

NIGERIAN EXPRESSIONS IN SEFI ATTA'S *THE BAD IMMIGRANT*.

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BENIN CITY.**

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**AN ESSAY SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND LITERATURE,
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CERTIFICATION

I certify that this project titled Nigerian Expressions in Sefi Atta's *the Bad Immigrant*, was carried out, under my supervision by JOVITA ECHEZUNAM AKABAH (MISS) with Matriculation Number ART2100165 in the Department of English and Literature, Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, Benin City, Edo State.

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Project Supervisor

Date:



DEDICATION

This project work is dedicated to God Almighty for His constant grace and abundant mercy to be able to carry out my whole academic journey.



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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the phenomenon of Nigerianisms and its causes and effects through the use of Sefi Atta's novel *The Bad Immigrant*. This study examines the factors that drive Nigerianism, such as cultural identity, social context or emotional expression, and it analyses its effects on how individuals are perceived and how they connect with others.

1.2 Scope of Study

This study is limited to the use of Nigerian expressions in Sefi Atta's *The Bad Immigrant*. The scope of data covers selected dialogues and parts of the novel where Nigerianisms are expressed in speeches. The scope of analysis focuses on identifying these instances of Nigerianisms and explaining their causes and effects on communication and meaning. The study is restricted to the text itself and does not include real-life bilingual speakers or statistical data.

1.3 Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research design to explore how Sefi Atta employs Nigerianisms in *The Bad Immigrant*. The data are collected through close reading and textual analysis of the novel by focusing on dialogues and scenes where characters switch between English, Yoruba and Nigerian Pidgin. Relevant examples of Nigerianisms are identified and extracted for interpretation. The findings are presented through selected excerpts from the novel, each followed by brief analysis



and discussion.

1.4 Theoretical Background

This study is built on *Accommodation Theory*. *Accommodation Theory* is a sociolinguistic framework that was developed by Howard Giles in the early 1970s. The theory explains how and why people modify their speech styles to either reduce or increase social distance in communication. In simpler terms, it describes the way individuals adjust their language use depending on who they are speaking to and the situation they find themselves in. The main idea is that language is not only a means of sharing information but also a tool for shaping relationships, showing identity and expressing attitudes. Giles introduced two main strategies under this theory, namely, convergence and divergence. Convergence occurs when a speaker adapts their speech to sound more like their interlocutor to create closeness, understanding or approval. Divergence, on the other hand, happens when a speaker maintains or exaggerates differences in speech to express independence, resistance or identity.

Accommodation Theory is particularly relevant to this study because it provides a strong foundation for understanding Nigerian expressions among bilingual speakers in Sefi Atta's *The Bad Immigrant*. Nigerianisms in this context is not viewed as random or careless switching between languages but as a socially motivated strategy that reveals how characters respond to their environment and to one another. In Atta's novel, characters often use Nigerian expressions to express belonging, power, familiarity or cultural identity. For instance, when a bilingual speaker in the text blends English with elements of a native language, it can be interpreted as an act of convergence, which is a way of aligning with a listener's



background or expressing solidarity. In contrast, when a character deliberately uses a different language or tone, it may be an act of divergence, that is, signaling distance, pride or self-assertion.

This study shows that the use of Nigerian expressions in *The Bad Immigrant* reflects deeper social and psychological patterns. The theory helps to explain how bilingual speakers accommodate or resist accommodation based on factors such as power, class, ethnicity and identity. It also reveals how language becomes a marker of inclusion and exclusion by showing who belongs to a group and who does not. The novel's bilingual characters use language flexibly to navigate different cultural spaces, and through this, Sefi Atta presents language as a living reflection of social negotiation.

Furthermore, *Accommodation Theory* helps this study to move beyond the surface level of language analysis to explore why speakers make particular linguistic choices. It provides an evaluative pattern through which Nigerianisms can be seen as an intentional communicative act that serves emotional, cultural and relational functions. The theory supports the view that language behaviour in *The Bad Immigrant* mirrors real-life bilingual communication, where speakers constantly balance the need to connect with others and the desire to preserve their distinct identities.

In summary, *Accommodation Theory* gives this research both structure and depth, that is, it helps to appropriately interpret Nigerian expressions as reflections of human relationships, social mobility and cultural adaptation. The study evaluates how Sefi Atta uses language not only to represent Nigerianisms but also to question ideas of belonging, identity and acceptance in a multicultural world through this



theory.

1.5 Review of Related Scholarships and Justification of Study

Bilingualism has become a central feature of modern African writing, especially in countries like Nigeria where English lives side by side with indigenous languages such as Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa. Writers from these multilingual backgrounds often combine these languages in their works, not by accident but as a deliberate artistic choice. This blend, often associated with Nigerianisms, allows them to portray real-life speech patterns and capture the complex identities of bilingual people who live between different worlds. African writers express culture, emotion and social belonging in ways that one language alone cannot express sociocultural fusion. Scholars have long studied this creative use of language as it is recognised as a powerful reflection of how individuals navigate identity, power and relationships in postcolonial and diasporic contexts.

General studies such as Ibhawaegbele, Edokpayi and Afful have explored code-mixing as a stylistic device in Nigerian prose. They note that authors blend languages to preserve African culture and make their stories sound authentic to local audiences. Afful's work, for instance, connects code-switching to gender and class, which shows that language choices in literature can highlight the voices of marginalised characters, especially women (Affel 45). These studies have built a solid foundation for understanding bilingualism as both a linguistic and a social phenomenon in African literature. However, they often focus on older or more widely discussed writers, leaving a gap in the study of newer authors like Sefi Atta.

Sefi Atta captures the lived realities of bilingual Nigerians both at home and abroad. In novels like *Everything Good Will Come*, *Swallow*, and *A Bit of Difference*, her



characters constantly shift between English, Yoruba, and Pidgin. This reflects the social spaces they occupy. Critics such as Enuma Okoro praise Atta for using language to preserve African tradition and express the everyday voice of Nigerian women. Yet, most studies of Atta's works focus on gender, culture and politics, which leaves her linguistic style underexplored. Even when researchers note her use of multiple languages, they rarely examine it through a theoretical framework such as *Accommodation Theory*, which could explain why her characters change their speech patterns in different contexts.

