

# COMPLICATING THE LANGUAGE OF CONVENTIONAL NIGERIAN NARRATIVES: THE POETICS OF THE LANGUAGE OF BEN OKRI'S NARRATIVES

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## ABSTRACT

Nigerian narratives, from Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) to contemporary ones, have always resorted to the technique of realism by which they seek to make art correspond to life. These narratives were, therefore, metonymic, Roman Jakobson's manner of describing language standing in for a state of reality. This circumstance persisted until Ben Okri's mature novels deviated from it through being metaphoric and the deployment of unfamiliar characterisation, settings, action and language. By this deviation, Okri's narratives seem to have ruptured the metonymic and the concretising literary language traditional to Nigerian narratives, an issue that has remained largely overlooked. Using Roman Jakobson's linguistics and sundry descriptive methods (since Jakobson's thought relevant to this study does not exceed metaphor and metonymy), this article teases out the variegated dimensions through which the literary language of Ben Okri's latter works undermine and complicate the conventional literary language of Nigerian narratives. Focusing on this language, this article analyses, first, the metonymic – the tendency in the language of Nigerian literature and Okri's earlier narratives to evoke a familiar reality; second, the metaphoric; third, the redefinition of human actions; fourth, the dissonance between the signifier and the signified in signs signifying institutional concepts; fifth, paradoxes; and last, parallelisms. It concludes that with the language of Okri's later works so tied to his will-to-narrate in a way subversive of the technique of realism, while representing perceived resemblances through related poetic elements and features, he breathes fresh and rich energies into Nigeria's existing realistic literature as well as flustering critics' expectations.

**Keywords:** African literature, Ben Okri, anti-realism, Nigerian literature, Roman Jakobson, third generation Nigerian novelists.

## INTRODUCTION

African literature, including Nigeria's, has been said to chronicle the anthropological data of an oppressed people and to correct perceived misrepresentational discourses of earlier Western literatures about Africa or do some moralising (Achebe, 1990, p.44; Gordimer, 2007, p.116). But what makes literature to be thus viewed is its language, made evident by the technique of realism. This language, in the Nigerian tradition, orients towards asserting a substantiable reality, the reason why *Things Fall Apart*,

the catalyser of modern African literature (George, 2007, p. 448; Emenyonu, 2010, p. xiii), was once generally regarded and studied as an anthropological masterpiece and received scholarly attention in Departments of Anthropology in United States universities (Gates, 1989 p.3, 20). For more than three decades, up to Ben Okri, this literary technique of realism held sway.

What principle is deducible from this technique of realism in the Nigerian literary tradition; how has it been appropriated in Nigerian narratives; and, in what ways do Okri's narratives, one of which won the Booker Prize in 1991, having begun with it, subvert and complicate it? In accounting for this language and technique, the theories of Roman Jakobson will come handy in two separate, but contiguous phases for the purpose of baring areas where they are most suitably applicable to Nigerian narratives, in general, and, specifically, the narratives of Ben Okri. The first would be his linguistic theory and the second the relation of this theory to literary language.

### **Jakobson, Saussure and the Question of the Referent**

True that Jakobson's contribution to linguistics is diverse and for that reason cannot be pigeonholed (Harris, 1997, p.75). He holds that from a speaker's repertoire, fitting words are selected from their groups, to form the best communicative expression. Groups of synonymous words, in this manner, relate following the relationship of equivalence ('Closing Statement', p. 358). Communication is not possible until the selected words are set beside one another in a relationship of contiguity and contexture as permitted by *langue*. He declares: 'the concurrence of simultaneous entities and the concatenation of successive entities are two ways in which we speakers combine linguistic constituents' ('Two Types of Aphasic', p.59). While combination and context are two phases of the same operation, selection from possible substitutable alternatives, one for the other, are two faces of the same operation (p. 60). These principles also elaborate Saussure's syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations operating in any language. With code (*langue*) and context, messages involving the above two operations are decoded and appropriated by readers or listeners. There could be a replacement of a given significative unit, such as a word, sentence, utterance, and so on, but its general message remains the same. Few people with speech disorders do not possess the commonly ignored congenial speech ability. These disorders somehow disrupt the above operation in some speech participants. The aphasic disorder reveals, especially, through the description and classification of its syndromes, the patterning and functioning of language, at least, of how Saussurean language works (p.55). The first, similarity disorder, can affect an individual's ability for selection and substitution of linguistic units, with the presence of 'relative stability of combination and contexture.' Conversely, the second, contiguity defect takes place in the operation of combination and contexture, where the relative steadiness of selection and substitution is present (p. 62). The patient in the first case conceives sentences as elliptical sequels to be supplied from antecedent sentences uttered, where a specific noun is replaced by a very

general one. The speaker, here, unless stimulated, cannot begin a sentence of his own, and has problems starting with the subject of the sentence and has difficulty substituting significative units already familiar with. So, he in his deficiency, supplies us metaphors. In replacing the term *car*, he gives us, *accident*, *death*, or even *killer*. Jakobson's position above pertains to conventional and, curiously, literary language, at least, as it is used in narratives. On the other hand, the aphasiac experiencing contiguity disorder, owing to his lack of capacity to propositionise, piles up words belonging to the same class of significative values. From *car*, for instance, he could give us metonymies such as *camry*, *Peugeot*, or even *picnic*, *office*, and so on, according to the individual's residual power of association, in the course of which, words of rhetorical value are also given. In these, metaphor and metonymy sometimes get complicated and tangled, for instance, in *killer* and *office*. A previous experience with a car supplies *killer*, while a habitual action gives *office*. What the car is closely associated with is inseparable from what it is compared to because it takes association, some shared identity for both to stand in a relation of association and comparison, especially when this identity is propped by convention, habit, and situation.

