

# LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND ENVIRONMENT

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## Abstract

This paper highlights the significance of language in literary communication of cultural values and reaction to environmental degradation as consequential effect of modernity and technology in Africa as portrayed in *The Famished Road* (1991). Conceived on the premise of postcolonial space, the paper adopts the qualitative text based analytical method as its tool of analysis. It is discovered that Ben Okri's efforts to tackle the problems of the effects of decolonisation in Africa and the consequential devastation of Africa's rain forests by technological innovations is altruistic in *The Famished Road* (1991). Through the vagaries and restlessness of the abiku protagonist: Azaro - the spirit child, Okri focuses on the cruel engagement of deforestation triggered by Western corporations and exposes the continent's clumsiness to restore a harmonious relationship with nature and environment. The paper shows that *The Famished Road* (1991) also highlights the ancestral links of the forest with the African folklore and imagination. This paper recommends the engagement of literary discourses in both national and continental dialogues on environmental protection and development in Africa and the World.

**Keywords:** Language, Literature, Environment, Deforestation and Decolonisation

## Introduction

Environment implies everything that surrounds us. This can be living (biotic) or non-living (abiotic) things, including physical, chemical and other natural forces (Ricklefs, 2005). The biotic live in their environment and continually interact to

familiarise themselves with the conditions in that habitat (Vermeiji 2009).

Because everything is part of the environment of something else, different scholars use the word environment inversely. For instance, electromagnetic environment means radio waves and other electromagnetic radiation and magnetic fields. The environment of galaxy refers to conditions of interstellar medium.

To psychology and medicine, an individual's environment includes the people, physical objects and places that the person lives with. The environment influences the development and growth of the inhabitant. It affects the individual's conduct, body, mind and heart. In other words, the living circumstances of living organisms in an environment are influenced by the weather or climatic changes in the environment. Consequently, this also influences language, culture and cultural products like literature.

Language is a necessary aspect of human beings. It defines man as a social being. Language enables man to communicate: convey his ideas, feelings, thoughts, behaviours, etc. However, man is confronted with language death, dispersed around the earth and some linguists like Dorian (1993) alleged that humanity is experiencing a catastrophic linguistic drift by losing a "truly vast cultural content" (p. 578). Culture and language are two faces of a coin. They are deeply intertwined, and one is part of the other. To prevent language extinction, multiple approaches must be considered, and cultural features as literature should be prioritised.

Language, as an item of linguistic scholarship, has two primary meanings: as an abstract concept and, as specific linguistic system. For instance, language as a concept implies langue as a specific instance of a language system, and parole for the tangible usage of speech in a particular language (Lyons, 1981).

When discussing language as a general concept, definitions, which emphasise diverse features of the phenomenon are required (Lyons, 1981) which, also require different schools of linguistic theory on the relation between words, concepts and reality (Trask, 2007). This

made Gorgias to question the ability of language to represent the objective experience or human experience, concluding that communication and truth were therefore impossible. Contrastively Plato sustains that communication can be achieved because language signifies ideas and concepts that occur independently of, and prior to, language (as cited in Bett, 2010).

The renaissance of the opinion that language is significant in the creation and circulation of concepts, and that the study of philosophy is fundamentally the study of language is linked with what is termed the linguistic turn when, philosophers like Wittgenstein in 20th-century philosophy, discussed language in connection to cognition and consciousness, meaning and reference, which remain active today (as cited in Devitt & Sterelny, 1999).

This paper therefore, seeks to highlight the bond between language, literature and environment in the making of man in society: culture, values etc. as tools for reflection of and reaction to environmental issues in Africa, using Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* as the literary embodiment of the interplay of these sociocultural variables.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Postcolonialism has come to stand for “both the material effects of colonisation and the huge diversity of everyday and sometimes hidden responses to it.” This word, postcolonialism then, represents the continuing process of imperial suppressions and exchanges throughout this diverse range of societies, in their institutions and practices. Like the description of any other field, the term has come to mean many things (Ashcroft et al, 2003, pp. 2-7). The rich heterogeneity of this theory and the immense range of studies from which the theorisation of postcolonial literatures have emerged indicate that the task undertaken by postcolonialism as literary theory is not an easy one.

## Language, Literature and Environment

Language is the formal system of signs ruled by grammatical rules to communicate meaning. This view emphasises that human languages can be defined as closed structural systems entailing rules that link particular signs to some particular meanings (Trask, 2007), as extrapolated by Ferdinand de Saussure (1983), and this structuralism provides the foundation for numerous approaches to language (Campbell, 2004).