Atta's most recent novel, *The Bad Immigrant*, takes her use of bilingualism into a global setting. The story follows a Nigerian family living in America. It goes on to reveal how language becomes both a bridge and a barrier in their new environment. Lukmon, the father, struggles with acceptance by holding onto Nigerian speech patterns even as his children adopt American slang. This linguistic contrast captures the emotional gap between generations and the cultural tension of migration. Reviews from *Publishers Weekly* and *Booklist* highlight the novel's sharp and natural dialogue, yet academic criticism has not yet examined how Atta's code-mixing functions as a deeper commentary on belonging and alienation.

This gap in scholarship justifies the present study. While writers like Achebe and Adichie have received detailed attention for their use of bilingual expression, Sefi Atta's contribution to this linguistic conversation remains largely unexamined. Her works, especially *The Bad Immigrant*, offer fresh insight into the experiences of bilingual immigrants who must constantly adjust their language to survive in new cultural environments. This study explores the way Atta's characters modify their speech, whether to connect with others, to maintain pride in their identity or to resist



cultural erasure.

This research fills an important gap in Nigerian literary studies by examining Nigerianisms in *The Bad Immigrant*. It fills the gap by showing how Sefi Atta's deliberate use of Nigerian languages and speech patterns in *The Bad Immigrant* reflects cultural identity, social belonging, and the negotiation of hybridity, offering a focused analysis of bilingualism that previous studies on Nigerianisms have largely overlooked. This study also builds on previous scholarship while adding a focused and theory-driven analysis that connects Atta's storytelling to wider questions about identity, adaptation and communication in a globalised world. In doing so, it not only expands understanding of bilingualism in literature but also sheds light on the emotional and social costs of migration. This study ultimately values language as more than a tool of communication. It sees it as a living mirror of human experience by capturing the struggle, resilience and creativity of bilingual lives.

1.6 Thesis Statement

Sefi Atta's *The Bad Immigrant* employs Nigerianisms to explore social dimensions, psychological and relational motivations, and effects in addition with implications among bilingual speakers.



CHAPTER TWO

SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF NIGERIAN EXPRESSIONS

2.0 Introduction

This chapter examines the social dimensions of Nigerianisms in Sefi Atta's *The Bad Immigrant*. Section 2.1 looks at how the expressions of the characters reflect their gender identities, while section 3.2, on the other hand, looks at how Nigerian expressions are used to show communal identity.

2.1 Gender Identity

Gender identity in the novel is deeply tied to how men and women use language to express themselves and navigate their roles within both Nigerian and American societies. The characters reveal the subtle ways gender influences communication, power and belonging. Women in the novel often use a blend of English, Yoruba and Pidgin to show care, authority and emotional strength while men use language to assert control and maintain social respect. These linguistic patterns highlight how



speech reflects gendered expectations carried from Nigeria into the diaspora.

“They probably gave you rat meat to eat in Nigeria and called it chicken.”

“No one would do that and get away with it,” Moriam said.

“Naijas like chicken. We would know the difference.”

“Naijas eat bushmeat,” he said.

“Yes,” she said, with a shrug.” (Atta 6).

This short exchange captures gendered expectation and pride wrapped up in food, taste and national identity. It does so using a quick mix of Standard English and Pidgin or colloquial forms (“*Naijas*”). Moriam’s calm rebuttal and her final shrug show a woman who claims cultural knowledge and domestic competence as sources of authority. In many Nigerian households, cooking and food knowledge are central to female identity; here, Moriam’s voice resists Ismail’s condescension. The Nigerian expressions do two things: they index authenticity (the use of “*Naijas*” and familiar talk about bushmeat signals insider knowledge) and they mark the speaker’s gendered role (she is the experienced cook, the one who knows what real food should taste like). Thus language becomes gendered practice: Moriam’s mixing of registers publicly asserts her competence as a woman from Nigeria and resists a male speaker’s attempt to belittle her. Moriam converges to Nigerian and domestic linguistic norms to claim in-group status and diverges from Ismail’s belittling English-only stance so as to preserve her dignity and gendered authority.

“Then American men said they couldn’t boil an egg, they usually didn’t mean it literally; I did, and every good Nigerian wife knew that to win her in-laws over she had to cook for them.” (Atta 6)

This narrator’s reflection names a widely held norm: the ideal of the “*good Nigerian*



wife." The sentence is straight English but it carries social meaning about gender roles; further into the scene the narrator and Moriam use Nigerian speech and jokes to negotiate that role. The narrator's voice is both descriptive and mildly ironic: he reports the rule but also gestures at its limitations when transplanted to America. Gender identity here is communal and performance-based as women are evaluated in terms of their domestic labour, and language about cooking signals that evaluation. Nigerianisms appears not only as words from Yoruba or Pidgin but as culturally loaded practices that the characters reference together. The narrator's English describes the role while the characters' code-mixed exchanges enact and contest it.

"You all could have died,' she said in Yoruba.

'By the grace of God we didn't,' the woman said." (Atta 234)

This exchange happens in a medical setting and shows the narrator (or Moriam) switching into Yoruba at a moment of intense moral censure. Nigerianisms here functions as an ethical register: the speaker moves into the mother tongue to mark seriousness, to claim cultural authority and to address a fellow woman in a recognisable and moralising voice. Gender matters because the exchange is about childbirth, which is a female domain where language, cultural expectations and bodily risk meet. Using Yoruba makes the rebuke sharper and more intimate; it draws on shared values about motherhood that English alone might not deliver. This is a convergence toward the hearer's cultural code to gain compliance or to express solidarity with normative feminine responsibilities, thereby making language become a tool to police and protect women's bodies and reputations in the diaspora.

