

# THE PHENOMENON OF EXILE AS A MUTANT STRAIN IN NIGERIAN NARRATIVES

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## Abstract

Nigerian narratives are usually given socio-historical readings. This means that critics ground them to their seeming inalienable social and historical contexts from where they are said to be derived. In the operation of historical contextual grounding, scant regard oftentimes is given to the image of exile. This article, therefore, takes up for a close reading, the exilic figure in Nigerian narratives. It notes, through analysis, that this figure is hugely mutative as it emerges from Nigerian mythic narratives; realistic works, with Soyinka's *The Interpreters* as a prime example; and quasi-realistic texts, such as Okri's *The Famished Road* and others. With the exilic image straddling Nigerian narratives thus, this piece concludes that this image warrants serious critical attention in this present time.

**Keywords:** Mutant strain, Nigerian narratives; *The Famished Road*; *The Interpreters*; the phenomenon of exile

True to the critical discourse of most postcolonial literatures, Nigerian narratives have, since gaining international prominence in 1958, been placed in the wider sociological, anthropological, political and historical contexts. Contextualising narratives this way is still pervasive today as regards Nigeria's 21<sup>st</sup> century texts. For instance, politics is the fulcrum of Erritouni's reading of Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* (144-161); Andrade's analysis of Adichie's works; Hawley's criticism of Adichie's, Mbachu's, and Iweala's corpora (15-26); Nnolim's bellowing of African writers' responsibilities to their societies (1-9); Omelsky's essay on Chris Abani's works (84-96); Orabueze's deliberations on Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* (85-102); and the reading of a host of other narratives. Where it is not possible to read politics or history into emerging literary works, critics have had to assume that such works do not speak to society (Ogungbesan 2-9). However, from these narratives, one cannot gainsay the possibility of discovering figures of huge poetic importance when the above critical attitudes are brushed aside.

This is how come we have such images or figures as those of exile, *pharmakos*, wanderer, and of the quester traversing a tier of five modes of Nigerian narratives. The modes include the mythic, romantic, *high mimetic*, *low mimetic* and *ironic* modes (Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* 33-34). Through these five modes, the figure as articulated by a central character, travels from the very first point of clarity and distinction to the last point of inapparentness and indistinction, owing mainly to the acquisition of realistic devices through the principles of *analogy* and *identity*. It is



at this level that metaphor and figure intersect, in that, while *analogy* makes a simileic misleading form, *identity*, beginning from Cassirer's momentous deity (33), tries to align images, metaphorically and mistakenly, to natural elements at the primitive stage of literature. In Frye's words, "Of all images in literature, the most important are characters, the personalities that do most to mediate between the author and his public" (Frye, *Words with Power* 71). These characters as figures and personalities would be the focus of this essay.

To bring the above process home, the natural element of thunder which in Nigeria's Igbo is Amadiora will serve as a case in point. Human characters are made to represent its destructive qualities. In this, Amadiora is the destroyer, one that plunders the clan and it is he who must be appeased. In Amadiora, ritual and myth are now tied together. This way, *mistakenly metaphorical* identity has just been enacted and consummated. This process takes place in African and non-African myths at the primitive stage of literary activity where mythical patterns first emerged. However, the figure of destruction in fiction does not end here. Over time, literature has had to make reference to Amadiora in both direct and indirect manner until whoever possesses destructive capabilities appear as faint figures of the Amadiora myth. As the figure of destruction descends into narratives and literature through identity, literature also assumes its sequential arrangements of incidents through analogy until a total displacement of all original mythic figures becomes the very law that literature, including narratives, abides by.

So when we take up, as cases in point, Soyinka's *The Interpreters* and Okri's *The Famished Road*, we have a critical attitude that should yield results. The characters that are figures of the quester, in their being far away from home and in being detained by the object of their quests, also posit and acquire the image of exiles in both *The Interpreters* and *The Famished Road*. Golder poetically reveals this figure in his refrain during the solo exhibition thus: "a long way from ho-o-ome" (Soyinka, *The Interpreters* 246). The exilic experiences of his life are accentuated by his finding no resting place. So long as he has no rest, he also will have no peace, and as he has no peace, he will not cease to be irritating to civil societies and any company of friends he keeps by happenstance. As if to echo what situation Golder and other characters are in, Edward Said offers that "The exile . . . exists in a median state, neither completely at one with the new setting, nor fully disencumbered of the old, beset with half-involvements and half-detachments, nostalgic and sentimental on one level, an adept mimic or a secret outcast on another." (51).

