

The Forest and the Road in Novels by Chinua Achebe and Ben Okri

Gillian Gane

Novels by two great Nigerian writers, Chinua Achebe and Ben Okri, present strikingly different attitudes toward trees and forests and toward nature and the environment more generally. I examine the attitudes that emerge from their novels *Things Fall Apart* and *The Famished Road*, finding that Achebe and Okri are writers of different generations, addressing different concerns. Then, given the alarming statistics on the current state of forests in Nigeria, I try tentatively to find ways of conceptualizing change in that country, discovering some promise in Okri's image of the road.

Chinua Achebe demonstrates powerfully the irreparable damage to the fabric of Igbo society that colonization brought, but shows no particular concern for the environment. In his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, it is taken for granted that the natural world exists to be exploited by human beings, though parts of the natural world are at the same time a source of danger and fear; nature is polarized into good, usable nature and evil, dangerous nature. Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, by contrast, exposes not only the persistent effects of colonization and the conflict between the rich and the poor, but the devastating effects of development on forests and the natural world. Perhaps most crucially, the world that Okri presents is not one with human beings at the centre.

The difference between the two authors is in large part generational; Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* was written in the 1950s and set some half a century earlier, at the time when the colonizers first arrived in Nigeria. Ben Okri himself was not born until 1959, the year after *Things Fall Apart* was first published in England. His novel *The Famished Road* was written in the 1990s and is set just before Nigeria's

independence in 1960. The difference also has to do with the vantage points from which the two novelists write. Achebe locates himself squarely within the worldview of rural Igbo society a century ago, whereas Okri does not tether himself to any fixed ethnic or cultural identity. His narrator and protagonist Azaro is a small boy, a spirit-child who moves between the world of spirits and the human world, and no clues identify the particular language or culture of his family (he calls his parents 'Mum' and 'Dad'). It is also significant that Azaro and his family have no connection with agriculture.

Achebe has made clear his outrage at Conrad's identification of Africans with their natural environment in *Heart of Darkness*, and his own presentation of the Igbos' relationship with nature is clearly shaped by his commitment to countering Conrad's dark vision. In his much-reprinted article 'An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*', Achebe presents a scathing critique of Conrad as a 'bloody racist' (1977:788)¹, charging that he 'projects the image of Africa as "the other world", the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality' (1977:783). In 'The Novelist as Teacher' Achebe announces his own commitment to offering an alternative vision:

I for one would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past—with all its imperfections—was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them (1975:45).

For Conrad, the dark heart of Africa reveals the savagery underlying the veneer of civilization: both the natural world Marlow finds in Africa and the human beings who inhabit it are wild, untamed, primordial, a source of horror. In response, Achebe insists that Africans—specifically, the Igbo of Umuofia—see themselves as quite separate from the natural world; his re-contextualizing of the key terms 'darkness' and 'heart' is an explicit response to Conrad. Just like

¹ 'Bloody' was the term Achebe used in his first version of this article as published by the *Massachusetts Review*. In subsequent versions he changed this to 'thoroughgoing'.

Conrad's Marlow, the Igbo fear and are repelled by untamed nature. They condemn the inhabitants of the neighbouring village of Mbaino by calling them 'sons of wild animals' (1959:11). When sources of fear for the Igbo are enumerated, high on the list is 'the fear of the forest', followed immediately by the 'forces of nature, malevolent, red in tooth and claw' (1959:13). The darkness of moonless nights is another source of terror to the people:

Darkness held a vague terror for these people, even the bravest among them.... Dangerous animals became even more sinister and uncanny in the dark (1959:9).

Of nature itself—landscape, scenery—there is virtually no description in Achebe's novel. Readers have one brief glimpse of huge old trees as a group of men leave familiar ground and enter 'the heart of the forest', where

The short trees and sparse undergrowth which surrounded the men's village began to give way to giant trees and climbers which perhaps had stood from the beginning of things, untouched by the axe and the bush-fire (1959:59).

Conrad could not at this point have resisted a ponderous allusion to 'the night of first ages' or primordial evil; Achebe, by contrast, notes mildly and casually that these trees are ancient and untouched by human activity without attaching any moral or metaphysical significance to the fact.