Noam Chomsky (1957/1996), the initiator of the generative theory of grammar, who defined language as the creation of sentences through generated transformational grammars (Trask, 2007), considers these grammatical rules to be the innate features of the human mind which constitute the basics of what language is (Chomsky 1957/1996). Contrastively, such transformational grammars are also commonly used in formal logic, in formal linguistics, and in applied computational linguistics (Trask, 2007; Newmeyer, 2011). In the philosophy of language, the view of linguistic meaning as residing in the logical links between propositions and reality was developed by philosophers such as Alfred Tarski, Bertrand Russell, and other formal logicians (Newmeyer, 2011).

Yet scholars view language as a method of communication that permits humans to exchange spoken or symbolic utterances. This definition emphasises the social utilities of language and the fact that humans employ it to assert themselves and to manipulate objects in their environment. Functional theorists explain grammatical structures through their communicative functions, and comprehend the grammatical structures of language to be the result of an adaptive process by which grammar was “tailored” to serve the communicative needs of its users (Nicholas & Stephen, 2009, p. 209; Van Valin, 2001, pp. 319-37).

This view of language is related to the spares of the study of language: pragmatic, cognitive, interactive, sociolinguistics and anthropological linguistic. Functionalist theories seem to study grammar as dynamic phenomena,

as structures that are continuously in the process of change as the speakers employ them. This notion prioritises the study of linguistic typology: the taxonomy of languages according to structural features, as it can be shown that “processes of grammaticalization tend to follow trajectories that are partly dependent on typology” (Newmeyer, 2011, pp. 3-6). In the philosophy of language, the view of pragmatics as being central to language and meaning is often associated with Wittgenstein’s later works and with ordinary language philosophers such as J. L. Austin, Paul Grice, John Searle, (as cited in Nerlich, 2010).

### **Language and Culture**

Language is a multifaceted element and, culture permeates more than one aspect of a language. An instance of a cultural aspect in discourse is the linguistic disparity between native speakers of a language and their foreign counterparts. This influenced Cedar’s (2006) decision to make the teaching of culture mandatory to foreign Language students to avoid cultural misunderstandings (23). According to Hale (1992), some forms of art, expressly verbal art (music, poems), are extremely reliant on “properties of the language” (p. 36) in which it was originally conceived. Language is what describes us as humans and humans are culturally and socially entwined. Scholars have cautioned that a language loss signifies the loss of “linguistic and cultural knowledge” (Ladefoged, 1992, p. 810), and the loss of the “cultural tradition connected to it” (Sasse, 1992, p. 7). There is no miracle that can detach language from culture. To this end, the American Heritage Dictionary defines culture as: “The totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought. (...) 2. Intellectual and artistic activity, and the works produced by it.”

Human thoughts, human intellect, human beliefs, are embedded by language. Though no linguists can deny the bond between culture and language, this relation is proved to be weak. The extreme version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, “that perception and

cognition are determined by the structure of whatever language one happens to speak,” was refuted by Chomskyan linguistics (as cited in Crawford, nd, p. 29). The flexible version of the hypothesis, the affinity feature, however, is not a subject for disputation: “culture, influenced by language, influences thought” as well as the pattern of literary thoughts, and mode (Crawford, nd, p. 29).

It suffices to agree with Hale’s (1992) argument that language articulates cultural systems. However, culture and language are not stagnant, they transform over time: “a living tradition implies change” (p. 41). Kubota (2003) argues that “culture has a diverse and dynamic nature ... constructed and transformed by political and ideological forces” (p. 70). When a language is lost, the cultural context of its traditional milieu is irrecoverably lost, because the possible survivors of that period might no longer exist (Hale, 1992). For instance, in some indigenous tribes that were overwhelmed by foreign civilization, the native language may be lost if offspring stopped learning it in order to learn the so called “civilized” language, occasionally out of prejudice, thinking the “white” language is more prestigious than the indigenous language. Therefore, the death of the last old man/woman of the tribe, implies the death of that language (p. 21).

### Theory of Fiction

The study of the social value or utility of literature is a subfield of the sociology of culture that investigates and studies the social production of literature and its social implications on society. For instance, Pierre Bourdieu’s 1992 work, translated by Susan Emanuel as *Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (1996). A significant first step in the social utility of literature is taken by Georg Lukacs’s *The Theory of the Novel* (1920) which, strappingly influenced and shaped the Frankfurt School. Its second edition in 1962, correspondingly influenced French structuralism. The Theory of the Novel argued that, whereas the classical epic poem had given form to a totality of life in reality by the social integration of classical civilisation, the modern novel has become “the epic of an age in which the extensive

totality of life is no longer directly given” (Lukacs, 1920, p. 56). That is, the novel form is therefore organised about the problematic hero in the quest of problematic values in the context of a problematic world.

