher) speak correct English which John agrees sounds artificial, the illiterate village people: Timothy, his brother Alphonsus and Kuchelli (the village girl) speak broken English (*turanci*) which reveals their honesty and kindness. Language is therefore aptly used to reflect character and educational level of the characters in the play.

Meunier's language in *Barriers* is very figurative. The title word *Barriers* is metaphorical. It represents the various facets of the *barriers* which man has erected between himself and his fellow human being in Nigeria and other parts of the world. John, the philosophical character in the play explains the many kinds of *barriers* in the play. There are both concrete and abstract *barriers*; the concrete tree trunk that bars their way, the language barrier, the status *barrier*, the education *barrier*, the *barrier* of misunderstanding and prejudice, the *barrier* of age, tribe and sex which stand between people in everyday life (pp.2, 12, 13, 24, 25, 35).

When John invites Timothy and his brother to eat with himself and Paul, Timothy he first declines, recognising the status-*barrier* between them:

John: ... Come and join us the three of you (*speaking off*). We must break the barriers of high and low.

Timothy: No! That for you. (*Making gestures*) You big people. Read, write, count, we small small! (P.19).

Paul: I cannot trust a bush girl (P.35).

The love affair which blossomed between John and Kuchelli help to break some of the *barriers* at the end. In a very symbolic body language (*gestures*), John and Kuchelli, celebrate the breaking of these *barriers* in a dance at the end of the play and each jumps over the concrete *barrier* - the tree trunk with two feet. They realise that *barriers* in human relationships are man-made and can be broken. They theorize

over the ambivalence of barriers which could do good to some and evil to others. Kuchelli sings:

Barriers O! Barriers! Be you love barriers. No obstacles to men and women. But only to demons. Who'd separate men from women. (P. 39)

*Barriers* is full of apt imagery. Apart from the image of the *barrier*, the civilised man is represented as a child and treated as such by Timothy and his daughter Kuchelli.

These images and classical allusions give the play a certain density of language which makes it appeal to a learned audience while the informal and obscene language of Paul would appeal to a popular audience. It is surprising that most of the classical allusions are made by Paul.

The play also has a fair dose of humour found mainly in the language of Paul, when talking about his broken appointment caused by the delay he says:

My Chairman won't make a hole in my arse because I have already one (p.7).

Remarking about Timothy's attitude to his offer of a bribe he says:

Listen to his litany: Does he want a certificate for being honest (p.8.).

Paul's statements quoted above added to John's statement quoted below create humour and reflect the Nigerian setting:"

John: O' I boy, read for yourself... You see the kind of peppersoup we've landed in (p. 4).

Paul's description of the sound of the frogs is also humorous:

Can you hear the concert of the frogs? a foggy rhapsody in B flat (p. 18).

Clearly some of the expressions used above and others in the play are typical of educated Nigerian English. The description of the concert music of the frogs exemplify Paul's contact with civilisation. It is

interesting to note that John's statement is just humorous while Paul's combine some sarcasm with a tendency to show-off his learning and lack of finesse.

Meunier's erratic punctuation in *Barriers* cannot go unnoticed. A casual look at the passages quoted above reveals disjointed sentences and fragments featuring a preponderance of exclamation marks where full stops and other punctuation marks could have been more appropriate. Could this be the writer's way of presenting the childishness of the educated Nigerians or their lack of finesse and kindness? Capital letters are used indiscriminately and small letters are even used to start sentences or sentence fragments. The playwright may be exclaiming and inviting his readers to exclaim at the behaviour of the so-called educated Nigerians except that John's sentences also feature this tendency to speak in phrases and sentence fragments.

This clumsiness in syntax could also be viewed as indexical features which reveal the writer's superior knowledge of his native French rather than English syntax.

### 3. Chinyelu

Meunier continues his differentiation of character through language in *Chinyelu* but does not appear to have succeeded as well as he did with this style in *Barriers*.

Chinyelu, the heroine of the play, speaks educated English displaying a knowledge of the classics and other fields of knowledge. She is an heiress and there is no doubt that her defiance and contempt for men filter through in her language. Like Shakespeare's tragic heroes, the female version of Moliere's *Don Juan* speaks in sophisticated imagery. The poetry of Chinyelu's language is unmistakable in this instance when she describes the *beast* called man:

Chinyelu: ... The beast will do all he can to pluck the flower which he regards as the most precious of all! When he has drunk from your adorable lips, pollen and nectar, the Ambrosia of love; he will reject you; like a faded flower, he will leave you alone in the world, with a memento of himself in your belly (P. 9);

Equally fresh is her figurative description of the male and female sex instruments:

Chinyelu: A bird, yes! A bird of ill omen, keen only on its own pleasure when it nestles down in the cosy little nest, which stupidly we lend to him!

When speaking to her disappointed lover Emeka, a fallen Seminarian whom she seduced out of the priesthood, she shows no sympathy rather her language is full of mockery as she demands thanks from him for the part she has played in his life.

Chinyelu: I pulled you out of the prison in which you were stagnating...

... I made you throw away the skimpy frock in which you were choking. (P. 12)

For this she demands thanks and puts up a strange feminine bluff which would scandalize even the women she is trying to liberate.

Chinyelu: You must understand Emeka. My heart is too big to become attached to only one man. Give the others a chance and let them enjoy my body as you have (p12).