However, by metonymy and metaphor and the linguistic terms of rhetorical value incidentally derivable, the two models of aphasic discords become relevant to verbal art, literature, where an artist, through his power of preferences, and tendency as explained above, engage in a distinct linguistic undertaking, which Jakobson terms a 'focus on the message for its own sake' ('Closing Statement', p.356), an expression arising from his tier of six communicative factors promoting corresponding six functions. These are: addresser; addressee; context; code; contact; and message, with matching emotive; conative; referential; metalingual; phatic and poetic functions. Attention will be focused on the contextual and message factors and their functions later in this essay. Reverting to earlier discussion, Jakobson affirms that 'manipulating these two kinds of connection (similarity and contiguity) in both their aspects (positional and semantic) – selecting, combining, and ranking them – an individual exhibits his personal style, his verbal predilections and preferences', a situation observable in literature ('Two Types', p.77). Stylistically, of the two strands of metaphor and metonymy, poetry is most outstanding with regard to being metaphoric and in bearing the above feature because it requires 'a compulsory parallelism between adjacent lines' (p.77). He noted that either of the two gravitation poles may prevail in literature, like, in his example, Russian lyrical songs, where the metaphoric supposedly hold sway, while in heroic epics, narratives (Nigerian narratives find place), the metonymic does. The preeminence of the metaphoric process also obtains in romanticism and symbolism whereas metonymy also governs, underlies, and predetermines the realistic school, 'which belongs to an intermediary stage between the decline of romanticism and the rise of symbolism and is opposed to both' (p.77). Interestingly, with the brief history of the Nigerian literary tradition and the enduring influences of realism in it from Achebe to Okri, little or no discordant style, as in the West, is observable. One last remark on Jakobson: his linguistics paraphrased and inventively extended

Saussure's, especially as regards the referential function (whether as it concerns lyrical, elegiac, or epic poetry, the three arising from the first, second, and third communicative factors respectively). In one instance, he concurs with him that 'The truth values, however, as far as they are ... 'extralinguistic entities,' obviously exceed the bounds of poetics and of linguistics in general' (Jakobson, 'Closing Statement', p.351); in this case, he means that since what is true about any linguistic item is very fluid, it would be protean for linguistics to handle. Nevertheless, in contrast to him, he believes that language must be investigated in all its 'functional ramifications' (p.353), which also includes considering the 'temporary dynamics' of the communicative event (p.352). He takes this dynamics to mean context. A few points make this feasible – he identified language that speaks about language and the language that speaks about objects (p.356), with *objects*, here, being inclusive of Saussure's Concept and Benveniste's and Ricoeur's referent (Ricoeur, 1946, p.141). Nonetheless, the element referent is not well-articulated with regard to the extralinguistic world and to literature, especially, to narratives, besides the mention of metaphor and metonymy, and the pithy remark that poetry (restrictive sense) is a message or verbal communication, which focuses on itself for its own sake. To make for this inadequacy, we draw on Benveniste's theory of instance of discourse, which is synonymous to Jakobson's 'temporary dynamics'.

### **'Message: Focus on the Message for its Own Sake'**

Centrifugal language articulated at any instance is discourse inasmuch as it pertains to the moment in which it is uttered (521-530). Here, we move from language as system to language as a linguistic event, following Jakobson's clue of context/contexture and temporary dynamics. To Benveniste, discourse has its criteria of possibility of emergence. Forming the first pair is that discourse *identifies* and *predicates*, that is, it enunciates an act – an illocutionary act, an utterance that links an action to a name or a subject by giving the sentence a force of a question, a request, a statement and so on. By implication, one does something in linking a subject to an action. Discourse is also an *event* and *meaning* at the same time; it just takes place as an incident and it makes meaning because of the context within which it takes place or, rather, spoken. It unites *sense* and *reference*. That is, sign, whatever it is and wherever it is made, has *sense* – the literary meaning of the sentence – and *reference* – the thing about which it says what it says. Lastly, one can identify within discourse a reference to *reality* and to *speakers* mostly through personal pronouns. These characteristics are borne by the discourses of journalism, sociology, history, anthropology, business, and others, including those of positivist sciences, in their quest to communicate reality. This notion drives the language of realism as applicable to Nigerian narratives informing critical opinions, as late as 2010, that, 'It is difficult for a Nigerian writer, or any postcolonial writer, to take a definite, Kantian art-for-art sake position' (Obafemi, 2013, p.13).

Although Jakobson did not stress it, readers surmise from him that conventional

language and literary language (not just poetic language) are the same, at least as far as his speech event theory of every communication is concerned. But are they? Deriving a few ideas from an earlier discussion on Benveniste, we agree that literary language distinguishes itself from its other in three main areas, which the latter boasts of having. Literature possesses a centripetal language, the sort that engages in internal reflexivity in the course of emptying itself of its referential function (Loevlie, 2012, p.89), recognised by Jakobson's function of context which in its inspired form is evinced in epic poetry. Even then, when he paid attention to literature, poetry, and not much of narratives, took most of it confirming Toolan's declaration that in Jakobson, there is a 'relative paucity of comment on narrative and narrative art' (p.191), which is because of the doubt he has regarding having the same degree of patterns as had by the short poems he analyses (p.193). At the first level of this literary context of language, the text, whether oral or written, becomes translinguistic in that the signifiers of that present textual space assume a new function, in a reflexive and counter-reflexive manner, where meaning, within the universe of the text, become text-dependent and not reality-directed as its signalling functions have been unburdened (Derrida, 12). This process takes into little account the significatory function of the language from where these signifiers are drawn, whether from the general text of culture, or 'society and history' (Kristeva, 1980, p37). As a result, we encounter in literature a language where the speaker constantly looks back to what was said in previous sequences. The pronominals 'I' and 'you' serve only deictic roles by engaging in 'signal interactive relationships' sanctioned by art in order that art might appear as recognisable (Akwanya, *Semantics and Discourse* 134). This is how come it has been consensually agreed that it is the 'persona' that speaks in a poem and not the poet as such. For these reasons, it is not the novelist that speaks neither is Nigeria the object being represented in *Things Fall Apart* and other literary texts despite an otherwise textual suggestion.

From the above, we deduce that the referential function of the language of realism and epic literature, alongside the referential communicative function Jakobson ascribes to inspired context, epic, is ostensive, given that the context, the referent or subject matter of the discourse (what it refers to), whether in the third, second or first person, each of these three pertaining to narrative, realist or lyrical sorts, are undermined and totally subverted in their non-referential reference to its language. Here, the coinage 'message focusing on itself for its own sake', restrictive in reference and in scope, requires expansion to include narratives.