Lukacs’s second idiosyncratic impact to the social utility of literature was *The Historical Novel*, written in German but first published in Russian in 1937. Its English translation appeared in 1962. In this book, Lukacs contended that the early 19th century historical novel’s central accomplishment was to realistically signify the disparities between pre-capitalist past and capitalist present. This is not a matter of individual’s specific talent, but of collective historical experience, because the French Revolution, the revolutionary and, Napoleonic wars had made history for the first time a mass experience (Lukacs, 1962). He further argued that the achievement of the 1848 revolutions condemned the historical novel to “decorative monumentalization” and the “making private of history” (Lukacs, 1962, p, 237).

### **Literature and Environment**

Raymond Williams, a Professor of Drama at Cambridge University and one of the founders of contemporary cultural studies, defined his distinctive approach as “cultural materialism”, which implies a theory of culture “as a (social and material) productive process” and of the arts “as social uses of material means of production” (Williams, 1980, p. 234). This demonstrates the relationship between culture and literature as a unique literary-critical perspective of the articulate use of language as signifier. Although Williams has a spread interests across literary and cultural studies, his key works focus on literature, especially drama.

In *The Long Revolution* (1961), Williams established pioneering explanations of the sociology of the book trade, the sociology of authorship and the sociology of the novel. In *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (1974), he maintained that the modern novel articulated a typically modern “structure of feeling”, the crucial problem of which was the “knowable community” (pp. 14-15). In *The Country and the City* (1973) he architectures a social history of English

country-house poetry, aimed at elucidating the idealisations of rural life represented in the literature: “It is what the poems are: not country life but social compliment; the familiar hyperboles of the aristocracy and its attendants” (Williams, 1973, p. 33). His *Marxism and Literature* (1977) - an instantaneous criticism of both Marxism and literature - is a general and formal expansion of his theoretical system.

Following on previous works in cultural production, reception aesthetics and cultural capital, the sociology of literature has focused on readers’ creation of meaning. Novel advances pertain to “investigating the link between literature and group identities”; concerning institutional and reader-response analysis; re-establishing the role of author intentions in literature; reconsidering the role of ethics and morality in literature (Dromi & Illouz, 2010, p. 357) and develop a clean perception of similarities or otherwise of literature and other media (Griswold nd).

The sociology of literature has equally delved into “the global inequality between First-World and Third-World authors”, as the latter is vehemently reliant on “the editorial decisions of publishers in Europe and America” and are frequently “excluded from participation in the global literary market” (Casanova, 2004, p. 321).

The postcolonial African novel has, through language, cultural regeneration and representation, reflects and reacts to the totality of environmental conditions in Africa. Ben Okri is one of such writers who, through literature, not only portrays the deplorable conditions of our environment, but also advocates for and protests against these devastations of African environment by the intrusion of colonial technology and urbanisation. Through literary regeneration of the abiku myth, the author portrays deforestation and its implications on not only the environment, but also on cultural practices in Africa.

Vanessa Guignery (2013) posited that “The homelands of *The Famished Road* are certainly “imaginary” and invisible as the novel is not explicitly bound to a specific geographical and historical place or nation” (p. 13). This disinclination about the home of the story accepts a metaphorical reading of the literary location to include any African



country, as well as any of the developing postcolonial nations in the world. It suffices to point out that a critical “bioregional” study of *The Famished Road* will show a conceivable plot setting for the novel. This should be done through the scrutiny of the climatological activities and the flora and fauna species depicted in the novel. Notwithstanding the rich magical realist features in the text. Okri has evidently maintained a concept of the native environment in the novel.

Erin James (2012) submits that, the novel depicts more than a hundred and thirty plant and animal species, with those common to West; corn, tomato and those that are only linked with Nigerian environment; flame-lily, baobab, and yam. The flora Azaro finds as he excavates the forest bordering the ghetto, such as mistletoe and palm, obeche, iroko, rubber, and mahogany, have mutually divulge the proper location of *The Famished Road*. The fauna indicated in the novel; the antelope and the duiker, impose additional confinement on the text, limiting it to a particular geography – south-western Nigeria that accommodates the rainforest: a dwelling for the species threatened by hunting activities and deforestation.

The place of the novel is quite contracted and restricted to the environs where Azaro and his family live, and to the journeys taken by Azaro on ‘endless’ roads. These geographical limitations render the sense of change even more clearly thus:

Steadily, over days and months, the paths had been widening. Bushes were being burnt, tall grasses cleared, tree stumps uprooted. The area was changing. Places that were thick with bush and low trees were now becoming open spaces of soft river-sand (TFR 104).