Achebe's Igbo are farmers. Yams, the 'king of crops', are objects of reverence to them, and many rituals celebrate the planting and harvesting of yams and other events in the agricultural year. What the Igbo value is not nature raw and unimproved, but nature exploited and domesticated, conquered and cultivated for the benefit of human beings. While Evil Forest and 'nature red in tooth and claw' are objects of fear and revulsion, there is virtue in the subjection of nature to human needs. The expectation is specifically that hard-working farmers will clear 'virgin' forest and convert it into fields for their crops. When Unoka, Okonkwo's lazy and improvident musician father, consults the priestess of the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves about his poor harvests, she screams at him:

You have offended neither the gods nor your fathers. And when a man is at peace with his gods and his ancestors, his harvest will be good or bad according to the strength of his arm. You, Unoka, are known in all the clan for the weakness of your machete and your hoe. When your neighbors go out with their ax *to cut down virgin forests*, you sow your yams on exhausted farms that take no labor to clear' (1959:17; emphasis added).

The authoritative voice of the Oracle, who relays to the people the mandates of their deities, judges Unoka as wanting for his failure to participate in deforestation, in the metaphoric defloration of untouched, virginal nature. The Oracle holds no brief for the protection or preservation of nature, but is aligned with the masculinist and colonizing enterprise in terms of which the virginal is seen as crying out to be violated and exploited. As virginal maidens exist to be deflowered and impregnated, virgin forest needs to be cleared and turned into farmland producing crops for the benefit of human beings.

Evil Forest is by contrast the tainted realm into which abominations are cast away. 'Every clan and village had its 'evil forest', we are told;

In it were buried all those who died of the really evil diseases, like leprosy and smallpox. It was also the dumping ground for the potent fetishes of great medicine men when they died. An 'evil forest' was, therefore, alive with sinister forces and powers of darkness (1959:148).

Evil Forest is a zone of abjection, a place where contaminants can be siphoned off from civilized society. It is a dump for toxic waste, both for sources of disease and for the dangerous products of human experimentation. If good men marry virgins and clear virgin forests to plant their crops, Evil Forest serves as a kind of safety valve for draining off noxious elements that threaten society.

So convinced are the Igbo of the dark powers of Evil Forest that when the Christians ask for a piece of land they readily offer them land there: 'they made them that offer which nobody in his right senses would accept' (1959:148), convinced that Evil Forest will destroy them. The people of Mbanta are amazed when the Christians survive and flourish;

they start to think that the white man must have a fetish powerful enough to counter the toxic forces of this dangerous place.

The division of forests into, on one hand, those that are virginal and available for exploitation and, on the other, those that are evil is reminiscent of the tendency to divide women into virgins and whores. The masculinist worldview sees virgins as pure and as appropriate objects of male desire—though of course the goal of the desiring male is precisely to destroy that virginity. Similarly, virgin forests and untouched nature are seen as inviting men to conquer, subdue, and exploit them, and this conquest and exploitation is approved and encouraged. Set against the virginal, whether a female body or a forest, is the impure and experienced, which is at least potentially contaminating and dangerous—though at the same time these unsanctioned outlets are considered essential to the preservation of respectable society. Not only is this a dangerously polarized way of thinking, but it is one that sees women and land alike only from the perspective of their exploiters.

I am in no position to judge the extent to which this polarized worldview presented in the novel accurately reflects Igbo beliefs or the extent to which it is a result of Achebe's commitment to writing back against Conrad and the Western tradition. There are, however, a couple of indications that Igbo society may be less trapped in polarized binaries than Achebe would have us believe. Evil Forest is repeatedly presented as noxious, dangerous, a place apart; and yet there is the paradox that the oldest and most important of Umuofia's *egwugwu*, the revered ancestral spirits of the clan, is called Evil Forest. This must surely indicate that at some level the people of Umuofia accept that Evil Forest is intimately connected to them. This is also implied by the fact that, according to Paul Brians's study guide for *Things Fall Apart*, Umuofia, the name of the community, means 'people of the forest'.

Of course, the Igbo attitude toward nature I have outlined is by no means exceptionally exploitative. Through time and space human beings have characteristically seen nature as a resource at their disposal, and the damage done to the environment by small clans of pre-industrial agriculturalists is negligible when set against the massive depredations of contemporary agribusiness and industry. Nor is it reasonable to expect Achebe as a writer recapturing the worldview of his Igbo ancestors to show the kind of concern for the environment that is characteristic of our own age.