### **Metonymy and Nigerian Narratives**

However, curiously, critics claim that literature, especially Nigerian narratives engages in putting for reality in Jakobsonian metonymic format, subsists. One can ascribe this to the mode of realism adopted by these Nigerian narratives. Realism holds that literature, no matter the genre, bears verisimilar indices and pointers to the socio-political and historical milieus out of which it springs and that a contract is entered into by the writer when he writes. This contract is sustained by the reader,

typically, people of ethnic or racial sameness with the writer. In Ogungbesan's (1992) words, 'African writers in general do not believe that they should abdicate their ethical role by eliminating themselves, and, therefore, the question of responsibility to their readers, from their books. They value the relation of writer to reader and take very seriously their moral obligation to their audience' (p.2). Writers are believed to be championing some historical, political, sociological and anthropological mission. Some indices of metonymy in narratives, using the rule of contiguous relationships, are that 'the realistic author metonymically digresses from the plot to atmosphere and from the character to setting in space and time' (p.79); he is fond of synecdochic details 'handbag', 'hair on the upper lip', and 'bare shoulders' which stand for the characters to whom the features belong. Hereunder is the passage describing, in a referential metonymic format, Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, which though has indirect implications for the plot, has no apparent direct connection to the work's structure:

Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen, he had brought honour to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat. Amalinze was the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten, from Umuofia to Mbaino. He was called the Cat because his back would never touch the earth. It was this man that Okonkwo threw in a fight which the old men agreed was one of the fiercest since the founder of their own town engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights (1958, p. 3).

*Okonkwo, Amalinze (the Cat), Umuofia, Mbaino, nine villages, elders, spirit of the wilds*, and the art of *wrestling* are indexical of the realist technique and, as linguistic elements, they place the work in an ostensive context that can be pointed to: the Igbo in Nigeria. So goes the catalysing effect of this sort of realism on the second generation writers like Isidore Okpewho, Buchi Emecheta, Catherine Acholonu, Ifeoma Okoye, Ben Okri, and many others. Festus Iyayi's *Heroes*, for instance, gives us the following:

He tried to work out in his mind how many checks there had been. About fifteen, he thought. Fifteen which meant one for every three kilometers. And each time, they took the lid off the box and looked at the body there. They searched the car, they asked questions and it was obvious they were nervous as they carried the automatic AK 47 Kalashnikov rifles. Always, the bayonets flashed in the sun. Always, the men had their fingers on the triggers. It was the bayonets that worried him, the bayonets that were jack knives sharpened on both sides and ending sharply and flashing dangerously. Also, he saw the machine guns flashing between the leaves of the bushes as they stood on the tripod mounts. He wondered why they didn't get general purpose machine-guns, but he did not ask because of the voices of the soldiers (p. 66).

Above is the context of war, people 'wrestling' with bullets and automatic assault



rifles, and there is not much contribution to the plot as such. Even Okri's style is not excused from this as observable in 'In the City of Red Dust', a short story in *Stars of a New Curfew*:

The barman increased the volume of the music . . . Emokhai tried to calm him down, but Marjomi pushed him away and sent him crashing into the gathered crowd. The people grew angry. They pressed towards Marjomi, who seemed to relish the idea of being beaten, and Emokhai needed all his might, all his tact, to hold them back. Marjomi, in the meantime, became increasingly possessed. He kept uttering a curious, frightening, high-pitched scream, as if he were trying to wake up from a heated nightmare, a terrible hallucination. He seemed quite mad (p. 68).

This scene, under the pretext of referentiality, echoes a similar one in *The Interpreters*, where Okonje of robust biceps, in a charge, suddenly heaves to the floor without anybody touching him. Such linguistic units as *Emokhai*, *madmen*, *Marjomi*, the bar scene, not only put the work in a context, they also, somewhat align it to similar presences in the traditions. Still it is not directly linked to the plot. Right in the twenty-first century, Chimamanda Adichie supplies a fight of some sort, though not quite a physical conflict. What bespeaks of realism places these works in context, the tradition of literature from where they emerged. Like the other culled passages, the language Adichie's work could pass for an assertive discourse, especially with such elements as *Ugwu*, *village children*, *Nnesinachi*, *Anulika*, *palmwine*, *kolanut*, *stool hut* and *car*. Much as they appear to be describing a reality, and presenting this reality to the subject reading them, for the fact that the method through which this is done is literary and not that ordained by conventional language as adopted by the discourses of journalism and others with Benveniste as hindsight, these realities are hugely subverted and undermined.

The above passages leave no illusion regarding the places referred to in the above works, where the authors come from and where they tend to describe. Aside from the third to last sentence of the last passage, everything else is pure description, purely metonymic, in line with Jakobson's identified features for narratives and emergence of meaning, that is, through the selection of linguistic elements based on equivalence, similarity and dissimilarity, synonymy and anonymity, while combination is based on contiguity (p.358), where 'equivalence', with respect to narratives, 'is promoted to the constitutive device of the sequence' (p.358). Besides, the above passages are some of the earliest appearances of metonymic evidences in the works mentioned. In those passages and many more in the works where they were culled, the usage of language is, with occasional exceptions, not metaphorical. As much as possible, the narrators try to be 'factual', displaying referential function as if they are conveying information to readers (Jakobson). Without discerning this 'as if', a reader could take it for real, and it happened once in American universities (Gates, 1992, p.3,9). Other Okri's narratives – *Flowers and Shadows*, *The Landscapes Within*, and most short stories of the collections: *Stars of a New Curfew* and *Incidents at the Shrine* bear the above features of the language of the narratives of the Nigerian literary

tradition, where in associations with reality, the presence of metonymy far outweighs metaphor.

