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AN INTERCONNECTEDNESS AND DESTRUCTIVENESS ON ENVIRONMENT: AN ECO-CRITICAL ANALYSIS ON BEN OKRI'S "THE FAMISHED ROAD'' –TRIOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

This Research paper explores the contentious outcomes of decolonization in Nigeria, highlighting the detrimental effects of technological advancement on natural landscapes. Author emphasizes the relentless deforestation driven by Western companies and brings to light Nigeria's struggle to restore ecological balance. This research paper highlights the deep connections between the forest and Yoruba folklore and imagination. The forest represents the persistent deterioration of natural resources and spiritual life in postcolonial Nigeria. The central spatial elements that define fictional universe include the ghetto, the forest, and Madame Koto's bar. The ghetto and the forest are the main destinations for the abiku's movements, with the bar functioning as a luminal space between these realms. The ghetto is characterized by dirt and violence, results from colonial and neocolonial forces that have driven chaotic urbanization. Conversely, the forest symbolizes resistance, a realm where the forces of nature challenge human violence. This tension is mirrored in the environmental degradation caused by deforestation and the construction boom that follows the destruction of the trees. Authour presents a unique view of the natural world, integrating motifs from Nigerian traditions. Against the backdrop of globalization and neo-colonial exploitation, and with an acute awareness of environmental vulnerability, and illustrates a compassionate understanding of how human activities endanger natural processes.

KEYWORDS: Decolonization, Deforestation, neo-colonialism, spiritual word and Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

This research paper explores Ben okri's uunique view of the natural world, integrating motifs from Nigerian traditions. Against the backdrop of globalization and neo-colonial exploitation, and with an acute awareness of environmental vulnerability, Okri illustrates a compassionate understanding of how human activities endanger natural processes. By underscoring the crucial role of the forest in African culture and economy, the author highlights its ecological importance and its profound ties to the spiritual realm. In "The Famished Road," the forest symbolizes the gradual erosion of both natural resources and traditional beliefs in postcolonial Nigeria. The changes in postcolonial cultures highlight the imperial contradiction between geographic expansion for economic and political benefits and the purported moral justification for such actions. "The Famished Road" is the first installment in a trilogy, succeeded by "Songs of Enchantment" (1993) and "Infinite Riches" (1998), all with the overarching aim of highlighting environmental degradation and especially deforestation.

Spiritual realm and Collective Imagination

The research explores the complex and uneven journey of Nigerian history towards political independence, suggesting that this freedom might not fulfill its promises. Okri's fictional world is influenced by both the spirits in the bush and the people inhabiting the land. The protagonist of the novel Azaro, originally named Lazaro (a nod to the biblical Lazarus), represents both the "native" and the "nomad." He straddles the physical world and the spirit realm, with his journeys often taking him into the bush, a realm rich with spirits. The abiku, or spirit child a recurring figure in West African cultures also known as Ogbanje struggles to stay in the living world, enduring continuous suffering as it shifts between reality and the realm of fantastical beings rooted in the Yoruba collective imagination. Azaro's dual existence between the visible and the invisible mirrors the cyclical nature of "The Famished Road," as his wanderings and visionary perspective reveal. The abiku's cycle of birth, death, and rebirth parallels Nigeria's own history, marked by repetitive patterns and stalled progress. In this novel, the primary viewpoint is deeply rooted in the spiritual realm, contrasting with the alternative world of the Lagos ghetto where Azaro's parents reside. The central spatial elements that define Okri's fictional universe include the ghetto, the forest, and Madame Koto's bar. The ghetto and the forest are the main destinations for the abiku's movements, with the bar functioning as a luminal space between these realms. The ghetto, characterized by dirt and violence, results from colonial and neocolonial forces that have driven chaotic urbanization. Conversely, the forest symbolizes resistance, a realm where the forces of nature

challenge human violence. Azaro spends much of his time wandering the ghetto, exploring the adjacent forest, and observing the evolving dynamics of his neighborhood from Madame Koto's bar. The rivalry between the Party of the Poor and the Party of the Rich escalates as the push for independence gains traction, highlighting the stark divide between the struggles of manual laborers like Azaro's parents and the relative affluence of property owners like Madame Koto. This conflict is further underscored by the environmental damage resulting from deforestation and the subsequent construction boom. Although Azaro's small neighborhood, the surrounding forest, the boundary road, and the nearby large city are not explicitly named in the novel, *The Famished Road* evokes a specific setting through its vivid portrayal of weather patterns and local wildlife. Despite the novel's rich fantastical elements, Okri grounds the narrative in a familiar landscape, creating a sense of "local realism." The novel's geographical focus is relatively narrow, centering on the neighborhood where Azaro and his family reside and the "endless" roads he traverses.