"He was the first person I recognized in the concourse, which was like



a marketplace when I walked in. ... 'He is a liar,' she said. 'Plain and simple. As for these oyinbos, any far-fetched story any African tells them, they believe.'" (Atta 201)

Ranti Shonubi's fierce, gendered performance is telling. There is, at this point, the revelation about a woman whose public persona such as provocative dress, blunt speech and feminist stances unsettles expectations. Her dismissal of "*oyinbos*" (a code-mixed, slightly pejorative term for white people) is forceful language that refuses to soften for a mixed audience. Ranti's behaviour complicates gender identity as she resists being boxed as merely "*womanly*" or decorous; instead she uses bold language to stake a claim as an intellectual and cultural critic. The code-mixing ("*oyinbos*") signals ethnic solidarity and a refusal to adopt an anglophone deference. Ranti diverges from white audience expectations (she does not converge) and thus asserts an oppositional female identity: proud, outspoken and unwilling to accommodate the dominant culture's taste for polite fiction about Africa.

"'It's better for a woman to be smart than attractive,' I said. Bashira looked up. 'Who said?' 'In my humble opinion.' 'Maybe. But if you're smart, you can always figure out how to look attractive.'" (Atta 234).

This brief dialogue between father and daughter stages competing ideals of femininity. The father's statement is normative but well-meaning; Bashira's reply is pragmatic and strategic: intelligence is useful because it can be turned into attractiveness if needed. The code-mixing context around these lines (other passages nearby show family members shifting registers) suggests that gender identity is negotiated amid multiple linguistic repertoires. Girls and young women in the novel learn to manage how they present themselves both verbally and physically



so that language choice and performance become part of female survival in the diaspora. Code-mixing is part of that toolkit: switching between cultured English, streetwise Pidgin and Yoruba allows a woman to position herself as educated, street-smart and culturally anchored as the situation demands.

The way characters mix English with Nigerian languages such as Yoruba is not accidental. It is a deliberate act that reveals how gender is expressed, challenged and defended. The women in the story use language as a tool to perform their roles within society. When Moriam slips into Yoruba or when women gossip in a mixture of English and Nigerian expressions, they are not simply switching words; they are showing what it means to be a woman in their culture. Sometimes, this means following expected roles, like being a good wife or a caring nurse. At other times, it means going against these roles, as seen when Ranti speaks boldly in public by refusing to be quiet or submissive. The novel presents language as a mirror of gender behaviour through these shifts in speech.

Language also becomes a form of power in the story. When the women switch to Yoruba or Nigerian Pidgin, they do so to claim authority, especially in familiar spaces such as homes and hospitals. For example, in the hospital scene, female characters use Yoruba expressions to assert moral or practical control by showing confidence in their work and their relationships. This use of local language gives them a kind of moral strength and authenticity that English alone cannot provide. Speaking in their mother tongue connects them to their cultural roots and makes their authority feel natural and respected. In this way, Nigerianisms is not just a matter of habit as it becomes a quiet form of empowerment.

The women in the *The Bad Immigrant* also change the way they speak depending on



where they are. In public places such as offices or schools, they tend to use Standard English to appear educated, competent and professional. But in private spaces like at home and among friends, they switch to Yoruba or Pidgin by using familiar speech that builds closeness and solidarity. This behaviour reflects a balance between two worlds: the formal, Western-influenced world that values English and the intimate, communal world rooted in Nigerian language and culture. This shift clearly shows that people adjust their speech to manage relationships, power and respect. In this way, the women's language choices show their ability to adapt to different settings and to protect their dignity in both public and private life.

For some women, Nigerian expressions become a means of resistance. Ranti, for example, refuses to act like the gentle and polite woman society expects. She mixes English with Yoruba. She also uses strong and direct language to show that she will not be silenced. Her expression "*oyinbos*" and her blunt tone challenge both male authority and traditional gender expectations. Likewise, Moriam's use of Yoruba when she dismisses a man's arrogance shows that she can stand her ground and defend her identity. In such moments, language acts like armour, that is, something that protects women from disrespect and helps them fight against unfair stereotypes. The novel shows that speech can be a powerful tool for reclaiming self-worth.

There is also a noticeable generational difference in how women use Nigerian expressions. Younger women, like Bashira, are more flexible and strategic. They are aware of how they are seen by others and choose their words carefully to fit different situations. They balance between showing intelligence, maintaining appearance and meeting expectations. Older women, however, rely more on shared cultural ways of



speaking by using familiar phrases and proverbs to express their views and guide younger ones. Both generations, in their own ways, use Nigerian expressions to deal with the pressures of gender roles in a changing world. For those living in the diaspora, where cultures meet and clash, switching between languages helps them stay rooted in their identity while also adapting to new social realities.

The Bad Immigrant shows that Nigerianisms is not just a linguistic feature but a form of gendered expression. It allows women to navigate tradition and modernity, to claim authority where they are often silenced and to create spaces where their voices can be heard clearly and confidently. They perform resistance, connection and self-definition, all within the rich blend of languages that shape their lives.

2.2 Communal Identity

The Bad Immigrant reflects the strong sense of belonging and shared culture that binds Nigerians together even when they live far from home. In the *The Bad Immigrant*, language becomes the most powerful tool for keeping this connection alive. The characters recreate familiar spaces and maintain their cultural values within a foreign society by blending different languages. The discussion shows that the characters adjust their language to fit social settings by finding comfort in familiar words that remind them of who they are and where they come from. In doing so, Nigerianism becomes not just a way of speaking but a symbol of shared experience, cultural pride, and community identity among Nigerians in the diaspora.

“At the exam venue, she’d met up with a few nurses she had known in Nigeria. They had come from Queens, the Bronx, Paramus, Paterson and Edison. ... She’d noticed how Yoruba and Igbo nurses kept to separate groups to discuss the exams. ... Through Bisi, she



got the phone number of an elderly nurse known as Auntie. Auntie was a sort of godmother of Yoruba nurses in New Jersey.” (Atta 101).