## **Ben Okri and the Complication of the Language of Nigerian Narratives**

### **(A) Nonreal Images and Models**

Nevertheless, as his genius matures, under the guise of imitating the language of the tradition, the language of narrative, the ultimate function and purpose being referentiality and conveyance of information through context, respectively in Jakobson's theory, Okri adopts the poetic function of language which conveys pleasure or play in consequence of the operation of the principle of metaphor. In this latter segment of his art, narration is not plotal, as one observes in Chinua Achebe's, Flora Nwapa's, Buchi Emecheta's, or even in Chimamanda Adichie's novels. Jakobson believes that the metonymic language makes narration to be shifty, always moving from the description of character to atmosphere, from this to setting and back to character, and so on as are found in Okri. But besides these, I see a different shift in Okri's narration, though largely unobserved, where narration shifts from the above segments to the description of concepts, image, the esoteric and nonreal scenes and characters, amongst others. While aphasiacs pile words leading to metonymic circumstances, as provoked by the loss of rule of sequence, Okri tends to pile image upon image and picture upon picture until the connection amongst these tend to replace the connective purpose of the plot of the narrative. Unlike in the realist tradition, the pictures set up have no first, extra-linguistic semblance – that is, there exists no prior physical model the subject reading the narrative is already familiar with and to which the fictional representation could readily be interpreted against or appreciated with, either as a subversive or confirmatory model. In fact, what Okri conveys is not what exists, neither does it have a corresponding relation, as a significative unit, in the code. Again, and this is decisive, the Jakobsonian subsuming literary characteristic of a communication which focuses 'on the message for its own sake' is not only undermined but also problematised. This is hinged on the fact that the language of his latter narratives is, in Jakobson's sense of referent, purely non-referential. He uses conventional signs to convey an altogether unconventional idea, or an ultimate significative unit, whether in a paragraph, a sequence, or otherwise. Instances abound across *The Famished Road* series:

... Sometimes, when I fell asleep, a lighter part of me rose up from my body and floated in the dark. A bright light, which I could not see, but which I could feel, surrounded me. I would be lifted out of my body, would find it difficult to get out through the roof, and would be brought down suddenly by the noise of the rats eating. Then I would sleep soundly.

One night, I managed to lift myself out through the roof. I went up at breathtaking speeding and stars fell from me. Unable to control my motion, I rose and fell and went in all directions, spinning through incredible peaks and vortexes. Dizzy and turning, swirling and dancing, the darkness seemed



infinite, without signs, without markings. I rose without getting to heaven. I soared blissfully and I understood something of the inhuman exultation of flight (p. 187, 8).

Here, the narrator is describing an instance of levitation which is far removed from the plot of the work, that is, if it had plot at all. But if it is not levitation, it would be history, pre-birth history appearing and segmentally displaying itself as it passes by like phases of manufactures journeying through the labyrinthine stages of the process of a company's production line. See an instance in *Songs of Enchantment*:

That was probably the first time that I felt the doors to my other lives – my past lives, my future lives – opening on me with frightening clarity. Sometimes, my other lives would open and then shut, and what I glimpsed didn't make sense. Other times, I could see far into an aquamarine past; I saw places I had never been to, saw faces that were both entirely alien and familiar; and my mind would be invaded with the black winds of enigmatic comprehension. The lives in me increased their spaces, languages of distant lands bore my thoughts, and I found I knew things I had never learnt. I knew the charts and tides of the Atlantic, I understood complex principles of higher mathematics, the sign-interpretations of the forgotten magis, the sculptural traditions of the ancient Benin guild, the lost philosophies of Pythagoras and the griots of Mali. Powerful symphonies resonated in me and sometimes, I found that I could compose passages of silent spirit-music while I played in the street. The presences in me had been growing vaster, swelling out to include intuitions of other spheres and planets, and the invasions of knowledge had become frightening – and it had all been happening so quietly, so inexorably, that I became sure I was soon going to die (p. 31).

One cannot really tell if this language is metonymic, if the term metonymic language is to describe a reality that is familiar, describable, and not just conjured up. If the future and the past are capturable experiences of daytime life as evident above, we have a nightly one in *Infinite Riches*:

Thirty miles away, the English Governor-General, who hated being photographed, was dreaming about his colonial rule. In his dream he was destroying all the documents. Burning all the evidence. Shredding history. As I lingered in the Governor-General's dream a wave of darkness washed me to an island, across the ocean, where many of our troubles began, and on whose roads, in a future life, I would wander and suffer and find a new kind of light.

I wasn't long in that world when someone appeared at our door, stinking of a crude perfume made from the bitter aloes of the desert. I stopped circling. I descended into my body, woke up, and saw Dad. He was freshly bathed and looked thoroughly scrubbed. He also stank of carbolic. Wrinkles were deep on his forehead. His eyes bulged. A candle was alight on the centre table (p. 12).

What is presented above is not what the narrator persuades the readers to accept as real – it is real to him, and whoever reads should see it as such, for the narrator does not feel that there is any reality beside his. This presentation can be termed madness, the sort Madame Koto was in when she raved (Okri, 1998, p.28).

Another characteristic of Okri's language which agitates the conventional language of Nigerian narratives is its tendency to capture a reality-in-transformation as against reality-in-stasis, the visionary against the perceptible, that is, as against the descriptably familiar mostly attainable in Nigerian narratives. The former is reality the transformation of which is in progress, whereas the latter refers to the normalcy of conventional world, though every action or event taking place is ephemeral. We take a passage from *Songs of Enchantment*,

Dad lowered his belt and sat in his chair. He retreated into the barely contained whirlwind of his fury. He poured himself a generous quantity of ogogoro, lit a cigarette and, in between smoking, proceeded to decrust his boots. While he cleaned his boots his spirit boiled and I watched as a strange demon entered him in the form of a beautiful girl with green eyes. The demon-girl moved into dad's spirit and sat comfortably, and then I couldn't see it any more. As he cleaned his boots with fiery vigour, smoking his cigarette with a grim intensity, his spirit rising and swirling, dad lashed us with accusations (2003, p. 10).

In *Infinite Riches*, we have:

I could see the stage more clearly now and could make out the forms of shadow beings and spirits who saw us but whom we couldn't see. I could make them out in the spaces between the people on the lighted platform. Then I noticed that there were shadow beings in all the empty spaces, and even in the spaces that were occupied with our bodies. The shadow beings were part of the crowd, tangential to everything, yet living their lives in spaces filled by a thousand pressured bodies. The realisation made me cry out, but no one heard me. Lights flashed on the dais, and I saw the Photographer perched on a wall. [. . .].