Golder and other major characters of both works live out the picture of exilehood Said has painted and also exceed it in a significantly different way, resonating the figure of exile at a very sunken level. For Golder as a person, one could appreciate his exilehood in his other refrain, "I feel like a motherless child . . ." at the exhibition scene (Soyinka, *The Interpreters* 246). Golder calls himself a misanthrope: "I am a misanthrope" (185). But beneath his misanthropy is his



exiliness, affirming that "I am not a social person . . . When I am in company . . . I try to take flight" (186). Beyond the company of immediate 'friends' and acquaintances, he does not seem to find himself at home in the larger nation he has come to stay put at the moment. He, who suffers from insomnia and takes a walk at the time, says to Sagoe, "I find you fellows a most unfriendly bunch in this country" (184). His exiliness, this physical dislocation and the nervy feeling of unwantedness that accompanies this, becomes bare through analysis. The strange and uncomfortable atmosphere that goes along with dislocation in Golder recurs again and again bursting in clear and distinct notes during his solo requiem number on the day Sekoni's exhibition is staged when he sings that he feels like *a motherless child*. The narrator describes his entire being further:

Some bones on that stage were bared, sandbags and transverses, collapsible platforms billowing black drapes on the two sides, . . . Beyond him, deep void and total, and Joe Golder. And outwards from the black edges of the moveable proscenium which framed him, an archaic figure disowned from a family album. Joe Golder sought the world in hop, the faceless, unfathomed world, a total blank for the man whose every note tore him outward. Joe Golder bared his soul, mangled, spun in murky fountains of grief which cradled him, the long-lost child, but would not fling him clear...

*a long way from ho-o-ome, a long wa-ay from home* (246-247).

Disowned by his family, he journeys through some of the capital cities of the world in the process of which he makes himself an uncomfortable traverser and a renderer of tragic notes from his past life to the unbearable sorrowful strains of the present life.

There is an overwhelming presence of the mood of aloneness around this profound figure of exilehood in *The Interpreters*. His image sheds much light on to other characters in both works mainly because, during his solo, he inspires some chaotic feeling of pain, anxiety, and exile in other characters at the exhibition. Golder's feelings are passed on to all his hearers who somehow have been afflicted, before that moment, with the same infirmity – wander-germ. Monica's hands are "trembling"; Kola admits that "it is a night of severance, every man is going his own way" (247), while at the same time, he is overcome by "a feeling he could not explain" (247). He eventually grows "distressed" (249); Bandele on his part cannot remove his gaze from Sekoni's carving, "The Wrestler"; and Simi too is "afraid and unhappy" (249). Indeed, there is something about their souls that is gradually becoming uncovered. Monica is not from that part of the world, and neither is Egbo nor Sagoe. In actual fact, they are all "a long way from ho-o-ome" while in some sense, they are exiles in a familiar land into which, in their individual wanderings, they have stumbled. A thing that is worthy of recall is the motivation of the activities of Simi which has been hitherto hidden in her taciturnity. But with the states of all the major characters becoming stripped and rendered hollow, we discover that there is



more to why it is that Simi in a matter-of-factly manner traps Egbo in his first major quest for forbidden pleasures. She initiates him, after which, playing Circe, she would not let go.

The haunts Egbo experiences are also an index of an exilic experience that afflicts him when he happens to be far away from home. Though his exilicness is not intentional, as his parents have perished in a canoe accident, it could also be traced to him when he became of age, an age where he could exercise his will or leave off. Such is the case with Golder, whose exilic experiences are accentuated and sealed. Taking leave of his native home, there is now no resting place for him forever like Azaro in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*. His state has obvious consequences. It leads to his sending Noah to an untimely death who, in fright, falls over eight stairs when Golder began making his sodomic passes. Most characters, in both works and in the structure of their relationships, can be said to be exiles – a condition reflected in their wanderings. Both Golder and Azaro have broken a taboo in their respective worlds. The ethereal world not being his home is the cause of Azaro's conflict both with his spirit companions and his parents.

The distorted perception and behaviour of most characters in *The Famished Road*, in one way or another, is an indication of the discomfort they feel about their present abode and their wish for a better place where their desires could be realized has some shades of exilicness in them. The feeling of discomfort, as they yearn for something better, translates them into exile. The ghetto of the poor is where they have been and would continue to be. But it soon turns out that the strange happenings could estrange them from the familiar as they go through a dislocation of some sort. We take the torture visited on ghetto-dwellers by political thugs as one important case. The ring of coercion and conscription of all non-Party of the Rich members into the party against which Tyger lamely rebels is another. Their efforts to wrestle with these forces by struggling or by avoidance through subservience indicate that they are in an abhorrent state. They have been dislocated psychologically, and, if given the opportunity, would love to be suitably located.

In contrasting the exiles, only Azaro and Golder, both major figures of exile, compare favourably by virtue of the verity that they have both broken taboos. While in *The Interpreters*, the state of exilehood of the major characters is accentuated by nonviolent existential concerns and forces which are internal, in *The Famished Road*, it is heightened by the forcefulness and bestiality of the actions of the thugs of the Party of the Rich and the decadent political leadership of the ghetto nation.

