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A review of 'I Do Not Come to You by Chance' by Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani

Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2009 (343 pp)

There must be few of us who have never received a scam email asking them to receive a multi-million sum from Africa (usually) on a safe account in the west (invariably) and to keep a large percentage as their fee. No doubt most of us were suspicious from the start, and kept well away, but over the years – and the scammers have been around since global communications and anonymous email accounts made it all possible – thousands have swallowed the bait. The next step is for the *mugu* – the victim – to pay for the money to be released. This is followed by further supposedly 'bureaucratic' hold-ups, and at each step the *mugu* is asked to pay more. The art of the scammer is to keep the *mugu* biting – and paying – for as long as possible.

Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani's first novel, *I Do Not Come to You by Chance* charts the rise of Kingsley 'Kings' O. Ibe, 419 scammer, one-time student of chemical engineering, master in the art of email scam composition. As it does so, it connects Nigeria - heartland of advance fee fraud, also known (from a reference in the Nigerian penal code) as the 419 scam - to the wider world of global interaction and interdependence, and in particular to Kingsley's victims in the US and the UK. The interdependence is handled lightly, with irony and affection; scammers and *mugus* display the same faults and weaknesses (greed, naivety) and the same humanity which is their saving grace.

Central to the novel is the figure of 'Cash Daddy', Kingsley's Uncle Boniface. Cash Daddy is the colourful local millionaire who comes to the family's aid at a time of need. He has business interests everywhere – car showrooms, petrol pumps, properties for rent – but at the heart of his empire is 419. In the inner sanctum of his offices (lovingly known as the CIA) he employs a group of young men who spend their time writing and answering scam emails. A successful scammer needs to combine creative genius with the ability to think quickly; Kingsley has both.

Kingsley is Cash Daddy's creation. As a young man, when staying with Kingsley's family, Boniface (the nickname came later) had discovered Kingsley's talents by getting him to write multiple love letters for him; meantime, Boniface is making his first 'grubby bucks' by selling ginger beer bottles refilled with his own concoction of water salt and sugar. Boniface is eventually kicked out of the family by Kingsley's outraged father, but years later, when his father is hospitalized, the family remember the renegade relative who has made millions, and Kingsley is chosen to go and ask his uncle for help to pay the bills. Cash Daddy is happy to oblige, and he also realizes that Kingsley is looking for a job, having been turned down by every engineering company he has applied to, and (as a direct result of this) turned down by his campus sweetheart too. And so begins Kingsley's life of crime and easy money.

There are many merits to this novel – to start with, the scam emails themselves which punctuate the narrative, and drive it forward. Nwaubani has captured the stilted yet improvised tone perfectly; 'I do not come to you by chance' reads the opening of Kingsley's first concoction. The scammer's creativity is put to the test when the *mugu* takes the bait, and further emails are required, putting further strain on credibility. Kingsley plays the personal card:

'DEAR FRIEND

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR RESPONSE TO MY DEAR SISTER'S EMAIL. YES, MR HOOVERSON. IF YOU HELP US WITH THIS TRANSACTION. WE WILL GIVE YOU 20% WHICH COMES TO \$11.6 MILLION (ELEVEN MILLION SIX HUNDRED THOUSAND DOLLARS). I HOPE THIS AMOUNT IS SATISFACTORY.

MY HOOVERSON, FROM NOW ON, BOTH OF US MUST WORK AS A VERY CLOSE TEAM. I HEREBY SUGGEST THAT WE CHOOSE A CODE WHICH SHALL PRECEDE EVERY ONE OF OUR

CORRESPONDENCES. ALUTA CONTINUA, IS MY SUGGESTION, UNLESS OF COURSE YOU HAVE ANOTHER PREFERENCE.
THIS IS MY CODE NAME OF CHOICE OWING TO THE FACT THAT MY FAMILY IS CURRENTLY ENGAGED IN A STRUGGLE AGAINST INJUSTICE...'

It is Kingsley who has the idea of choosing the less common names in the phonebook – the Hooversons and Winterbottoms of this world (the English speaking world, of course), rather than the Smiths and Jones. This is because, he believes, they will have been subjected to less spam than their more commonly named fellow citizens in Auckland, Cardiff, Wisconsin, and so on – and more likely to respond as a result.

The English speaking world may be a vast pool of *mugus*, of willing dupes, but at the same time it is a source of attraction, for Kingsley and all his upwardly-mobile contemporaries. Kingsley has grown up in an anglophile family, where English is the only language spoken and the vernacular is banished. English is the passport to success, an idea which is reinforced by the semi-comic examples of pidgin speakers, the accents of Edo speakers ('a mother tongue induced speech deficiency that prevented (..) from putting the required velar emphasis on X sounds') and the reference to African click languages as somehow less than a 'real' language:

When I was a child, we had watched a documentary on television about an East African tribe who spoke with clicks and gargles instead of real words. I used to imitate their chatter to amuse Godfrey and Eugene.

With English, Kingsley can conquer. He is something of a purist, who corrects his fellow scammers' writing, even though he realizes that this is not necessarily always a good idea:

The grammatical errors stood up from the page and punched me right in the middle of my face.

'Please move,' I said.

Ogbonna shifted away, allowing me space to take over his keyboard. Unlike Azuka and Buchi, he had never made it to university. The level of language in our emails did not matter, though. It was probably just the purist in me. Apparently, mugus were never really surprised to see an African emitting dented English.