This limited setting amplifies the sense of change and transformation in the narrative, making the shifts in both the environment and society more striking. In *The Famished Road*, Ben Okri vividly illustrates the gradual alteration of the natural landscape due to human activity paths widen, bushes are burned, and trees are uprooted, resulting in the degradation of what was once a dense and vibrant ecosystem. The novel begins with a cosmological image that implies a cyclical transformation: "In the beginning there was a river." "The river became a road, and the road extended into the entire world. And because the road was once a river, it was always hungry." This opening line routes the concept of the "famished road" in myth rather than history, questioning linear historical narratives and dismantling idealized pastoral images. The road's insatiable hunger symbolizes the predatory violence inherent in the earth itself. The biblical allusion at the beginning suggests events that transcend specific timelines, merging Christian and Yoruba mythology and highlighting the colonial and postcolonial exploitation of the land. Okri critiques how cultural transformations have contributed to the ecological degradation of Nigeria, with the metaphor of the "stomach of the road" symbolically consuming the land and alienating the Yoruba people from their traditional beliefs.

Environmental destruction and vivid imagination

Deforestation not only diminishes forestry related activities and limits access to food but also represents the abandonment of traditional taboos surrounding logging and farming. This shift from viewing the forest as a life-sustaining space to perceiving it as an alien territory

underscores the cultural change. The environmental destruction is further amplified by Azaro's vivid imagination, as he envisions a world overtaken by development, where forests give way to roads and buildings, and the cries of fallen trees resonate with the violence of human encroachment. In the novel, the road and the river symbolize cycles of life and death, intertwining with the nation's history and the fate of the abiku. Okri employs these symbols to critique the relentless colonization of nature, connecting the trauma of the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) to a disfigured and chaotic landscape. The novel captures the tumultuous period leading up to Nigeria's independence, seen through the eyes of a child caught between two worlds. Azaro's father's warning about the impending loss of forests to urban slums highlights the cultural and ecological crises that post-independence Nigeria would confront. In Okri's novel, the forest represents more than just a physical space; it serves as a boundary between the visible and invisible worlds, where the distinctions between reality and fantasy become blurred. This fluidity challenges conventional ideas of space, blending realistic and fantastical portrayals of the same environment. The forest, alive with supernatural beings, is a "nowhere land" where forms shift like in dreams, reflecting both the richness of the abiku's imagination and the decline of the natural world. As deforestation progresses, the destruction of the forest symbolizes the erosion of imagination and traditional beliefs. The trees' groans as they fall resonate with Azaro's physical pain, highlighting a profound connection between humanity and nature. The anthropomorphic descriptions of deforestation such as trees bleeding and crying out underscore the brutality of the act and the loss of Nigeria's lush vegetation. Okri's narrative captures the stark reality of Nigeria's forest devastation, illustrating the significant loss of primary forests in the country between 2000 and 2005 (Butler 2006). The novel links deforestation to food scarcity, highlighting how the loss of forests disrupts agro forestry practices essential for food production in West Africa (High field 2012:144). Okri portrays deforestation as "slow violence," illustrating the ongoing environmental and cultural crises in Nigeria, where modern roads and infrastructure replace traditional forests, undermining both the land and the cultural identity associated with it. Madame Koto's bar, which shifts from serving traditional food and drink to offering commercial products, symbolizes Nigeria's capitulation to global capitalism and the erosion of cultural practices.

Okri ultimately contends that the destruction of the forest is not merely an environmental concern but also a cultural one, as the loss of the forest erodes traditional beliefs and human imagination. This work implies that for Nigeria to survive and rejuvenate, it must cultivate a new awareness, viewing the world through the lens of imagination and myth. The final line, "A dream can be the highest point of a life" (Okri 1992: 500), emphasizes the vital role of

imagination in shaping reality. In this way, *The Famished Road* serves as a metaphorical act of reforestation, striving to restore the "forest of the mind" and revive the human imagination that is in danger of being lost.