Apart from Egbo and Monica, the original homes of the rest, Kola, Sekoni, Simi and Lasunwon, are not much known. Whatever one knows of them does not go beyond their professional activities. Their unclear roots are much aided by their education which divorces them from their origins. Taking the two works together, Azaro's origin is the most visible; he is neither here nor there – he owns two homes, neither of which is his home in the long run. The 'village' Tyger and his family



migrated from to the ghetto in *The Famished Road*, in spite of Tyger's many references to its religion and lore, is not mentioned. The ghetto of the unnamed city where they are is not their original abode. They have been transplanted into an alien zone through migration.

In the African literary tradition, we have *Sundiata* where Sundiata, having benefited from his exile, engages in a war with Soumangoro, the sorcerer king to reclaim his fatherland. Now, his return opens a fresh vista of illumination to the figure of exile by bringing up the possibility of a successful return of an exile unlike Joe Golder, Egbo, Monica Faseyi in *The Interpreters* and Black Tiger, his family and Madame Koto in *The Famished Road* who proceed to exile and never return. In fact, for Koto, with little information about her origins, it is evident she is a mystery woman in her ghetto. Again, the latter characters, being mainly present in a realistic work, have no divine enablement that enhanced Sundiata's success in D.T. Niane's *Sundiata*. This attribute in Sundiata places *Sundiata* in the second mimetic mode as a legend where he is not only a leader, but also a leader who through divine aid is able to exercise superiority over other men and their environment.

The Nigerian literary tradition displays the inherent mythical formulas that transgress time and tradition to bear on narratives. In *Myths of Ife*, a work belonging to the first mimetic mode, Mórimi who, having disguised as a harlot, returns from a self-imposed exile from the community of the Úbos armed with the information that would spell the Úbos destruction. Unlike Mórimi but like Sundiata, Bayajida in *The Bayajida* leaves home in the pursuits of unbelievers. He returns, in Oedipal fashion by killing the snake that prevents people from drawing water and marrying a queen that bears children for him. These children found the Hausa states. The killing of the snake can be located as well in the Theban myth of origin where Cadmus kills the snake that kills his men, the killing of the last enemy trying to prevent his founding Thebes. To Bayajida, the return of the exile is triumphal, with a super deed to establish his presence and reign. On the other hand, there is the complementary segment of the eventual return of an exile. In the mimetic mode where *Myths of Ife* belongs, one can also place Fagunwa's *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons* and Tutuola's *The Palm-wine Drinkard* where the heroes, overcoming distressing obstacles, successfully return home.

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in the Nigerian high mimetic mode is a work where the figure of exile and questing are inherent properties that charge its tragic mood. It is also a realistic work where the state of exile and objects of quests are not just only accessible without difficulty, but also show, within this seeming simplicity, evidence of complexity uncharacteristic of any work in the first mimetic mode. Okonkwo, the Umuofians, the Europeans especially, the District Commissioner, the missionaries and their protégés, all exhibit and illustrate the sequence of exile tinged with quest in a symmetrical perspective cut out by the white man's arrival: those who have been there before the coming of the white man and those after his



appearance. After the arrival of the white man, when Okonkwo returns to his father's climate and environment from his seven-year stint in his mother's village which was not home, he is never to remain the same again. The same can be said of Obi Okonkwo in *No longer at Ease* after his 'exilic' return. While Okonkwo's exile is involuntary; Obi Okonkwo's 'exile' in quest of education, ably helped by Umuofia sons and daughters, is involuntary.

If we take a look at an early evidence of this figure of exile in *Prometheus Bound*, one observes that while Prometheus, a member of the gods' community is exiled, by the time one stumbles upon a similar banishment from an original community in *Things Fall Apart*, this figure has acquired plausibility, where human characters, rather than gods and spirits, are agents of action. These humans undergo a tough historical experience such as colonization, an experience recommending itself as evidence what the work resorted to through the technique of plausibility. In fact, the picture of dislocation, the major figure of which is the District Commissioner, is summed up in this rumination of his thus: "In the many years in which he had toiled to bring civilization to different parts of Africa he had learnt a number of things" (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 149). He is a bringer of some valuable project to the many parts to which he is a foreigner; hence, he is a wanderer and in his wandering and, possibly, questing, he acquires in clarity and the enigma of the figure of an exile in contrast to *Myths of Ife*, Fagunwa's *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons* and Tutuola's *The Palm-wine Drinkard*, where the romantic element is in surplus appearance. Greater elements of 'realism' are contained in *Things Fall Apart*, though a cursory reading would not really locate this depth of figuration of the characters as humans.