This short passage shows how communal identity first forms through work and mutual aid. The nurses meet because of a shared professional purpose, but their grouping, which takes the form of Yoruba with Yoruba and Igbo with Igbo, shows that community is also organised by ethnicity and region. In the diaspora these small groupings matter a great deal: they act as social insurance, job networks and cultural anchors. Auntie, the “*godmother*,” is a clear communal figure, that is, someone who transmits practical knowledge, social norms and help. The phrase “*godmother of Yoruba nurses*” tells us that community here is not casual; it is ritualised help, coded by language and shared memory. Nigerianisms appears in the way characters address and name one another in familiar and culturally loaded ways (Auntie, Titi, Bisi), and it helps create immediate trust. In short, communal identity in the *The Bad Immigrant* is reproduced through workplace ties, ethnolinguistic clustering and elder-led networks that ease the shock of a new country.

“Bisi told her about a website for Nigerian nurses where she could get information about state registration and job applications, after which I couldn’t get her off the Internet. From then on, she followed postings on the website’s message boards regularly and started using email.” (Atta 101–102).

This excerpt shows how transnational communities use modern tools to stay connected. The Nigerian nurses’ website becomes a virtual communal space. This is a digital diasporic forum where practical knowledge, gossip and identity circulate.



The Nigerianisms is implicit: online, English is the medium, but the topics, references and tone are distinctly Nigerian. That hybrid space changes how community works: it widens the circle beyond neighbourhoods and church groups, which enables geographically scattered Nigerians (Queens, Paterson, Edison) to sustain a shared identity and to coordinate moves like exam tips or visa strategies. In the novel, such forums reproduce community norms (who to trust, who counts as *“one of us”*) while also encouraging newcomers to adopt tools that help survival in the US workplace.

“She and her husband were planning to buy a bigger house. ... Bisi thought Titi was envious, yet she invited Titi and her family for Thanksgiving dinner.” (Atta 102).

This short domestic scene captures how communal identity includes competition and hospitality in equal measure. Buying a bigger house and inviting others for Thanksgiving are both signs of trying to belong and to show status in the new country. Yet the invitation itself, calling a rival to dinner, is a typical communal gesture: food and shared meals are how migrants make and maintain ties. Language used at such events often slips between English and Nigerian idioms, which in turn reinforces belonging while signalling success. Atta shows that communal identity in the diaspora is negotiated through such rituals: generosity binds, boasting divides, but both are part of the social code that keeps a group recognisable and resilient.

“Moriām made the stew with stockfish. ... She also taught me how to make jollof rice, so Bashira could take some to school in Tupperware. ... ‘What if they say it smells funny?’” Bashira asked.

“Tell them they smell funny.” he said. (Atta 161).



Food is one of the most powerful ways communal identity is preserved. Jollof rice, stockfish, the habit of packing home food in Tupperware are not only culinary acts but cultural statements. When Bashira worries that others will find the smell *“funny,”* and gets told off with the blunt humour *“Tell them they smell funny,”* Atta shows how the family teaches pride through language. Nigerianisms are present in attitudes and idioms rather than single words: the family’s speech includes Nigerian humour, local nicknames and a readiness to defend their tastes. Keeping culinary traditions and the playful language that surrounds them preserves a sense of *“we”* for children who might otherwise drift to mainstream tastes.

“I was in the concourse, which was like a marketplace when I walked in. ... Ranti was one of the most beautiful women I knew. She wore a tight ankara outfit so that when she turned heads, the colour spoke louder than anything she could say.” (Atta 201).

Public gatherings such as conferences, markets, church halls act like temporary homelands where communal identity is visible and performative. The concourse as *“marketplace”* is a neat image: people trade ideas, gossip, jokes and customs there. Clothing (ankara), praise, and small talk mix languages and cultural signs; even when people use English in public, the visual and idiomatic cues mark them as part of the same communal culture. Atta shows that communal identity is rehearsed publicly: familiar dress, shared references and the comfortable mixing of idioms reassert belonging in a place that can otherwise feel alien.

“We were from Nigeria and they’re from Korea. If we can’t get along in America, we can go our separate ways.” (Atta 179).



This blunt line reveals how diasporic communal identity sometimes defines itself against other migrant groups. The narrator's exasperation, "*if we can't get along... we can go our separate ways*", shows how group boundaries are made and policed. Language here is a reflexive marker of difference ("*they*"), and it underlines that communal identity is partly defensive: claiming a separate space is a way to protect customs and to maintain social order when the wider culture is indifferent or hostile. In practice, such boundaries may close opportunities for alliance, but they also create a refuge where Nigerian expressions and Nigerian cultural habits can survive without dilution.

"Moriām sat next to me on the bed. 'Oh, come on. America is not that bad.' ... 'There's tribalism in Nigeria!' Moriām said. 'We've even brought it here!'" (Atta 116).

This exchange admits the dark side of communal identity: *The Bad Immigrant* shows that homeland divisions (tribalism, class, religion) move with migrants. Community is not pure solidarity; it carries old grievances and rivalries into the diaspora. Nigerianism reproduce those divisions: people still use regional terms, tribal jokes and regional registers to mark insiders and outsiders. Atta is critical here: communal identity helps with survival, but it can also recreate exclusionary practices. The community's language becomes both glue and gate: it comforts but also excludes those who cannot perform the right idioms or who do not share the same origin story.

"The next Saturday, Bashira went to Alice's house for the day. ... I was not giving up on Alice. Alice, I realized, would be the first American-born kid to visit our house. ... Bashira banned me from



tagging along.” (Atta 179–180).

This domestic vignette highlights how communal identity is taught, rehearsed and tested through child socialisation. Letting an American-born child into a Nigerian home is a small but decisive test of whether communal norms will translate to future generations. Parents worry if their children will hold on to Nigerian ways like language, food and greeting rituals so they stage controlled encounters that expose kids to both worlds. Nigerian expressions appear in these teaching moments: parents encourage certain words, correct others, and teach children which parts of their speech mark them as “one of us.” Atta shows that communal identity depends on these repeated micro-practices inside households.