Chinyelu is revealed in her language as the defiant woman who is out to conquer as many men as she can as a revenge for men's subjugation of women. In her "book of records" she has recorded 154 including a Brazilian and a Chinese. Her language is permissive to the point of embarrassing her maid and mother. Ngozi, Chinyelu's maid describes her mistress as a "she-devil, more enigmatic than the sphinx; a spider waiting for her prey, a heretic and wickedness" herself. Ngozi describes Chinyelu's life-pursuit in this manner:

Her only pleasure is to conquer, to possess a man and get a kick out of seeing him enslaved and crawling at her feet to win her favour. Quickly she sets her heart on somebody else: For her it is just another victory in her book of records. And that book is no small book. Love for her is only a sport and also a trap... Operating without restraint anywhere from North to South and West to East.(p7)

It is for this reason that Ngozi labels Chinyelu as:

A female Don JUAN and Casanova all in one. A female Narcissus to crown it all worshipping her own body."(p16)

One is forced to wonder from where Ngozi gets her classical allusions and images; Chinyelu herself observes:

You frighten me Ngozi... How can a country girl like you who did not go beyond primary school know the existence of Don Juan and Casanova! And of Narcissus (P. 16).

It is as if a literary artist speaks through the mouth of Ngozi. To a large extent Ngozi's language does not befit her level of education and status in life and she couldn't have gotten this from her mistress close as she may be to this mistress who is educated. Meunier also succeeds in making the humble Innocent and his bride, Comfort, speak in pidgin, so does the tailor Friday. Here again Innocent's sincerity sounds better in pidgin than in the educated artificial English of Ngozi and her mistress.

Equally unnatural is the language used by the Moslem beggar who refuses to make the sign of the cross for food or deny the existence of God for money. The elaborate syntax of the beggar is out of joint with the character portrayed. In the following conversation between Chinyelu and the beggar, the italicised portions show a use of English that is quite sophisticated:

- Beggar: But Madam I am Moslem... Pork meat is haram... strictly forbidden by the Koran! and so is beer! These two things should never enter my mouth, *much less go down my throat!*
- Chinyelu: And you pretend to be hungry! What sort of hunger is yours. Follow me! Even the thought of a pork roast should make your mouth water!
- Beggar: I am not going. *I had better die than eat haram food!* (p 36).

One would have expected a normal Muslim beggar to speak in pidgin mixed with some sprinkling of Arabic if he is a learned one.

This brings us to the question of punctuation. The three speeches above reveal a problem with punctuation. Chinyelu's second sentence above would normally have attracted a question mark rather than a full stop while the other two sentences would normally end with full stops.

The first sentence of the quoted speech is the only one that could be punctuated with an exclamation mark to show Chinyelu's surprise at the beggar's refusal to eat anything. The beggar's first speech also features this tendency to end every sentence with an exclamation mark even when it is a statement without implication. The last speech of the beggar features faultless syntax but the reason for ending the second sentence with an exclamation mark can hardly be theorized. Suffice it to say that Meunier has an idiosyncrasy of style which exhibits a preference for exclamation marks. Perhaps his surprise at the way human beings behave could serve as an explanation for this tendency.

In *Chinyelu*, therefore, Meunier's use of language as a way of portraying character succeeds very well in the choice of language Chinyelu speaks. This lady carries her defiance up to the level of abusing her own mother and her seductive act to the point of challenging the stone giant, her village juju, to a sexual combat where she meets her demise. Language as a means of delineating characters does not succeed well in the portrayal of Ngozi, the maid, and the beggar. However, the couple Innocent and Comfort and the tailor speak a language that appears natural to their level of education and status. The language of the Chinese Chunchang aptly suggests his origin while the American Juscelino also speaks in a language appropriate to someone from the American continent. But there appears to be a certain mark of exaggeration in almost every character's use of language. Chinyelu's shameless description of her sex life and conquests embarrasses rather than entertains. One wonders whether even a professional sex-worker could count as many as 154 lovers. Her description of the instruments of her male lovers and their performance score smacks of scatology. So does the language of Juscelino who claims to have had *thirteen rounds*. Only Ngozi and the Chinese appear to show some modesty in their choice of words when talking about the affairs of Chinyelu.

#### 4. Summary and Conclusion

This paper has attempted to examine the language of Meunier's plays *Barriers* and *Chinyelu*. It has been able to show that Meunier's language features a peculiarity of style with a predominance of exclamation marks. The paper theorizes that the playwright tries to represent his surprise at the behaviour of human beings by frequent use of the exclamation. Secondly, the paper has identified three areas of language usage: the learned figurative and formal language of educated Nigerians, the pretentious language of some educated Nigerians who try to make up for their lack of finesse by the use of classical allusions, the pidgin English of the less educated and almost illiterate Nigerians and that spoken by Non-Nigerians which is a curious kind of pidgin. These kinds of English are used to identify the speakers and reflect their characters, educational backgrounds and their origins. Language is also used for humour and to reflect the idioms and peculiar expressions of the Nigerian environment. The paper concludes that the writer's use of language for the purposes above succeeds more in *Barriers* than in *Chinyelu* and that even with these language levels the plays are strongly accessible to a wide range of audience.

#### Works Cited

Pierre Meunier, *Barriers*, (Zaria, Pace Publishers, 1992). All page references and quotations from this text are from this edition.

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