It is important to note that while both Achebe and Okri seek to foster a close relationship between humans and the natural environment in their writings, there has been a lack of thorough eco-critical analysis of their novels. Despite their distinct styles, both authors evoke pastoral scenes of pre-colonial Africans living in harmony with nature and critique the ways in which "neo-colonial" Africans attempt to dominate and exploit the environment. They advocate for a rational approach to managing nature, treating it as "our mother," for the benefit of all life forms. Consequently, it is vital to analyze Okri's novels from an eco-critical perspective to highlight the ecological and environmental issues embedded in their narratives. This study aims to explore selected works of Achebe and Okri through an ecocritical lens. Given the global environmental crisis, especially in newly independent African nations, examining postcolonial literature from an ecological viewpoint has become increasingly important. Literature has long served as a medium for expressing ecological concerns, and the rising interest in these issues has fostered the development of eco-critical theory, a dynamic and sometimes contentious area within literary studies.

This ecological lens helps reveal the "eco-vision" present in literary works, nurturing an ecological sensibility in readers. Ecocriticism encourages a reevaluation of ecological attitudes and raises awareness of humanity's relationship with the living earth. By developing historical and theoretical frameworks, ecocriticism engages with the increasing ecological consciousness of the twenty-first century. The portrayal of ecological diversity in literature often evokes a sense of connection. Works that showcase a wide array of non-human species are seen as fostering ecological proximity (Iheka, 2018). This section examines how ecological diversity is represented within the framework of proximity in *The Famished Road* (TFR), where narratives are rich with various species. The settings are primarily multispecies environments, characterized by complex, interwoven interactions among ecological entities.

Interconnections and a complex ecosystem

The following excerpt from Okri's novel illustrates this interconnectedness: "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" (Okri, 1992, p. 242).

In this passage, the protagonist, Azaro, describes a scene brimming with life from various species, referring to it as "another world" and later a "miraculous world." This setting transcends mere human existence, representing a complex ecosystem where human and non-human lives coexist and interact. In just one paragraph, the novel vividly encapsulates a rich tapestry of diversity. Importantly, the passage acknowledges the agency of both present beings and those still coming into being.

This multiplicity reflects a discourse of proximity that challenges anthropocentrism and the marginalization of other life forms. The resilience of this discourse is evident in how diverse life forms—spirits, humans, animals, plants, and more—create a network of coexistence and interconnectedness. Okri emphasizes this theme by portraying an ecological diversity that encompasses the more-than-human realm, as highlighted by the protagonist's observation: "That was the first time I realized it wasn't just humans who came to the marketplaces of the world. Spirits and other beings come there too. They buy and sell, browse, and investigate. They wander amongst the fruits of the earth and sea" (Okri, 1991, p. 35).

By depicting the marketplace's inhabitants, the novel contests anthropocentrism by including "other beings" in interactions similar to those of humans. Notably, the narrator experiences this "reality" for the first time, broadening his perspective as he acknowledges the presence of the "other" within the ecosystem of "the earth and sea." The narrative thus illustrates the proximity among different life forms, positioning the market as a contact zone for interactions between humans and otherworldly entities. Consequently, the novel articulates the entanglement of humans with earthly nonhumans and spiritual beings, highlighting the multispecies presence and interaction.

The Famished Road features three distinct settings: the forest, the road, and the bar, each inhabited by a diverse array of ecological entities. In the wild forest, the narrator depicts a world not dominated by any single species but rather a vibrant assembly of spirits, animals, and plants. Similarly, the road serves as another significant setting where humans, vegetation, machines, and spirits coexist (Okri, 1991, p. 47). The narrator's perspective prompts readers to reflect on how human activities affect the interconnectedness of these ecological entities.

Importance of human-nature coexistence

The novel expands its portrayal of diverse species beyond just the forest and road, incorporating human environments like apartments. For instance, Madame Koto's bar

emerges as a central space where humans share their surroundings with insects, rats, millipedes, mosquitoes, and spirits. The narrator notes how millipedes, slugs, and snails traverse the walls, and another character mentions living alongside rats (Okri, 1991, pp. 48-49). These descriptions challenge the notion of the human niche, transforming homes into micro-ecosystems teeming with multiple species. This discourse emphasizes ecological proximity by enriching the ecosystem with a variety of members and interactions. This passage highlights the essential importance of human-nature coexistence.