The dead laughed very hard indeed, and the dead carpenter was chief amongst them. I saw children who had died in our street. I saw the adults who had been felled by malnutrition and diseases, by political thugs, and hopelessness. I saw those who had perished in the war in Burma, perished in prisons and road accidents. I saw those who had died of malaria and fear, poverty and milk poisoning, typhoid and rumours, yellow fever and superstition, gut-worms, tape-worms, illnesses of the spirit, madness, famine, drought, weariness, too much acceptance and too much hope. I saw those who had withered away under bad harvests, who had been crushed by cruel laws and enshrined injustices. I also saw those who had died of too much love and too little love, and those who had died under the stars, without a home anywhere on this wide earth. And the more they laughed the more the dead increased amongst us (p. 265,273).

The above descriptions do not report a familiar world; hence, language is hardly conveying a message, let alone a message conveyed for its own sake. Here, Okri transgresses what Jakobson's linguistics could capture even as he gave narrative scanty regard in his theoretic view. Okri seems to be acting out Leech's words that 'The literary writer's object, after all, is to transcend the limitations of ordinary language, and this is the real sense in which he can be said to use language creatively'(p.26). In doing this, he enacts a universe of patches of collagic images and action. Deriving an idea from portions quoted, we might have to take the quoted portion as a unit of signification that is additive, a representation at odds, in tension, and opposed to its original sign, where it attempts to stand for what is not originally known, thereby standing only as a faint presence. We are confronted with a strange world. In consequence, the sign stands both as a metaphor (as a resemblance) to and metonymy (as an association) to the world Okri has in mind to describe, possibly, the way he wants us to see our own world. As for the latter term, whatever is represented that does no justice to the absent yet presenting traces of it, evinces to us who read it, the only image there is, a quantum by which the original, though absent and unknown could be slightly viewed, accessed, assessed, and re-modelled. This invokes for us the instability of the sign.

The instability of the sign as a feature of literary language adds a dimension to literary language's original incapability of asserting an extra-linguistic reality, as does natural (conventional) language, and it is through it that we are confronted with literature's double challenge, including that of Nigerian narratives. In Okri's *Astonishing the Gods*, there is a superfluity of the often encountered literary language. Against literary representation of textual reality, this work posits a dilating, changeable, contra-conventional textual reality. One implication of this jarring phenomenon is that literary language as aided and supplied by conventional language becomes hamstrung and inadequate, often leading the narrator to, in an attempt to describe his reality, define what novel phenomena he sees through the usage of the conventional language and customary concepts language afforded him in past linguistic encounters. This way, he makes meaning of the strange linguistic space he encounters and assigns meanings to objects, albeit, temporarily, until further and continuous encounters pushes him to redefine the already defined and appropriated concepts and phenomena. Description, definition and appropriation are continuous as the making sense of the unconventional situation progresses. In a sense, it could be said that he tries to make sense of an unconventional situation through a conventional means – language already known, while not taking into consideration the larger conventional literary context; yet Okri seems to be metonymic in his descriptive and narrative format as if it were an epic, one way by which complicates the language of the tradition.

## (B) Redefinition

### (i) Human Action

The sign 'Quest', for example, is redefined in a discussion in *Astonishing the Gods*:

'In this place if you look for something you won't find it'

'Why is that?'

'You have to find things first before you look for them' (p. 103).

The above meaning of *quest* is against logic, for no one would possess something and still goes ahead to search for it. If this ever happens, undiagnosed madness has just set in. Okri's language here suggests certain 'madness', a complication in the meaning of searching as Nigerian narratives represent it. Akara-Ogun, in D. O. Fagunwa's *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons* (1942), in company of other notable hunters, go to Mount Langbodo in search of what would add up to their community's well-being: 'Our country still lacks sufficient renown among nations beneath the sky' (Fagunwa 74). They proceed and they found it. In a realistic work, Ifeoma Okoye's *Chimere* (1992), a psychological void is created in her life and she, against her mother's tainted counsel, proceeds to look for her father's whereabouts and he gets him. In the above cases, questers got what they desired when they went for them in contradiction to the semantic ramifications of the same in Okri's *Astonishing the Gods*.

If one finds the object of his quest, he keeps it and if he is careless, chances are that he would *lose* it. But in *Astonishing the Gods*, we are told:

'... You only have one chance here. If you have something, keep it, be aware of it, treasure it, enrich it. Because, here, if you lose it, then you didn't have it in the first place. You weren't aware of it. You didn't guard it. You didn't give it life. And so, it wasn't real for you. In this place, things lose their reality if you are not aware of them' (p.103-104).

In the above, there is an attempt to redefine *lose* to mean *never had*, but both terms are not mutually substitutable, and possess no such possibilities. Implications abound in this re-tuning of the term – the possibility of erasing history and the erasure of the consciousness that enhanced the possession of the object quested for in the first place. A re-organisation of perception is in the offing here, considering what obtains in the tradition. Take the death of Sekoni in *The Interpreters* and the resultant sorrow his friends feel. The narrator informs:

But they all felt a little like that, flat. Sekoni's death had left them all wet, bedraggled, the paint running down their acceptance of life where they thought the image was set, running down in ugly patches. They felt caught flat-footed and Kola thought, not a bit like the finished work tonight. . . . habits have to change when memory becomes unbearable, and Sekoni had been too much a part of a union they took much for granted, and these were the physical facts, inescapable, like meeting at the Cambana nearly every fortnight and at the Mayomi in Ibadan the following fortnight (Soyinka 158, 159).

The above implies that he is much more felt than ever before. It seems to be an imperative response by a human organism that when what was once had is lost, some sort of reactions should follow. Even within Okri's corpus, this is the case. Marjomi and Emokpai have just lost their jobs in 'In the City of the Red Dust' and they never had it back, and it does not mean they never had it. Consequently, they suffer untold hardships that propel them into selling their blood to eke a living and have some glass of drinks. We observe that in deviating from the tradition, even from himself, Okri gives room for complications to arise in the trajectory of uniformity the Nigerian tradition previously had.

### **(C) Dissonance – Displacing the Signifier and the Signified**

#### **(i) Concepts: (time and size)**

Besides using language to redefine human actions thereby promoting a subversive sort of metonymic language uncaptured by Jakobson, Okri also contravenes the linguistic convention used in measuring time and size of things:

'Time is different here. We measure time differently, not by the passing of moments or hours, but by the lovely deeds, creative accomplishments, beautiful transformations, by little and great perfections.

