

Interconnection of Nature and Yoruba Traditions in Okri's Trilogies

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Abstract—Africa's history and ecology were shaped by colonization. The European invasion of eastern nations had a significant influence on the environment. The technical advancements due to colonization have been both beneficial and detrimental to the colonized countries. The harmful consequences have prompted several researchers and African writers to conduct a critical examination of the interaction between humans and their environment in terms of race, culture, economy, power, and belonging. Ben Okri is an internationally acclaimed poet, writer, artist, and public speaker. In his trilogies *The Famished Road*, *Songs of Enchantment*, and *Infinite Riches* Okri has depicted the repercussions of colonization and the process of decolonization on the individual and the environment in order to understand the African reality. This paper highlights the interconnection of nature and culture which is considered as one of the main tenets of African culture and tradition. Okri employs magical realism as a literary method to emphasize the interplay between the human and natural worlds. Okri has included vivid imagery of verdant forest that has been deforested and wounded. According to the Yoruba mythology, the forest is frequently associated with magic and the supernatural world, in keeping with West African customs. Therefore, the exploitation of the natural world has led to the abandonment of traditional values which is well depicted. Further, the paper attempts to examine the effect of colonialism in eroding the spirit world and the physical world in terms of social structure and the degrading culture and its relationship with the environment.

Index Terms—environment, culture, colonialism, spirit world, Yoruba tradition

I. INTRODUCTION

Postcolonialism is more often concerned with hybridity and displacement and conservation of animals and the environment that has been side-lined. The postcolonial era has led to the rise of modern developments and materialistic world leading to the exploitation of the environment. Literature and arts, therefore, have been focusing on the interplay of humans and their relationship with nature. This had turned many writers and critics to voice the adverse effects of colonization in the name of civilization. The postcolonial ecocritical movement was widely spread in the year the 1960s which gave rise to a lot of literary works ranging from fictional to non-fictional works sketching the human relations to the environment. Alier (2009) observes that the rise of environmental education in the literary world is restricted not only to academics but also to livelihood. The postcolonial ecocriticism created a new space to share perspectives in regard to environment and its challenges with colonialism. It is said that environmentalism is seen as “White movement” in Africa. Thus, the tension in Africa in terms of postcolonial ecocriticism rises in concern with the human values and its global concerns. Travis et al (2014) comments that, “Environmental justice attempts to balance both social and environmental interests with a clear understanding that the health of a community depends on the two negotiated together and responds to the exploitation of disenfranchised cultures and classes that are too frequently represented by Indigenous peoples” (Travis et al., 2014, p.1).

This paper attempts to study on the degrading environment of the African society which has a huge impact on culture. The African landscape with its rich natural resources was exploited by the European colonization. It is believed that the rapid colonization of the African continent has led to urbanization which in turn influenced and attracted many Africans. The detachment of the Africans and seizure of their livestock led the Europeans to colonize and offer an economic justification leading to disrupted African system socially, economically as well as ecologically.

Ben Okri is an internationally acclaimed poet, writer, artist, and public speaker who was born in Minna west-central region and has lived in London ever since the 1970s. Okri in his trilogies *The Famished Road*, *Songs of Enchantment*, and *Infinite Riches* depict the various African traditions and the Yoruba myths and its traditions in particular. Okri not only tries to voice out the effects of degrading environment and but also tries to create awareness about the degrading environment which is affected by the Western epistemologies and uneven political eruptions. He tries to integrate the role of forest, the lush green environment, and also animals concerning African culture and economy. The author through his trilogies had tried to bring out the co-relation among the forest, the supernatural world, and the African

economy.

Okri portrays the richness of African natural resources in his novels through vivid images. Okri through the Spirit child Azaro echoes on the devastating effects on the environment due to the technological advancements in the novel. The trilogies *The Famished Road*, *Songs of Enchantment*, and *Infinite Riches* depict the intrusion of humans and exploitation of the natural world and the response of nature in return. The trilogies portray the importance of advocating oneself with nature to bring changes in political and social structure. In the book 'Landscape, environment and technology in colonial and postcolonial Africa', Ogunfolabi (2012) comments Okri's depiction of nature thus: "The author's sustained conceptualization of nature as a vigorous actor, where humans may be at the center of the narrative, but they are inevitably vulnerable to nature and its ability to mete out its reprisal in unforeseen ways" (Ogunfolabi, 2012, p.14). The critic also expresses Okri's strong concern towards environmentalism and his efforts in restoring nature to its truest place.