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Forty-four years later, Ben Okri in *The Famished Road* sees the natural world in a very different light from Achebe. Writing in a different global context and with a new understanding of the fragility of the environment, Okri shows a sympathetic awareness of how human agency is damaging nature, and his magical realist approach allows him to blur the boundaries between humans and the rest of the natural world. The vulnerability of nature and of trees in particular, in the face of human expansion and development is a recurrent theme. Early in the novel, the narrator's father tells his young son that the forest that surrounds their home is doomed:

Sooner than you think there won't be one tree standing. There will be no forest left at all. And there will be wretched houses all over the place. This is where the poor people will live This is where you too will live (1993:34).

Again and again we see vivid images of the destruction of forests, and of wounded and bleeding trees. Trees that have been felled are anthropomorphized as fallen warriors. In one case, 'Red liquid dripped from its stump as if the tree had been a murdered giant whose blood wouldn't stop flowing' (1993:16). In another, 'The tree was mighty, its trunk gnarled and rough like the faces of ancient warriors. It looked like a great soul dead at the road's end' (115). Trees groan as they are chopped down:

I got to the edge of the forest and heard trees groaning as they crashed down on their neighbours. I listened to trees being felled deep in the forest and heard the steady rhythms of axes on hard, living wood (1993:137).

'[E]very day the forest thinned a little, Azaro tells us; 'The trees I got to know so well were cut down and only their stumps, dripping sap, remained' (1993:143).

Okri's image of trees as *warriors* and *giants* is radically opposed to the image of *virgin* forest in Achebe's novel (and in many other texts and discourses): for Okri, trees are gendered male, individualized, and endowed with potent agency; their defeat is the tragic fate of great heroes. The priestess who speaks of virgin forests, by contrast, genders forests as female, sees them as undifferentiated masses, and implicitly

approves of their subjection. In both cases, readers are clearly intended to position themselves as male—in Achebe's novel, to see themselves as destroyers of female forests and cultivators of yams in their place; in Okri's, to feel a masculine empathy with the conquered trees. The warlike virility of Okri's trees does not in fact empower them in the contest with human beings: it seems designed merely to make their plight more poignant to male-identified readers.

At one point in *The Famished Road*, Azaro has a surreal vision of the 'new world ... being erected amidst the old':

Skyscrapers stood high and inscrutable besides huts and zinc abodes. Bridges were being built; flyovers, half-finished, were like passageways into the air, or like future visions of a time when cars would be able to fly (1993:113).

This vision of an incomplete modernity is telling in at least two ways. It dramatizes the enormous gulf between, on the one hand, the high-tech, gravity-conquering skyscrapers and flyovers created by and for the wealthy and, on the other, the frail informal dwellings of the poor that stand in their shade. It is further significant that the flyovers are incomplete: these passageways into the future end in mid-air, leading to even more surreal visions of flying cars, and making us wonder whether this futurist fantasia, and the modernist project of which it is part, will ever be completed.

It is not only mega-projects representing massive investments that encroach on the forest, but also the homes and pathways and places of worship of ordinary people:

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 (1993:242).

Bit by bit, development and the expansion of human settlements destroy the forest:

Steadily, over days and months, the paths had been widening. Bushes were being burnt, tall grasses cleared, tree stumps

uprooted. The area was changing. Places that were thick with bush and low trees were now becoming open spaces of soft river-sand. In the distance I could hear the sounds of dredging, of engines, of road builders, forest clearers, and workmen chanting as they strained their muscles. Each day the area seemed different. Houses appeared where parts of the forest had been. Places where children used to play and hide were now full of sand piles and rutted with house foundations. There were signboards on trees. The world was changing and I went on wandering as if everything would always be the same.

It took longer to get far into the forest. It seemed that the trees, feeling that they were losing the argument with human beings, had simply walked deeper into the forest (1993:104).

There is an adversarial relationship between trees and human beings—and the trees are ‘losing the argument’. Workers with heavy machinery destroy growing things, and those trees that remain are converted into signposts bearing signs that doubtless assert human ownership and control of the area.

At least twice Azaro sees the forest as fleeing from human beings: in the passage quoted above from page 104 trees walk deeper into the forest, and later the pace of their flight quickens: ‘The trees were *running* away from human habitation’ (1993:243; e.a.). There are many other passages about wounded and defeated trees and forests, and there is finally a point at which Azaro concludes, ‘The forest there had been conquered’ (1993:277).

However, in this novel nature is not always seen as suffering and innocent. There is at least one evil tree that grows at the spot where Azaro has buried a fetish and that changes into a sinister animal. Evil spirits often have the characteristics or body parts of animals, and there is an intriguing reference to ‘the unholy fecundity of objects’ (1993:161).