'Size is also measured differently here. For us something is great if it is beautiful, if it is true, and if it has life. Something is small if it has none of these things. A little perfection is large for us. A large thing without beauty or truth is small for us. A creative seed is greater than a mountainous lump hence, the invisible things are the smallest and the highest things amongst us. . . .' (p.147-148).

Rather than time measuring the duration of human action, the latter, such as *lovely deeds, creative accomplishments, beautiful transformations, little and great perfections* do. In this case, the *lovely deeds* of Okonkwo such as defeating Amalinze the Cat, being the first to bring home human heads during the last inter-tribal war, the custodian of Ikemefuna, and being one of the nine spirits of Umuofia, in *Things Fall Apart*, alongside other deeds by few notable figures would have helped to measure seconds, minutes, and hours; and I guess days, weeks, months, and years as well, because these huge chunks derive from those other little ones, though Okri did not acknowledge this.

And then, we are told that 'something great' is measured differently too. Its parameters for measurement are *beauty, truth, and life*. What then is *small* and what, correspondingly, is *big* or *great*? What about sizeless things? Adultery, lust and covetousness are sizeless things? When, in Isidore Okpweho's *The Last Duty*, Toje locks up Oshevire in faraway Idu with bribery, and seduces and sexually harasses his wife who was beautiful, though the action does not give life, does not engender societal and personal (psychological) health neither does it have beauty, can we claim that this action of Toje's can be reasonably measured by life, truth, and beauty, which were not there in the first instance, 'something great'? We experience

a disconnection in this narration; Okri, at best, is talking esoteric, not to us about our world. *Size*, which denotatively means ‘the dimension, extent, amount, or degree of something, in terms of how large or small it is’ and is conventionally used in Nigerian narratives as such (‘Size’, *Encarta*), is in Okri brought to question and furthermore, redefined, shocking a familiar reading idiom.

## **(ii) Money and Goods ([non]substances)**

The concept of the unit of exchange, *money*, also undergoes mutation:

He passed shops, where people exchanged the fruits of their talents, rather than sold goods for money. The concept of money was alien to the city. The only form of money it had consisted in the quality of thoughts, ideas, and possibilities. With a fine idea, a house could be purchased. With a brilliant thought rooftops could be restored. Useful new ways of seeing things, imparted possibilities, could be exchanged for acres of land. The currencies of the civilisation were invisible, and had to do with values. There was no hunger in the city. The only hunger there was existed in the city’s dream for a sublime future (p.71).

This contrasts with intrinsic, physical money. It ranges from bags of cowries in *Things Fall Apart* to British pounds in *No longer at Ease*, to naira in Okri’s *Stars of the New Curfew* short story (60), ‘In The City of Red Dust’, and many other instances where naira is used in narratives belonging to the Nigerian literary tradition. With this sort of intangible money, idea, it makes little sense that the goods bought with it are also nonsubstances:

A delighted mood blossomed in him as he passed the glittering arcades and marketplaces where the Invisibles from all over the world came to buy and sell ideas. Here they traded in philosophies, inspirations, intuitions, prophecies, paradoxes, riddles, enigmas, visions, and dreams. Enigmas were their trinkets, philosophies their jewelleries, paradoxes their silver, clarity their measure, inspiration their gold, prophecy their language, vision their play, and dreams their standard (p. 74).

Most important above is the concept of ‘trade’. When I give anyone my ‘philosophy’ to get his/her ‘inspiration’, both conceived here as physical objects, would I still retain what I gave? No. But the sense of what is exchanged is that they are had after they are traded – so a complication arises, for it is possible I never had what I traded.

## **(iii) ‘Ideological State Apparatuses’**

Okri continues:

The universities were places for self-perfection, places for the highest education in life. Everyone taught everyone else. All were teachers, all were students. The sages listened more than they talked; and when they talked it was to ask questions that would engage endless generations in profound and perpetual discovery.



The universities and the academies were also places where people sat and meditated and absorbed knowledge from the silence. Research was a permanent activity, and all were researchers and appliers of the fruits of research. The purpose was to discover the hidden unifying laws of all things, to deepen the spirit, to make more profound the sensitivities of the individual to the universe, and to become more creative (p. 66).

As well, the courts, hospitals, and the library do not miss Okri's attention:

Courts were places where people went to study the laws, not places of judgement. The library, which he took to be one building, but which he later discovered was practically the whole city, was a place where people went to record their thoughts, their dreams, their intuitions, their ideas, their memories, and their prophecies. They also went there to increase the wisdom of the race. Books were not borrowed. Books were composed there, and deposited.

The hospitals were places of laughter, amusements, and recreation. They were houses of joy. The doctors and nurses were masters of the art of humour, and they all had to be artists of one kind or another. . . .

The masters of the land believed that sickness should be cured before it became sickness. The healthy were therefore presumed sick. Healing was always needed, and was considered a necessary part of daily life. Healing was always accompanied by the gentlest music. When healing was required the sick ones lingered in the presence of great paintings, and sat in wards where masterpieces of healing composition played just below the level of hearing. Outdoor activity, sculpting, story-telling, poetry, and laughter were the most preferred forms of treatment.

. . . banks were places where people deposited or withdrew thoughts of well-being, thoughts of wealth, thoughts of serenity. When people were ill they went to their banks. When healthy, they went to the hospitals (p.66, 69).

The above redefinitions are incredibly ingenuous. The universities, courts, hospitals, and even the concept of disease are revised and subverted. More important, is that these are the embodiments of a society's institutions and apparatuses for enculturation, socialisation, and of power. In fact, save the hospital, Althusser classes these among what he terms the Ideological State Apparatuses (n.p.). The novelty of Okri's unique 'signification', 'the meaning that a term conveys, or is intended to convey' (Gates, 1989, p.46), is in resistance to the extant language of Nigerian narratives on the level of signification, the process of combining signs in order to make them mean an intended meaning. In this case, Okri revises the sign supplied by natural language by hacking into the components of the signified and signifier, displacing the signified, and rendering the signifier hugely opposed to the signified he replaces. Some of his works proceed to appropriate this into the narrative instance.