“Auntie was a sort of godmother of Yoruba nurses in New Jersey. ... She said that white Americans preferred Africans to African Americans because Africans were better educated and worked harder.” (Atta 102–103).

This is a painful example of how communal identity can be linked to aspiration and uneasy hierarchies. Auntie’s comment that white Americans prefer Africans over African Americans is an attempt to protect the community by claiming moral and educational superiority. It is Nigerianism thinking: the claim is shaped by a diaspora conversation that uses English but channels anxieties from Nigeria (respectability, status). Atta puts such lines into the mouths of elder community figures to show how communal identity can be defensive, sometimes reproducing prejudice to secure advantage. The language that circulates in the community (on message boards, over the phone, in kitchens) becomes a way to manage reputation and social capital in the host society.



The Bad Immigrant portrays community as something alive, complicated and constantly changing. In the story, community is built not just through blood ties but through daily interactions in workplaces, online chats, family meals and public events. It is never fixed; it grows and reshapes itself as people talk, share and argue. The way people mix English with Nigerian languages such as Pidgin and cultural expressions becomes the real language of this shared identity. Nigerianisms is not just a way of speaking; it is how people express who they are and where they belong. It serves several purposes in the novel by showing how language shapes belonging and difference at the same time.

First, Nigerian expressions help to bind people together. When characters use familiar Nigerian names like “Auntie” or “Titi,” talk about local foods such as jollof rice, or give their own twist to celebrations like Thanksgiving, they recreate a sense of home far away from Nigeria. These small acts of speech and culture build warmth, trust and mutual help among people facing similar challenges abroad. The shared words and habits remind them of who they are and where they come from even in a foreign land.

Second, Nigerian expressions help to pass on knowledge and traditions. *The Bad Immigrant* shows older women and online communities teaching the younger ones both practical and cultural lessons such as how to cook, how to find work and how to register as a nurse. Language becomes the tool that carries this wisdom. A switch into Yoruba or Pidgin often signals teaching, advice or correction. Atta shows how communication preserves culture and helps younger migrants adapt without losing their roots.

Third, language also keeps order within the community. The same words that



connect people can also be used to control them. Gossip, teasing, nicknames and the way people group themselves by tribe such as Yoruba, Igbo or others can determine who is accepted and who is left out. The use of local expressions sometimes enforces respect, reputation and social boundaries. This side of community life shows that belonging always comes with rules and expectations.

Fourth, Nigerianisms reveals how communities can break apart as much as they unite. Old tensions such as tribal differences or class pride do not vanish in the new environment; they simply take on new shapes. People still compete, judge and divide themselves even while sharing similar struggles as Immigrants. The same spaces that offer comfort can also breed rivalry and misunderstanding. In this way, Atta presents community as both a refuge and a battlefield of identity.

People in the diaspora naturally adjust their language to fit the situation, sometimes to draw closer to others, and sometimes to stand apart. They use speech to show solidarity within their own circles or to set themselves apart from outsiders and other migrant groups. In the *The Bad Immigrant*, Nigerianism is therefore not random; it is thoughtful and strategic. A few words in Yoruba might show warmth when speaking to an older woman; English might show pride or confidence when addressing a child or a foreigner. A sudden switch into Pidgin or a sharp Nigerian expression might serve as a defence when someone looks down on Africans.

Atta shows that communal identity is shaped as much by the small sounds of everyday talk as by larger questions of culture or politics. Belonging, in *The Bad Immigrant*, is built word by word, in laughter, advice, gossip and defence. Language becomes the daily act through which people make a home for themselves, carry their culture across borders and remind the world, and one another, that they still belong.



2.3 Conclusion

This chapter has shown that Nigerianisms in Sefi Atta's *The Bad Immigrant* goes beyond mere linguistic play; it is a deep reflection of how people use language to express identity, maintain relationships and navigate social realities in a foreign land. The ways speech becomes a tool of adjustment and survival through gender and communal identities are seen. Women, for instance, use mixed language to nurture, assert, or protect themselves while men often use it to claim authority or familiarity. At the same time, Nigerian expression serve as a bridge that connects individuals to their cultural roots and builds a sense of shared belonging within the Nigerian community abroad. It allows migrants to stay true to who they are while adapting to new spaces. This chapter makes it clear that every instance of Nigerianisms in the novel carries social meaning as it reveals how language functions as both a social shield and a symbol of identity for those balancing life between two worlds.



CHAPTER THREE

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND RELATIONAL MOTIVATIONS FOR NIGERIANISMS

3.0 Introduction

This chapter examines the psychological and relational motivations for Nigerianisms in Sefi Atta's *The Bad Immigrant*. The next section, looks at how bilingual express themselves emotionally and how Nigerianisms are reflected in their emotions. Section 3.2 looks at how Nigerian expressions are used to show power, conflict and resistance.

3.1 Emotional Expression through Bilingual Speech

Sefi Atta uses bilingual expression as a deep emotional language that mirrors how Nigerian immigrants communicate their inner feelings while adapting to life in America. Nigeria expressions allow the characters to express emotions that English alone cannot capture, which include frustration, affection, homesickness and even humour. For many of them, switching between English and Nigerian languages like Yoruba or Pidgin becomes a way to stay emotionally grounded in a foreign land. This linguistic blend reflects the tug between their two worlds, that is, the rational English-speaking world they must fit into and the emotional Nigerian world that still lives within them. Atta captures how emotions travel through language, memory and



identity through these moments of bilingual expression.

“Why is it that Nigerian parents never say ‘I love you’?”

“Why would we say that?” Moriam asked.

“American parents say ‘I love you.’”

Moriam turned to me. “With all their ‘I love you, I love you,’ the minute their kids can’t have their way, what do they get in return? ‘I hate you.’”