II. THE WRECKED WILDERNESS

The novel *The Famished Road* exemplifies the drastic effects of the environment due to the rise of technology. The author tries to make one understand the environmental consciousness through the degradation of the environment due to modernization. Okri vividly pictures the changes of the wilderness thus: "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 within them were smashed . . . the little birds within the cracked eggs half-formed and dried up, dying as they were emerging into a hard, miraculous world" (Okri, 1991, p.187). Therefore, these lines highlight the destruction of trees and modernization which act as a threat to human and animal life. It exposes the continuous effect of colonization on natural resources. Okri enlightens and creates awareness among his readers on how humans have exploited the natural world. In one of the scenes in the novel, Azaro's father tries to tell him that the house is not surrounded by forest anymore. "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 live This is where you too will live" (Okri, 1991, p.37). Therefore, throughout the novel, the author tries to bring out the environmental degradation and loss of their connection to nature.

Okri uses graphic descriptions of murder of the trees. He writes "Red liquid dripped from its stump as if the tree had been a murdered giant whose blood wouldn't stop flowing" (Okri, 1991, p.24). Red liquid in the lines of Okri is personified to the blood of the plant where the act of deforestation turns out to be powerful imagery where destruction of trees can be considered as a murder "The tree was mighty, its trunk gnarled and rough like the faces of ancient warriors. It looked like a great soul dead at the road's end" (Okri, 1991, p.94). James (2013) thus comments, "The personifying depiction of the trees, trees turn into giants and the sap flowing from the stump of the tree represents blood" (James, 2013, p.271). Later in the novel, the spirit child Azaro, laments that as he approached to the edge of the forest the trees groaned as they were cut down and he could hear the groans of the trees as it fell on neighbours. "I listened to trees being felled deep in the forest and heard the steady rhythms of axes on hard, living wood" (Okri, 1991, p.112). Thus, depicting the exploitation of the environment "Every day the forest thinned a little, Azaro explains that the trees I got to know so well were cut down and only their stumps, dripping sap, remained" (Okri, 1991, p.116). Thus, these lines help one to understand that the communities were involved in activities such as deforestation and causing harm to the environment which relatively had adverse effects on the limited access to food and other essentials.

The transformation of the forest and rivers into a plain land implies the abolishment of certain religious practices related to farming. The farmers had to clear the forest and colonization had its demands of palm oil and issues of land ownership which eventually led to depredations of land as well as the religious practices. For example, the myriad spirits are associated with hills, mountains, rivers, rocks and lakes etc...It is considered as a groove according to the Yoruba belief. Any devastation of the environment symbolizes the destructions of the spirits that dwelled in the forest. Highfield (2012) explains his connection between the felling of trees and lack of food. "A great deal of agriculture in West Africa was agroforestry, in which cultivated crops were grown alongside a variety of tree species" (Highfield, 2012, p.144). The forest was a place where the characters were able to connect themselves more than the real world as the real world was filled with struggles and turmoil. Azaro finds a haven in the forest where he finds happiness and peace. "Sometimes I played in the forest. My favourite place was the clearing. In the afternoons the forest wasn't frightening ... I wandered through the forest, collecting rusted padlocks, green bird-eggs, abandoned necklaces, and ritual dolls" (Okri, 1991, p.116). Therefore, Okri through his novels manifest a celebration of nature through the characters in the novel. Alice walker through her environmental theories explores three main factors such as environmental consideration, celebration, and reclamation, and these features are also adhered to by Okri in his trilogy where he tries to figure out and reclaim the environment through the characters in every possible way.