So, with Okonkwo, a leader and the work's major character, ascertaining *Things Fall Apart's* mimetic mode is no longer an uphill task. Nevertheless, in descending a little lower to the low mimetic level, we hit upon the fact that this figure is displaced in Okri's *In Arcadia*, "Starts of the New Curfew", Ifeoma Okoye's *Chimere*, Jude Dibia's *Unbridled*, Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*, and Cyprian Ekwensi's *Burning Grass*. In these works, the structure of exile is tied to quest and wandering and it sustains both in a convoluted platform of interlocking sequences. It is dependent on them for meaning: for instance, what is established in Golder, Egbo, Sagoe, Lazarus, Noah, Monica Faseyi, and others in *The Interpreters* and Azaro Black Tyger, his family, Madame Koto, and other ghetto-dwellers in *The Famished Road* is that their exile is in consequence of their quests. The same can be discovered in *Chimere*, another low mimetic work. Here, Chimere's exiliness begins when she is pained by her father's absence ignited by Jide's splits with her. Thereafter, she goes about seeking for her father. In "Stars of a New Curfew", a nameless young man's dislocation is hinged on the detection of the need to survive through hawking of fake drugs. Ngozi's exilehood in *Unbridled* is provoked by the singular act of sexual abuse by her biological father such that within the sameness of her family, she feels



different – already unknowingly dislocated when she thinks she is rooted and located in the family. In *Burning Grass*, Mai Sunsaye's exilence is incited by a physical manifestation of the "sokugo" hex, a bird, which hops slowly and steadily until he is lead astray. In Okara's *The Voice*, we see the converging of the outward and inward influences that force him to become an itinerant exile in the character of Okolo, though there is no disputing of the imperious moral view held by all that instigate his alienation and suffering. In fact, all he suffers are to be classified as his *punishment* for the *crime* of seeking to reform societal conventions by seeking *it*. The mythic structure of the exile continues in its downward descent to works belonging to the ironic mimetic mode by bringing forth generous instances where it is either a direct cause or consequence of wandering and questing.

Despite the uniform positing of the exilic figure, the many forms of disguise this figure has undertaken are important for analysis. In "Stars of a New Curfew", hawking, a trading skill as old as man's movement from place to place and as the beginning of mobile apothecary is, in the hands of the technique of verisimilitude, made believable with such items drugs, *molue* and buses serving as pointers. Both are mobile modern technological inventions substituting for human legs. *Chimere's* figure of exile, Chimere, is neither a pre-colonial title-holder nor one of the spirits of the clan, but a university undergraduate to whom such moralistic loathing of pre-marital sex is no longer a rule that must be kept. To her, the world is modern, a world where formal education could stretch to university level, where fallen morals, and where factory work, vacation jobs, automobiles and other elements indicating historical Nigeria are appropriated by art into literature. These elements give the tale realistic grounding as they also posit the phenomenon of exile as a displaced figure. These realistic indices must be 'scraped off', as was done to *The Interpreters*, *Unbridled*, *The Famished Road*, and others, for the mythic structure of exile to emerge.

With the unearthing of the figure of exile across mimetic modes – from the first, where it is most apparent to the last, where it occurs in disguises, we reach a major conclusion: that as the phenomenon of exile journeys downward from myth, invisibility is acquired in form of *characters* that are recognizably humans, *actions* that are natural, and *environments* that are identifiably human. In consequence, the figure comes under the sway of the technique of verisimilitude. This accounts for the figure of exile's indistinctness in *The Interpreters* and *The Famished Road* as contradistinguished from the figure's clear outlines in the *Myths of Ife*, folktales, legends, *märchen*, and others. In effect, in *The Interpreters* and *The Famished Road*, the figure of exile has been effectively displaced as the characters which are not gods like Mórimi and Prometheus, supernaturally-aided heroes like Bayajjida, and not as leaders in the fashion of Okonkwo, undertake actions that, through omission or commission, circumscribe them. These occasion their dislocation in human environment that contrasts with that of the gods and spirits. To becloud this figure further, Golder, for instance, has to mention Paris and many other European cities he has been to and has to tell us he is Negro, a very dense



word in history. In conjunction with the narrator, they supply many other socio-cultural indicators that give support to believability both in America and in Nigeria. Ranged alongside Golder and his experiences, are names, 'local colours', such as Lasunwon, Faseyi, and those of gods and deities of the group where they come from – Ogun, Obatala, Usaye, Erinle, Esu, and so on. These all help to nail home plausibility in the reader. The total effect of these and very many more is that the figure of exile will no longer be easily identified as being present. But with the careful removal of these veils, as the saying goes, "all things are now possible" for the critic, including the archaic figures, images, and actions.

This article has taken up for analysis, across five modes of Nigerian narratives, the figure of exile. It noted throughout that it is a figure that is hugely mutative, emerging from such mythic narratives as are found in the beginnings of the Nigerian literary tradition and the realistic works of this present period. It is sincerely hoped that the insight provoked here would give rise to and encourage further research in the exile phenomenon in Nigerian literature.

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