(Atta 137)

This dialogue between Taslim, his mother Moriam and the narrator shows how bilingual families express affection differently. The Nigerian parents’ avoidance of the direct English phrase “*I love you*” does not mean emotional absence; rather, their love is woven into gestures, teasing and Yoruba endearments like “*my child*” or “*my wife*.” Atta uses this contrast to reveal how emotion is culturally expressed. The refusal to use English expressions of love reflects the parents’ desire to preserve their emotional identity while living in America.

“Your cousin’s head is not correct. Who is he to talk to me in that way? Is he cursed or something?” (Atta 159)

Moriam’s expressions outburst by using the Nigerian English idiom “*head is not correct*,” conveys both anger and familiarity. Such bilingual expressions add emotional weight to her frustration in a way that plain English would not. The mixture of local idioms with English reveals a depth of feeling rooted in her Nigerian background. Atta shows that bilingual speech becomes an emotional outlet and a means to express intensity without losing cultural authenticity.



"Make me," he whispered.

I turned around. "What did you say?"

He smiled. "Nothing." (Atta 270)

Though this excerpt appears simple, it captures a subtle emotional shift within a bilingual father-son relationship. The father's authority, which is shaped by Nigerian upbringing, clashes with the American tone of teenage rebellion in Taslim's "*make me*." The English words that carry Western defiance meet the father's silence, which is a Nigerian form of control. Atta uses this clash of linguistic behaviour to show how emotion is negotiated through language and silence where bilingualism becomes both a bridge and a barrier between generations.

"Your job is affecting you. You can't see any good in people working as a security guard. Find another job."

"Teaching is what I want to do. Any other job would be mindless work."

"So take your mind off what happened... This country won't change if we leave. We will cope." (Atta 116)

In this emotionally charged exchange, Moriam's tone softens from confrontation to reassurance. The phrase "*we will cope*" echoes Nigerian resilience, which is a linguistic and emotional posture drawn from her homeland. Atta portrays emotion not only in what is said, but also in how it is said through rhythm, phrasing, and cultural hybridity that English alone cannot fully capture.

Overall, Atta shows that emotional expression among bilingual immigrants is not limited to words; it is layered with tone, rhythm and cultural memory. Nigerianisms becomes a vessel for emotions that cross linguistic and cultural boundaries.



Whether it is affection disguised as sarcasm, anger framed in idioms or love hidden beneath silence, bilingual speech reveals how immigrants hold on to their feelings and their roots at the same time.

3.2 Power, Conflict and Resistance

Sefi Atta uses everyday speech, arguments and emotional tension to show how power and resistance are deeply tied to language. She reveals how people fight for control, dignity and understanding in a world that often dismisses them. The characters' use of both English and Nigerian expressions becomes a way of showing defiance, authority and cultural strength. Nigerianisms therefore becomes more than communication as it becomes a form of protest, a shield and a weapon.

“You are always finding faults, Moriam. Always. Even when things are good, you must have something to complain about.” (Atta 91)

This moment captures the way language is used to assert emotional power in a marriage. Ismail's complaint reflects a man struggling to keep control within a home that challenges traditional gender roles. His words carry frustration and insecurity, and they reveal the tension between Nigerian patriarchy and American gender equality. Moriam's silence after this statement is her quiet resistance since choosing not to argue is itself a form of power. Also, by refusing to respond, she unsettles her husband's authority without open defiance. Atta shows how both speech and silence can become tools of control.

“I told you that man was arrogant,” Moriam said. “You didn't believe me. Now you've seen it for yourself.”

“You always have something to say after the fact.”



“Because you never listen until it’s too late.” (Atta 118)

Moriam and her husband clash over an earlier experience of racial prejudice. The exchange reflects how their shared immigrant frustration turns inward by becoming personal conflict. Moriam’s direct tone and repetition show how she uses language to claim wisdom and moral authority. Her husband, in turn, uses sarcasm to resist being corrected. Atta’s use of short, rhythmic sentences mirrors the sharpness of real-life argument, which shows how cultural pride, gender dynamics and power struggles all surface in how people speak to each other.

“Don’t tell me how to raise my children,” she snapped. “They will not turn out like those ones who shout at their mothers.” (Atta 145)

This quote reveals how immigrant parents resist cultural change through speech. Moriam’s insistence on traditional respect in her household is a form of linguistic power. Her mixture of Nigerian and English tone shows the pull between two worlds: the cultural expectations of home and the influence of American independence. Her choice of words—*“those ones who shout at their mothers”*—carries the rhythm of Nigerian English, and it reflects the mother’s attempt to preserve authority and tradition in a setting that threatens both.

“You people complain too much,” Osaro said. “You think because you live in America, you’re better than the rest of us.”

“That’s not what we think,” Moriam replied quickly. “We just want a better life.”

“And you believe America will give it to you?” (Atta 190)

In this dialogue, the tension between homeland and diaspora surfaces clearly. Osaro’s tone is filled with envy and accusation while Moriam’s is defensive but calm.



The power struggle here is not only personal but symbolic as it represents the larger conflict between those who stay in Nigeria and those who migrate. The phrase “*you people*” is a linguistic divider that marks Moriam as an outsider even among her own countrymen. Atta shows how speech reflects social distance with Nigerianisms becoming a tool to express pride, regret and resistance all at once.

“You think you can just insult me because I live here now?” Moriam shouted. “If I were still in Lagos, you wouldn’t dare talk to me like that!”
(Atta 204)

This heated exchange highlights the emotional side of power and resistance. Moriam’s use of “*Lagos*” carries symbolic weight. It represents home, confidence and the authority she feels she has lost in America. She reclaims a sense of self-worth that migration has eroded by bringing back her Nigerian identity. Her speech, mixing English grammar with Nigerian assertiveness, demonstrates how bilingual language expresses emotional strength. For Moriam, words are not only for communication. They are a weapon of survival and self-respect.

Across these moments, Sefi Atta uses language to reveal that power and resistance are not always loud or physical as they are often subtle, woven into speech, tone and silence. Her characters use bilingual expression to defend their pride, challenge disrespect and fight invisibility. Atta shows how immigrants struggle for emotional and social balance while trying to adapt to new systems that question their worth.