This excerpt also presents a view of humanity that recognizes its deep ties to the natural world. It depicts a community that respects and responds to nonhuman beings. By including multiple species and emphasizing an indigenous perspective of working in harmony with nature, it underscores the interconnectedness between humans and the environment. The passage further highlights the necessity of maintaining balance in this relationship, as an overreliance on one entity can lead to the depletion of another. This mutual interdependence and care for all beings form the basis for coexistence among diverse species. Additionally, the text challenges the notion of human superiority over nature by suggesting that valuable insights can be gained from the natural world. The narrator's assertion that "The forest was a school to which they often came to hear what it had to tell them" underscores the importance of learning from nature.

The perspective of coexistence with the diverse natural world depicted in the novel is a key aspect of the discourse of proximity. The portrayal of ecological entities in *The Famished Road* (TFR) strongly reinforces the concept of ecological proximity in African fiction. African writers often delve into the relationships between humans and various forms of life, including animals, spirits, forests, rivers, trees, mountains, the sun, and the moon. These narratives not only celebrate species diversity but also pay careful attention to all ecological entities, challenging the narrow, human-centered viewpoint of anthropocentrism.

In this passage, nature is re imagined as a teacher rather than merely a resource to be exploited. It imparts wisdom and balance, highlighting the importance of humility and a departure from anthropocentrism. Nature serves as the "cure" for humanity's distorted perspective, allowing us to "see clearly" the interconnectedness of all living beings. This excerpt emphasizes the significance of reciprocity in achieving genuine ecological proximity.

The Famished Road (TFR), Ben Okri intricately weaves a tapestry of interspecies interactions that both celebrate the potential for harmony and lament the destructive consequences of human actions. The forest emerges as a vibrant setting where spirits, animals, and humans share a delicate existence. The novel presents positive encounters that challenge

anthropocentric norms, as illustrated by the following excerpt: "An owl flew over my head and watched me from a branch. I heard footsteps approaching and I could have sworn that they belonged to a heavy man, but when I looked, I saw an antelope. It came up to me, stopped near the pole, and stared at me. Then it came closer and licked my feet" (Okri, 1991, p. 41).

Peaceful coexistence between humans and nature.

This scene captures a moment where the human character, Azaro, interacts with animals in the forest. The owl and the antelope return Azaro's gaze, which is significant because it challenges the expectation that only humans are capable of observing and being observed. Azaro's exchanges with the owl and antelope go beyond mere observation; the animals' gaze and touch imply a level of understanding and mutual respect, blurring the lines between observers and observed. This interaction questions the notion of human dominance and invites readers to recognize other beings as sentient and deserving of connection. The forest acts as a sanctuary where Azaro encounters other nonhuman beings, such as a millipede and a black cat (Okri, 1991, p. 43). These interactions, characterized by harmony rather than hierarchy, highlight the possibility of peaceful coexistence between humans and nature. In this context, the forest symbolizes an alternative reality where respect and interconnectedness prevail. However, while the forest in *The Famished Road* nurtures positive interactions, it also becomes a battleground where human actions threaten its delicate ecosystem. As the narrator notes, the forest seems to retreat as humans encroach, their advance marked by destruction: "paths widening, bushes burning, trees uprooted" (Okri, 1991, p. 116).

CONCLUSION

This research paper brings light to the realities of human encroachment towards nature. As humans invade the forest, the narrative shifts from harmony to discord. The once-thriving forest begins to withdraw, its silence disrupted by the noise of machinery and construction. Deforestation, driven by greed and so-called progress, disrupts the fragile balance and severs the deep connection between humans and the environment, vividly illustrating this transformation. The impact of these human actions is illustrated through the destruction of birds' nests and the death of unborn chicks, as shown in a later passage from the novel. This underscores the devastating effects of human progress on the natural world and its inhabitants. The destruction is so profound that the narrator mourns the life forms that once flourished in the forest, now obliterated by humanity's destructive actions. This shift from

harmonious coexistence to a discordant reality reflects the broader theme of ecological degradation driven by unchecked human activity. It serves as a compelling commentary on the consequences of disrupting the natural balance, emphasizing the urgent need to reevaluate our relationship with the environment. By personifying nature and portraying it as an active force in shaping human experiences, the novel challenges traditional power dynamics and advocate for a more respectful and balanced connection with the environment. This approach resonates with contemporary scholarly views on African ecocriticism, which stress the importance of acknowledging the interconnectedness of all life forms and moving beyond anthropocentric perspectives of the natural world.

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