Okri registers the beauty of the African wilderness through the lines, "There was music everywhere, and dancing and celebration rose from the earth. And then birds with bright yellow and blue feathers, eyes that were like diamonds and with ugly scavenging faces, flew at me..." (Okri, 1991, p.189). The Animals are considered equal to human beings according to the Yoruba traditions and they are considered sacred as they are connected to human emotions and

traditions. For example, “The bar had moved deep into the forest and all her customers were animals and birds. I sat on a bench which was really the back of a goat and I drank off the back of a bull. A massive chicken without feathers strode into the bar, sat next to me, and ordered palm-wine and pepper soup. Madame Koto didn’t want to serve the chicken, but Dad said: ‘Serve him!’” (Okri, 1991, p.55). Babalola (1973) and Ojo (1973) comments Yoruba folktales show a deep connection between animals and human and moreover, depict how the animals interact with humans, eat and freely connect with each other without any boundaries. Though the consciousness and emotions of animals are similar to humans it turns out to be controversial according to Dawkins (2003) “It implies that emotional awareness is evolutionarily very old and possibly very widespread in animal kingdom” (Dawkins, 2003, p. 887). Thus, implies that animals have feelings and emotions with respect to its circumstances and situations. Therefore, one must consider its importance in the global world.

III. THE URBANIZED AFRICA

When Okri registers the riches of the Yoruban culture and their affinity towards their bioregion on one side, he claims the destruction of the environment on the other. Azaro dreams of the future world that is urbanized and modern “Skyscrapers stood high and inscrutable besides huts and zinc abodes. Bridges were being built; flyovers, half-finished, were like passageways into the air, or like future visions of a time when cars would be able to fly” (Okri, 1991.p.93). Thus, these lines focus on urbanization and the future of Africa with various stages of modern technology. The author through his text portrays the transitional period. Okri’s depiction of skyscrapers beside the huts and zinc abodes shows the half-finished process of development. “The forest loses its war against progress: it seems that the trees, feeling that they are losing their battle with human beings, simply walk deeper into the forest: I heard the great spirits of the land and forest talking of a temporary exile” (Okri, 1991, 459). Thus, through these lines, Okri portrays the exploitation of colonial power over the land as Africans fight for their independence. “In forest regions communities have long and deep relationships to the forest that predate the colonial and neo-colonial eras. Those relationships vary widely, but most local communities across West Africa lost significant control over forest resource use in the late colonial period, a situation that continued after independence” (Highfield, 2012, p.151). Hence Okri tries to bring out the postcolonial disillusionment through his novels.

The Trilogy not only focuses on deforestation but also creates an awareness that the forest is depleting and its consequences on the character’s life. Through the second book *Songs of Enchantment*, the author tries to bring in different perceptive of seeing the world anew he tries to bring out the changes that can be made in political, social, and ecological scenarios through the narrator. Especially, in the novel *Songs of Enchantment*, he tries to represent both the physical and the spiritual world where spirituality can lead to abdicating social influences and responsibility.

Okri through this novel not only emphasizes the loss of environment but also the loss of connection between the humans and the forest. “The trees were being felled every day in the forest. We heard the stumps screaming in the evenings. The word went around that the spirits of the forest had turned vengeful. No one was supposed to go there at night...And because the forest gradually became alien to us, because we feared the bristling potency of its new empty spaces, we all became a little twisted” (Okri, 1993, p.68). According to Constantini (2013) “the spreading deforestation exposes the people’s inability to restore a sustainable harmony with their environment” (Constantini, 2013, p.93). The author uses animals, lizards, birds, monsters to connect to Abiku fantasy world. The destruction of the forest also symbolizes the loss of animals and the imaginary world of the humans in novel. Thus, the consequences of deforestation on human life disturb them psychologically through hallucinations and nightmares. For example, Characters like dad, Azaro and old woman turn out to be terrified because of their lost sense of hope to restore the environment as they are culturally and ancestrally associated with the forest. Thus, the Okri beautifully exposes the local people’s inability to restore the environment.

Okri’s depiction of the old woman in *Infinite Riches* showcases on her survival despite her seclusion from society as she looked frightening with her disease the old woman looked different from others with her twisted eyes. The landlords refused to give rooms for rent and the society did not accept her so she retreats to the forest wherein she lives a life of a hermit and sees the changes that happen in the society. The old woman cared for animals and plants; she turns out to be someone who cured the disease of many people but she retained her ugliness. Through the portrayal of the old woman, the author tries to depict the sacredness of the forest and its connections to the culture. The forest was considered as a place of celebration and music and as crowded as the marketplace that was never silent and people trained themselves to fight at the forest “they were birds asleep on the roof everywhere on the grounds outside the hut they were white eggs on her wooden bed they were black eggs.” (Okri, 1993). Therefore, the lines suggest the survival of human beings through natural resources. Okri exhibits the abiding power of nature and its political associations with dehumanizing systems and corrupt politics. The visions of Okri are an integration that links humans and their surroundings.