When characters like Moriam feel threatened, they diverge linguistically by leaning into their Nigerian speech patterns as a sign of strength. When they seek peace or understanding, they converge by softening their tone into more standard English.



This constant shifting between languages mirrors their struggle between belonging and resistance.

In *The Bad Immigrant*, every argument carries layers of emotion such as anger, love, disappointment and pride. Atta reminds readers that language is not just a means of communication but a living reflection of who people are and how they survive in a world that demands compromise.

3.3 Family Bonds and Intimacy

Power, conflict and resistance lie at the heart of *The Bad Immigrant* where Sefi Atta paints an honest picture of how immigrants constantly negotiate their place within social, racial and cultural systems that often seek to silence them. Atta explores how her characters assert power, resist subjugation and challenge both internal and external conflicts. The use of bilingual speech gives authenticity to their voices and becomes a subtle form of resistance against cultural erasure and foreign domination.

“You’re going to stay at home. I tried to talk to her about it, but she said she wasn’t going to be submissive like some African woman.”
(Atta 30)

This moment introduces a clear confrontation between African traditional gender expectations and the Western concept of female independence. Through the mention of “*submissive African woman*,” Sefi Atta exposes the cultural clash that fuels conflict within immigrant relationships. Language becomes a weapon here. The woman’s decision not to be “*submissive*” is both a verbal and ideological rebellion. Her resistance lies not in violence but in self-expression. She asserts modern power within an American context by voicing defiance in English rather than



Yoruba or Pidgin. This moment also reflects how bilingualism can highlight gendered struggles where each language carries social meanings of authority and resistance.

“Do you think every woman wants to study as I did when I came here?
Do you think every woman wants to do what I do as a nurse?” (Atta
241)

Moriam’s argument here is an act of self-assertion. Her tone, which is captured through repetition and rhetorical questioning, reveals how she uses language to claim authority and control in a conversation dominated by men. Her refusal to be silenced demonstrates how speech itself becomes a battleground for gendered power. In bilingual households like hers, women’s English often signifies self-education and social progress while their Nigerian inflections preserve emotional authenticity. Thus, Moriam’s bilingual speech is her means of resistance by blending cultural memory with self-determination.

“We’re not wanted here. We should just go back to Nigeria.”
“Come on,” Moriam said, turning on me. “After one bad experience?”
“Listen,” I said. “I interact with Americans every day. I observe them
for a living. There is too much racism here and we don’t belong on
either side.” (Atta 116)

This exchange captures the immigrant’s inner and outer conflict in a racially divided society. The husband’s despairing “*We’re not wanted here*” shows emotional defeat while Moriam’s calm rebuttal symbolises pragmatic resistance. Both characters use English to argue their positions, but the tone and rhythm of their speech reveal differing worldviews. His speech reflects fatigue and alienation; hers, quiet defiance and strength. Atta uses dialogue to show how the politics of belonging are



negotiated within families where one voice pleads for retreat, the other insists on endurance.

“Why are you bringing up race?”

“You’ve brought race up before.”

“When? When have I ever brought up race?” (Atta 179)

This short yet powerful argument captures everyday conflict born out of cultural tension. The defensive tone, the quick exchange and the repetition of “race” expose how Nigerianism often occurs in emotionally charged situations. When identity is questioned, language becomes sharper and more revealing. The argument itself is a microcosm of racial tension considering the fact that the couple debates belonging, prejudice and the unspoken divide between immigrants and Americans. The line *“Why are you bringing up race?”* mirrors the societal pressure to silence discussions about inequality. Atta uses dialogue as resistance against the erasure of immigrant struggles by reproducing this linguistic tension.

“They’re foolish,” I said.

“Maybe they don’t have much choice.”

“They have inferiority complexes.” (Atta 224)

This moment of dialogue between husband and wife is not just marital banter but a cultural commentary on identity and pride. The term *“inferiority complex”* reflects the speaker’s frustration with those who reject their heritage to assimilate into white spaces. It is an example of how Atta gives voice to power struggles rooted in postcolonial experiences. The conversation blends the rhythm of Nigerian idioms with the clarity of English syntax, which shows that bilingual expression can assert cultural pride even within critique. Atta constructs a subtle form of linguistic



resistance by speaking from the margins while questioning the dominant order.

In the *The Bad Immigrants*, Atta's use of bilingual dialogue is not ornamental but political. Through Nigerianism, her characters expose how power is negotiated within households, workplaces and society at large. Arguments, moments of defiance, and everyday quarrels all become sites of resistance. Her characters reclaim agency by refusing silence. They remind readers that language itself can be a form of survival through every shift in tone and every native phrase tucked into English speech.

3.4 Identity Negotiation in the Diaspora

Sefi Atta captures the deep emotional and cultural struggle that comes with living between two worlds. Her Nigerian immigrant characters are constantly caught between who they were at home and who they are expected to be abroad. Atta shows how identity becomes something that must be negotiated, not assumed. The characters express their attempts to belong while holding on to their roots. This blending of speech mirrors their inner conflict, which is the search to be accepted in America without losing the essence of being Nigerian.

“When I’m around Nigerians, I sound more Nigerian. When I’m with Americans, I sound more American. Sometimes I can’t even tell which is my real voice anymore.” (Atta 87)

This confession captures the heart of identity negotiation for many immigrants. The speaker's shifting accent reflects not deceit but survival, which is the need to adapt linguistically to feel accepted in different settings. Atta uses this moment to show how the immigrant experience often involves performing different versions of



oneself. The uncertainty in the phrase *"which is my real voice"* exposes the cost of this adaptation. The bilingual speaker has become a bridge between cultures, but that bridge carries confusion as well as connection.