Okri’s *The Famished Road* opens with the cosmological image:

In the beginning there was a river. The river became a road and the road branched out to the whole world. And because the road was once a river it was always hungry (TFR 3).

The opening lines allude to a recurring mutation probing the order of historical chronology. This novel starts from myth and not from history. It's narrative of origin directly reviews its pastoral origins, as the road's perpetual hunger affirms to the earth's predacious violence (Ogunfolabi 2012). By mimicking the biblical opening, Okri refers to the unrecognisability of the time of the events, hence, signifying the mythic possibilities of the narrative: identified by a merger of Christian and Yoruba mythology. In addition, "hunger" is an obvious reference to the colonial and postcolonial subjugation, manipulation, denial and overpowering of the land and the people.

Cultural mutation is not the only factor responsible for the ecological deterioration of the entire country, as wiped out by "the stomach of the road". But such an act of ecological degradation also influences the speedy alienation of the indigenous people from their traditional belief systems. The local communities are equally endangered by the activities of the woodcutters. This curtails their forest-related activities and their access to steady food supply. The transition from the forest as lived-in space to alien ghettos implies its inhabitants' abandonment of traditional religious taboos relating to logging and farming practices and the loss of a long-established way of seeing the forest as life giving or provider. The petrifying destruction of the environment is strengthened by the strange imagination of the spirit child:

I had emerged into another world. All around, in the future present, a mirage of houses was being built, paths and roads crossed and surrounded the forest in tightening circles, unpainted churches and the whitewashed walls of mosques sprang up where the forest was thickest. I heard the ghostly wood-cutters axing down the titanic irokos, the giant baobabs, the rubber trees and obeches. There were birds' nests on the earth and the eggs half-formed and dried up, dying as they were emerging into a hard, miraculous world. (TFR 242)

Both the road and the river are embodiments of the motif of mutation or metamorphosis: cycles of life and death are linked with the nation and also the abiku. If Okri's major point focuses on the obsessive colonisation of nature, the trauma of the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970) is also transposed into a disfigured landscape, infused with disorder, deformity and disease.

Okri's chief character is born in one of the most precarious and chaotic moments in the history of Africa on the verge of becoming the modern, independent nation (Nigeria). The many events of the novel are indeed seen through the eyes of a child who straddles two worlds. The fate of the country on the eve of independence is constantly correlated to that of Azaro, who has not yet decided whether he has come to stay on earth or not. Suffering is one of the chief trepidations in the novel, as the wretched poverty that afflicts Azaro and his family symbolically suggests.

Olusegun Areola (1991) holds that slums are unfamiliar to the original urban settings in Yoruba land. They are consequential to colonial promotion of Nigerian urbanisation. The speedy growth of urban areas under colonialism really led to the "disintegration of the family compounds and the rise of slum housing conditions" (p. 202). Therefore, Okri's image of an urban slum in Yoruba land interrogates the colonial policy of Nigerian urbanisation and how it abated the inherent family and affinity ties that hitherto sustained traditional urban settlements.

By leading Azaro into the forest and showing him what "the new world" (postcolonial Nigeria) might look like, Dad informed Azaro of how forests surrounding the city will soon be lost, following the endless extension of urban slums. Dad informs Azaro that:

Sooner than you think there won't be one tree standing.  
There will be no forest left at all. And there will be wretched  
houses all over the place. This is where the poor people will  
leave ...This is where you will live (TFR 34).

This literary prediction alludes to further postcolonial cultural crisis in Nigeria which adds up to the ecological one. In other words, the crisis

of cultural hybridity will spontaneously occur with ecological degradation in Nigeria/Africa. As the proliferation of slums is one major cause of deforestation in Nigeria, the infinite construction of road networks as symbol of urbanisation and development is yet another cause of environmental attrition (Wu, 2012).

## Conclusion

Literature is the intrinsic cultural creation that replicates the very society of its origin via cultural apparatuses: myths, legends, riddles etc. as object of identity and history in an epoch in the sociocultural development of the people. However, literature is language dependent due to the fact that language provides the tool for both representational symbolism and the derivation of cultural values of the people. Therefore, language is an inevitable component of literary signification of reality or truth. Language is the only known means of civilised communication in society. As language communicates, literature not only communicates but also improves language. Language competences, preserves and transmits social values of its origin and documents transformational forms at particular point in history, while suggesting alternative options as solutions to social predicaments.

Due to literature's multi-facets social utility: reflection of society, language refinement, communication, preservation of culture etc., literature should be incorporated into the essential mechanisms of environmental discourses, linguistic development and change, public enlightenment and socioeconomic and political mobilisations of the general public.

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