We realise, therefore, that the *university, bank, courts, hospital, money*, and concepts like *size*, and *lose*, are familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. When we place them beside their conventional denotative meanings in the tradition, they

would be at variance, semantically, with Okri's usage in *Astonishing the Gods*. To Okri, the university, for instance, is not where Odenigbo lectures Mathematics in Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), or where Millicent graduates from, after fulfilling her dream of being a graduate in Majovo Amarie's *Suspended Destiny* (2007), or where Chimere's mother, sends her daughter in spite of her penury in Ifeoma Okoye's *Chimere* (1982), or where the community of Umuofia contributes tokens to send Obi Okonkwo to in order to acquire the whiteman's wisdom in *No Longer at Ease* (1964), and others. Evidently, therefore, in Okri's *Astonishing the Gods*, there is a dissonance of the signifier and the signified, and it is in this dissonance that he (mal-),(mis-) appropriates weighty institutional concepts that the Nigerian literary tradition bequeathed him, complicating same thereby.

#### **(D) Paradox**

A form of dissonance – between the signifier and the signified – occurs in several usages of paradoxes. In articulating his narration, Okri's signification, the successive interlinks of signifiers that configure horizontally on the syntagmatic level comprises the opposition of the signifier and the signified in a paradoxical form. Often, this is born by two key elements in the cumulative unit of signification, either a sentence or a paragraph. I shall give two examples of this cumulative significative unit, both paragraphs chosen from *Songs of Enchantment*. The first has the core idea 'evil things' or 'the universal mind of evil things' (*Songs* 114), but the entire paragraph depends on it through such terms as *evil happening; horrible incantations; excruciating horror; fire in my brain; evil things; terror; hideous spell* and so on. The second has 'terrible fate' as the nucleus idea (p. 116). Other terms as *struggle forever; uncertain of succeeding; never sure of companionship; have to fight; she (mum) buried her jewels; run out of candles; betrayed by love; burning my being away; without rest; my father and mum were doomed in the struggle; the Masquerade's dominion; the struggle unremitting; hoping everyday* and others keying into these two elements. It is units like these that prop a singular but paradoxical idea or operation rather than a segment of an action that is sequential, plotal, and progressive. Take the following concatenated elements: 'They went down stone streets, with silence echoing about them. The city was empty, but felt presences everywhere' as minor examples (*Astonishing* 35) and another: 'The town was empty, but he could feel that there were people all around. He fancied he heard an occasional whisper in the air.' (*Astonishing* 5); there is the presence/absence paradox in both, a situation rarely found in Nigerian narratives. A fairly long one is found below:

The avenue of mirrors seemed to go on forever. As he went along, shivering in the silver facades, he felt himself becoming more insubstantial, less real. He seemed to be losing his identity to the mirrors. He felt as if the heaviest and least important parts of him were dissolving in the effulgent lights. At the same time he felt himself becoming more peaceful, less questing and free from anxieties. He would normally have been quite afraid to lose such a familiar part of himself as his anxieties (p. 10).

I guess this is the most paradoxical of all, of how thought, a nonmatter, occupies space:

The thoughts converged there from all realms and each thought had infinite possibilities. He could have dwelled in any single one of those magical thoughts for a lifetime and not realised its full potential each of the thoughts, simple and clear like a drop of pure water, or a moment in a dream, resolved silently, and filled the room, and co-existed with all the others. The thoughts came from stones and seraphs, from trees and birds, from beings who dwelled in the air and beings who dwelled beyond the air, from human beings all over the world and beings in all the other spheres, from the dreams of the living and the continued meditations of the dead, from sea and cloud, from spirit and star, the thoughts came, and they went through him and left no imprints, and he noticed how small the room was for such crowded infinities (Okri, 1995, p. 139-140).

Descriptively, the signified and the signifier components of the significative units in the greater part of *Astonishing the Gods* are at variance and at dislocative relationship. Okri's prose above undermines the general expectation of Nigerian narratives, of indicating a referent, the way poetry does; yet no evidence exists that we are dealing with poetry.

### **(E) Parallelism/Repetition**

Another concept inaugurating dissonance, mentioned by Jakobson as distinguishing metaphorical literature from the metonymic is parallelisms (see Jakobson, 2013, p.76), which I take to mean repetition of thought, alliteration, and assonance. They are the rhetorical significative values that prompted Jakobson to say that poetry, of the lyrical sort, is propelled by the sign, and for that reason, the characteristics of parallelism, assonance, alliterations, rhymes, all underlain by the principle of semantic similarity, are what it bears (p.76). Toolan subsumes literature, narratives and poetry, under the term repetition in asserting the fundamental poetics of literature (p.197). Literature 'exploits and privileges repetition – kinds of repetition, or repetitions with kinds of difference, but repetitions all the same. I think it is not difficult to characterise many literary schemes and tropes, for example, as forms of repetition: rhyme as partial phonic repetition, rhythm and metre as repetition of pulse or beat, assonance and alliteration as consonantal and vocalic repetition, and so on' (p.197). But I add that in Ben Okri, this repetition is unsettling to one's knowledge of the tradition, where we have no model with which to find a correlation. Two instances are presented out of many:

*He was with the splendid array of men and women in their early battles with the darkness and monsters of the island. He was among them, building their bridges of light, their mighty cathedrals, their emerald towers, their architecturally perfect abodes, their marble roads. He was among them, conquering the marshes, constructing their houses of justice, their marked places and loggias, shaping their streets, designing the spiritual symmetry*

of their cities and towns, *creating* their holy places, *filling* their mountains with shrines, *carving* beautiful statues all over their hill tops, *building* canals, *developing* the sciences, *planting* flowers in their magical gardens, and *inventing* labyrinths which at regular seasons formed their arcane symbol of eternity (Okri, 1995, p. 130).