"I could not tell if I was Nigerian enough anymore. In America, I was always the African. In Nigeria, I had become too American." (Atta 172)

Atta presents the painful reality of cultural displacement. The narrator's words reflect the paradox faced by many in the diaspora, which is being too foreign for home and too native for the new world. The switching between identities is not voluntary as it is demanded by circumstance. The use of English to express this Nigerian experience reinforces the duality of belonging and alienation. Through this emotional confession, Atta reveals that Nigerianism is more than a linguistic act. It is a constant negotiation of identity and acceptance.

"Sometimes I dream in Yoruba, other times in English. The Yoruba dreams feel warmer. The English ones feel cold." (Atta 131)

This image of dreaming in two languages beautifully shows how identity lives deep within the mind. The warmth of Yoruba dreams represents memory, family and the emotional safety of home. The "cold" English dreams reflect distance and formality, that is, a life shaped by rules and performance. Atta uses this contrast to illustrate that even in sleep, the bilingual speaker's mind is divided between comfort and conformity. Language here becomes not just communication but memory and emotion.

"You say I'm forgetting where I come from, but you don't understand how hard it is to survive here. Sometimes, to belong, you have to



pretend.” (Atta 204)

This conversation shows the heavy emotional price of assimilation. The speaker defends the need to “*pretend*” as a means of protection in a society that constantly reminds immigrants of their difference. The choice of English for this statement, rather than Yoruba, reflects the context of the new world—where the speaker must articulate pain in the language of the dominant culture. Atta portrays this not as betrayal but as a form of self-defence. Pretending, in this sense, becomes part of negotiating one’s identity to survive.

“Even when I spoke perfect English, people still asked me where I was from. My accent gave me away before my words could.” (Atta 210)

This excerpt shows the limits of adaptation in the diaspora. Despite fluency in English, the speaker cannot escape being marked as “*different*.” The accent, which carries traces of heritage, becomes both a badge of identity and a barrier to full acceptance. Atta uses this to reveal the subtle discrimination immigrants face, which is how they are never allowed to be fully American no matter how well they assimilate. The phrase “*gave me away*” captures the vulnerability of existing between languages and cultures.

In *The Bad Immigrant*, language is the stage where identity is performed, tested and defended. The characters’ constant movement between Yoruba and English reflects their struggle to find balance in a life divided between home and abroad. Atta uses bilingualism as a mirror of their emotional landscape as each switch between languages signals either closeness to home or distance from it.



For these immigrants, belonging is not a fixed state but a negotiation. In private spaces, Yoruba represents comfort and authenticity; in public, English becomes a tool for survival. This duality embodies the immigrant's inner world where pride in one's heritage coexists with the pressure to adapt. The inability to fully fit into either culture leaves them in a liminal space which means neither fully Nigerian nor entirely American.

Atta reminds readers that identity in the diaspora is not lost but remade. It grows out of adaptation, resilience and the courage to live in translation. Nigerian expressions thus become more than a way of speaking. It becomes a way of being, one that holds both the memory of home and the reality of the present.

3.5 Conclusion

Chapter Three has shown that Nigerianisms in *The Bad Immigrant* goes beyond everyday speech. It is a window into the hearts and minds of bilingual characters struggling to belong. Sefi Atta reveals how language becomes a tool for expressing emotions, asserting power, maintaining family bonds and defining identity in a foreign land. The characters' movement between Yoruba and English mirrors their inner conflicts that move between home and abroad, pride and adaptation, memory and change. Nigerianisms, therefore, is not a sign of confusion but a sign of resilience. It allows these immigrants to remain connected to their roots while navigating new realities by turning speech into a living bridge between who they were and who they are becoming.



CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

This research has explored Nigerianisms among Bilingual Speakers: Causes and Effects, using Sefi Atta's *The Bad Immigrant* as the primary text and *Accommodation Theory* as its guiding framework. The study has examined how and why bilingual characters in the novel switch between languages and how this affects their identity, relationships and sense of belonging. However, it has become clear that code-mixing is not a random or careless act. It is a conscious, meaningful tool of expression that reflects cultural memory, social adaptation, emotional struggle, and artistic purpose.

Throughout the study, several key findings emerged. Chapter Two focused on the social dimensions of Nigerianisms by showing that language functions as both a bond and a marker of identity among immigrant communities. Within family, workplace, and social spaces, characters use language to connect, to gain acceptance, and at times, to assert individuality. Their use of English, Yoruba, and Nigerian Pidgin highlights how language operates as a living bridge between their native and adopted worlds. Chapter Three examined the psychological and relational motivations for Nigerianisms by revealing that bilingual speech carries emotional weight. It allows the characters to express affection, anger, nostalgia and conflict more truthfully, often using language to manage relationships, display resistance and cope with displacement.

This research has revealed that Nigerianisms often occur as a social and emotional



adjustment. The characters converge towards or diverge from others through language depending on their desire for acceptance or individuality. This explains why Nigerianisms is fluid. It changes with setting, emotion and relationship. The study has been able to interpret bilingual speech as a reflection of both adaptation and resistance.

The research also discovered that Nigerianisms serve multiple purposes beyond communication as it preserves memory, strengthens cultural pride and symbolises identity negotiation in the diaspora. While it can lead to misunderstanding and alienation in foreign spaces, it also functions as a quiet form of resistance against cultural erasure. In *The Bad Immigrant*, every switch between languages tells a story of struggle, belonging and resilience.

In conclusion, Sefi Atta's *The Bad Immigrant* stands as a powerful literary example of how bilingual expression shapes human experience. Atta gives voice to the Nigerian immigrant's inner and outer worlds, which include the world of memory, emotion and adaptation. Her novel reminds readers that language is not only a means of speech but also a vessel of history, culture and identity.

Therefore, this study affirms that Nigerian expressions among bilingual speakers is a rich linguistic and cultural phenomenon. It is both a survival strategy and an artistic expression that captures the realities of those living between cultures. For Atta's characters, to mix languages is to exist truthfully in order to hold on to who they were while becoming who they must be. Through this, *The Bad Immigrant* succeeds in turning everyday bilingual speech into a powerful reflection of humanity, belonging and the enduring strength of cultural voice.



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