In the third part of the trilogy, the *Infinite Riches* the author depicts the consequences of deforestation which leads to wide barren areas and landscapes which portrays emptiness and the control of colonial authorities over the land. “The forest once represented the beginnings of dreams, the boundary of our visible community, the dreaming place of spirits, the dwelling place of mysteries and innumerable old stories that reincarnate in the diverse minds of human beings...” (Okri, 1998, p.61). Thus, the forest was associated with spirits and elves were the spirits wove spells of ‘mischief and delight’ (Okri, 1998, p.61). The destruction of forest created emptiness and a wound in the life of humans. Through

Okri these lines reclaim the beauty of the forest and the effects of colonization over the land and its traditions. Deforestation has brought disaster; the gentle winds have gone instead bad wind started blowing. “There are certain trees that seem worthless but when gone leave empty spaces through which bad winds blow. There are other trees that seem useless but when felled worse things grow in their place” (Okri 1998, p.214).

Frantz Fanon in ‘Wretched of the Earth’ explains that the success of colonization lies when the ‘indocile nature is being tamed’. Thus, globalization had led to the loss of forest resources and it is what Rob Nixon (2012) calls as ‘slow violence’ (Nixon, 2012, p.257). The violence of forest is caused by the political thugs in the society which exemplifies contemporary Nigeria at the hands of globalization and colonial empowerment. “Madame Koto cries out that she ‘cannot cut down old trees’ because ‘they give shade to two thousand caravans of spirit’s” (Okri, 1998, p.29). Therefore, the crisis of deforestation is not just ecological but also cultural as the characters like Koto lose their connections to spirits, magic, or neither communal to the indigenous belief. Unlike, Koto, Azaro focuses on the new nation that is born with new realities in the world he sees the spaces created due to colonization on a positive note. “Widening the spaces for better realities’ (Okri, 1998, p.196) and ‘extending the womb of the world” (Okri, 1998, p.196).

The political growth in African society led to the violation and destruction of the environment. The distribution of poisoned milk causes food poisoning which reveals the scarcity of food over the nation and its starvation which leads to various issues and health problems. The decline of the forestry and development of buildings causes agroforestry. Okri reveals the transition of forest to buildings through his character Madame Koto. Therefore, the change in society can be viewed in two different perspectives it can be seen as an obsession with advancement in society and also as exploitation of the wilderness carried out by the western invaders. Madame Koto poignantly points out the transition “Our area filled up with strangers who came to the city from their villages deep in the country. There were no houses for them and sometimes ten of them lived in one room and when the diseases began to visit us from the forest many people died while the trees fell one by one. Things changed rapidly and at night all kinds of animal cries kept us awake” (Okri, 1998). Okri depicts the loss of trees, animals, and human lives due to the wake of colonialism.

According to Mahmutovic “The topos of the road which changes while crossing natural places is a symbol of the myth of progress viewed from a Yoruba perspective” (Mahmutovic, 2010, p.5). The exploitation of the forest and livelihood of people and the constant changes in the road symbolizes the Yoruba perspective where the road is associated with the myth of progress hence embodying modernization and technological developments leading to exploitation of nature by the colonial rule.

IV. CONCLUSION

The article foregrounds the human encroachment of nature and its resources. Okri’s novel tries to deal with ecological issues as an antidote and also highlights the Yoruba culture, a culture that is rich in its views on global discourse and postcolonial studies. A culture that projects the development of nature. Okri’s Trilogy draws much from Yoruba and African folklore traditions through the fragmented stories in the novels. The novels depict the transition of the society to an urbanized land due to colonial empowerment and transition causes environmental degradation which also leads to the loss of African traditions. The author also portrays the aspects of politics in the environment and he tries to exhibit the power of nature over human life and its impact. The paper emphasizes on environmental degradation and the instability of the land with regards to its modern growth and on the other hand the degradation of the land exhibited through political thugs in the novel. Okri tries to figure out new ways of seeing the world anew through his novel. Therefore, through the spirit child Azaro and other characters such as the old woman and Madame Koto he envisions the disappearing forest in postcolonial society and its forgetfulness of visions and imaginations. The trilogy can be seen as transformative, a breakthrough, and as an emergence of new dreams and creativeness.

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