The enthusiasm for English spills over onto all things British and American; for many Nigerians the ultimate dream seems to be a UK or a US passport. When Kingsley's sister Charity announces she is going to marry a man more than ten years older than herself he reflects:

There could only be one reason why my young, intelligent, beautiful, naïve, unassuming, impressionable sister would want to marry this cradle-snatching thug. He had a British passport.

Any excuse seems good for pro-British panegyrics; towards the end of the novel, when Cash Daddy is murdered, perhaps by a political rival running against him for the post of state governor, a crime scene investigation team is called in from Scotland Yard. The newspaper editors are quick to ask for more:

'Why not invite the whole British government to come and run the rest of Nigeria?' some asked. 'Then maybe we would have electricity, running water, good hospitals, and our highways would cease to be deathtraps.'

This constant comparison between cultures, peoples, and languages, with comments on (among other attributes) African noses and British teeth, at the risk of reinforcing stereotype, has a stylistic parallel in Nwaubani's perennial search for simile. The *as... as* structure, in particular, seems to be everywhere ('handsome as paint', 'as solid as Gibraltar', 'lenses as thick as the bottom of a Coke bottle'); in another writer they might have a different effect, but in a young African writer finding her voice they have a satisfying vibrancy.

Another stylistic feature is to squeeze an image or an idea for every last drop; Nwaubani particularly likes to dwell on speech characteristics such as accent and pace of delivery, as in this description of Kingsley's potential brother-in-law:

His look was stiff and sluggish, like all his mannerisms. When he began a five word sentence, I could have walked up the flight of stairs, gone to the bathroom in my bedroom, turned on the tap, washed my hands, turned off the tap, descended the stairs, sat down, and he still would not have finished speaking.

Hardboiled and humorous, vaguely reminiscent of Raymond Chandler, this style has a defensive function too. It allows the author to skim over the darker sides of life, such as rough justice, malfunctioning hospitals, and untimely death. And it turns the 419 scam into a game in which each successive email raises the stakes and increases the risks – for both players.

The language choices Nwaubani makes throughout this novel reflect the dilemma of the African writer famously stated by Chinua Achebe in 1964: 'The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost.' Her characters use many of the grammatical and lexical features identified as Nigerian English by Igboanusi (2006) Schneider (2007) and others, such as reduplication ('small, small girls'), and double subject ('Me, I...'); while the narrative displays occasional semantic shift which is characteristic of a specifically Nigerian lexis: ('Both women *crash landed* to matters arising', where *land* = 'finish one's speech'). Pidgin (or 'broken English') does not get much of a look in, being confined to servants and the uneducated, and it may come with a comment:

'Abeg no follow am go anywhere, jare,' the termagant restrained her in her more typical Pidgin English. 'Abi him hol' your life?'

The major problem, though, foreseen and experienced by Achebe (like Nwaubani, an Igbo speaker), concerns the representation of Igbo culture and culture-specific terms. Nwaubani adopts a range of strategies: she uses the lexis in context and allows the reader to infer the general sense:

My mother soon appeared carrying a broad plastic tray with an enamel bowl of water, a flat aluminium plate of *garri*, and a dainty ceramic bowl of *egusi* soup.

Where the context does not allow this, she glosses the term, either directly:

It was a *tokunbo*, secondhand, Mercedes-Benz V-Boot.

or more circuitously:

All evidence pointed to the fact that they were 'Jambites'. Prim appearance, surplus excitement – it was never hard to distinguish a freshman.

When there is no equivalent term, she opts for paraphrase with cultural comment:

I boarded a shuttle bus straight to the university gates and joined the long queue waiting for *okada*. These commercial motorbikes were the most convenient way to get around, flying at suicidal speed on roads where buses and cars feared to tread, depositing passengers at their very doorsteps.

The effect is a cultural 'packaging' which makes the novel accessible to the global reader. At the beginning of the first chapter we read:

Being the *opara* of the family, I was entitled to certain privileges.

We can already imagine that the *opara* is the first-born male; but by the end of the novel, this has been rubbed into us thanks to Kingsley's obsessive concern to look after the family ('I am the *opara*! I did it for you people!') – and the drubbing he gives his younger brother when he tells him he wants to leave school. The *opara* is the first-born male, and this comes with special responsibilities attached. One word at a time, we are given glimpses of Igbo family life, and experience the clash between global forces and local traditions. Gradually Nwaubani builds up a credible portrait of a family, against a realistic background of scamming, and (for Western readers) from an unfamiliar angle, which other commentators have recognized as a strength of the novel.

In the end, Kingsley makes good – and continues to make (clean) money. Nwaubani clearly likes him, perhaps because of his creative, innovative, and improvised approach to life, but primarily because they both recognize the power of words. Kingsley knows that his *mugus* are ordinary people, not stupid, but human and ready to respond... the secret is in the packaging, the text of the email, the appeal from Africa which continues to strike a chord in another continent. As Kingsley puts it:

'Any intelligent, experienced expert could become a *mugu*. It was all about the packaging.'

The 419 may be nearing the end of its cycle, although we may rest assured that other global scams will follow. In the meantime 'I Do Not Come to You by Chance' is a package worth opening.