Only two repetitions are repetitions indeed and they are main clauses; few others determiners (possessive adjectives and adjectives of quality); the rest are verbs in the progressive, which serve as the head of the same structure of dependent clause. The above paragraph arranged in a stanzaic form below might interest Jakobson greatly:

*He was with the splendid array of men and women in their early battles with the darkness and monsters of the island.*

*He was among them, building  
their bridges of light,  
their mighty cathedrals,  
their emerald towers,  
their architecturally perfect abodes,  
their marble roads.*

*He was among them,  
conquering the marshes,  
constructing their houses of justice, their marked places and loggias,  
shaping their streets,  
designing the spiritual symmetry of their cities and towns,  
creating their holy places,  
filling their mountains with shrines,  
carving beautiful statues all over their hill tops,  
building canals,  
developing the sciences,  
planting flowers in their magical gardens, and  
inventing labyrinths which at regular seasons formed their arcane symbol of eternity (p.130).*

In fact, this is one long beautiful poem – a lyric beyond compare. In the narrative, *Astonishing the Gods*, we encounter a poet, of a metaphoric order. As a model because of Okri's extensive use of parallelism, a similar structure from David Diop's 'Africa' can only be likened to it:

Your beautiful black  
blood that irrigates the  
fields  
The blood of your sweat  
The sweat of your work  
The work of your slavery  
Africa, tell me Africa (p.111).

More are found on page 140, and others. Besides *Astonishing the Gods*, examples also abound in *Songs of Enchantment* and in *The Famished Road* series. In the first, we read:

The Masquerade's head was a mighty house. It was not one mind, but many; a confluence of minds. *I* wandered in its consciousness and found a labyrinthine kingdom. *I* saw *its* pyramid, its cities, its castles, its great palaces, its seas and rivers. *I* saw its moats and marshlands, *its* architectural wonders, *its* splendid dungeons and torture-chambers, *its* vast armies and police networks, *its* slaves, cabals, mind-engineers, spirit-distorters, reality-manufacturers, history-twisters, truth-inventors, soul-transplanters, dream-destroyers, courage-grinders, love-corrupters, hope-crushers, sleep-eaters, hunger-producers, money-farmers. *I* saw *its* great universities, *its* infernal libraries, *its* arid museums, *its* numberless colleges of spies, *its* control centres, *its* government-creating agencies, *its* heresiarchs, *its* unbelievably beautiful gardens and radiant plants, and astonishing canals, *its* numerous orchestras for the production of poisonous music, *its* cunningly seductive art, *its* spirit-mangling paintings, *its* negation-breeding poetry, and I even read some of its brain-scrambling books, written in the most hypnotising calligraphic hand. What shocked me more than anything else was the uncanny sense of order in the kingdom. There was no chaos, no confusion, no alternatives, no dialectic, no disturbances. It was almost peaceful, almost – paradisaical. It was a strange kind of utopia (Okri, 2003, p. 114-115).

The same structure obtains like the former example where determiners (possessive adjectives and adjectives of quality) are ubiquitous. However, adjectival compound words are also in series. The paragraph could be framed in three stanzas of a narrative poetry to properly reveal the parallelism:

The Masquerade's head was a mighty house.  
It was not one mind, but many; a confluence of minds.  
*I* wandered in its consciousness and found a labyrinthine  
kingdom.

*I* saw its pyramid,  
*its* cities,  
*its* castles,  
*its* great palaces,  
*its* seas and rivers.  
*I* saw its moats and marshlands,  
*its* architectural wonders,  
*its* splendid dungeons and torture-chambers,  
*its* vast armies and police networks,  
*its* slaves,  
cabals,  
mind-engineers,  
spirit-distorters,  
reality-manufacturers,

history-twisters,  
truth-inventors,  
soul-transplanters,  
dream-destroyers,  
courage-grinders,  
love-corrupters,  
hope-crushers,  
sleep-eaters,  
hunger-producers,  
money-farmers.

*I* saw its great universities,  
*its infernal* libraries,  
*its arid* museums,  
*its numberless* colleges of spies,  
*its control* centres,  
*its government-creating* agencies,  
*its* heresiarchs,  
*its unbelievably beautiful* gardens and radiant plants, and astonishing  
canals, its numerous orchestras for the production of poisonous music,  
*its cunningly seductive* art,  
*its spirit-mangling* paintings,  
*its negation-breeding* poetry, and I even read some of its brain-  
scrambling books, written in the most hypnotising calligraphic hand.

What shocked me more than anything else was the uncanny sense of  
order in the kingdom.  
There was no chaos,  
*no* confusion,  
*no* alternatives,  
*no* dialectic,  
*no* disturbances. It was almost peaceful, almost – paradisaal. It was a  
strange kind of utopia (p.114-115).

Paragraphs in pages 89 and others have this format. These are but few instances  
out of many abounding in Okri's *The Famished Road* series, especially in instances  
where his description turns meditative, though not on every page. In *Songs of  
Enchantment*, it is present in pages 31, 43, 89, 92, 113, 113, 115, 139, 160, and  
many others and in pages 15, 20, 21, 23, 26, 30, and many more in *Infinite Riches*.  
Although less meditative than the other two works accounting for the scantiness of  
parallelism, *The Famished Road* has some in pages 139, 161, 163 and few others.



## CONCLUSION

The mass of parallelism in Okri's narratives bring us round back to the question of realism, the conventional metonymic features posited in the language of Nigerian narratives before some of Okri's works undermine them. With the sweeping statements credited to Obafemi and Ogungbesan, amongst others, of how Nigerian writers are committed to issues in the socio-historical space, can Okri be said to have affirmed their postulations? In using language to redefine human actions, by bringing about dissonance between the signifier and the signified in signs that can be termed institutional concepts in Nigerian narratives, by occasioning conflict through the usage of paradoxes, and in resorting to parallelism, a characterising feature of poetry, in narratives, Okri complicates the customary and proves pundits wrong. It is incontrovertible, therefore, that the language of Ben Okri's mature narratives or narratives written when his career had matured, transcend what is expected in Nigerian narratives as it also complicates its description as a language to some aim. After a careful look, he seems to be saying to us in Mallarme's words to Cazalis in a 1864 letter: 'I am inventing a language that necessarily must overflow with a very new poetics that I can define in these two words: depict not the thing, but the effect that it produces' (qtd. Lovelie 89). It would be fitting to declare that he announces a private world in a 'narrative' form using a public language, the language of the tradition, a language that never remains the same again after he has used it.

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