Within Okri’s novel a couple of visionary characters (seen by most as lunatics) offer their insights into the problems threatening forests and trees. The herbalist, who performs the ritual washing of the new car purchased by the ambitious Madame Koto starts with the expected predictions of prosperity, then gets drunk and, to everyone’s consternation, announces that the car will be a coffin before continuing with other prophecies of doom. ‘All these trees will die’, he predicts,

'because nobody loves them any more'. The more generalized rant to which he moves on, most of which is presented in capital letters, starts: 'Too many roads! Things are CHANGING TOO FAST' (1993:382). The insights of Azaro's father, another visionary and idealist who makes pronouncements in capital letters, are similar. He lashes out at the ghetto-dwellers, among other things for 'not taking care of their environment'. He urges them to 'THINK DIFFERENTLY ... AND YOU WILL CHANGE THE WORLD' (1993:419), but is met only with derision: 'He has gone completely mad!' (1993:420). It is he who articulates the concept at the heart of the novel, the notion that, like Azaro, Nigeria is an *abiku*, a child who is not ready to be born and who repeatedly dies and is reborn:

Dad found that all nations are children; it shocked him that ours too was an abiku nation, a spirit-child nation, one that keeps being reborn and after each birth come blood and betrayals, and the child of our will refuses to stay till we have made propitious sacrifice and displayed our serious intent to bear the weight of a unique destiny (1993:494).

The herbalist evidently believes there was once a time when people did love trees ('nobody loves them *any more*'). And in *Things Fall Apart*, too, there are in the names of the community ('people of the forest') and of their most revered ancestral spirit ('Evil Forest') traces of a time when people were closely identified with the forest. These bonds, however, are relegated to the past. In the mid-twentieth-century present of Okri's novel, both the herbalist and Dad seem impotent in the face of the changes in their world: the herbalist's conviction that change is happening too fast is echoed in Dad's notion that the new nation is not ready to be born because adequate preparations have not been made. Both men urge a change of heart: trees need to be loved, the environment must be taken care of, people must think differently.

However Nigerians have conceptualized nature or writers have imagined the relationship between Nigerians and the natural world, the recent history of Nigeria is a sad story of deforestation, destruction, and the apparently inexorable conquest of nature. The Igbo farmers were urged by their Oracle to clear virgin forest; colonization meant a new demand for palm oil and the intervention of the colonizers in issues of

land ownership. But the effects of peasant farming and early trading ventures were trivial compared to the depredations of global capitalism that followed as the twentieth century progressed. Okri gives us a glimpse of these depredations; more recent factual information presents an even more alarming picture. According to a World Land Trust website,

Nigeria, once in the heart of the tropical rainforest belt, has lost about 95% of its total forest cover and now has to import 75% of the timber it needs for its own purposes (World Land Trust).

The death of forests on such a scale must arouse horror and grief. The challenge that confronts us is—without losing sight of the record of destruction and without allowing our outrage to diminish—to find ways of thinking about our changing world that are not grounded in nostalgia for the lost past. We need to accept that change is inevitable. The nature of space is not fixed and constant, and we can neither turn back the clock to retrieve the past nor freeze time to preserve spaces unchanged.

Not all change in Nigeria fits the pattern of the juggernaut of development ruthlessly eradicating everything of value. The Malian critic Manthia Diawara (2000:135-136) offers an interesting perspective on Achebe's *Evil Forest*: this zone of terror and abjection, he claims, became in fact the locus of modernity in Nigeria, the site where the future evolved. It was the Christians, the formerly taboo and untouchable *osu*, the twins who had been rescued from the bush where they had been left to die—those seen as worthless by respectable Igbo society—who were most active in developing Nigeria and making it a modern country. We may well have reservations about the project of modernity (a project Diawara does not question), but this turning of the tables where former outcasts lead the way into the future has a certain appeal.

The Famished Road is full of liminal zones and transformations. Azaro and his family live always on the edge of things, within walking distance both of forests and of the city centre. In this novel, spaces are not fixed or constant, and different worlds flow into one another: the spirit world interpenetrates the real world, dreams intersect with waking life, the city flows into the forest, both paths and rivers become roads. Space is mobile, multiple, and multivalent. Of particular interest is Okri's treatment of roads, the centrality of which is highlighted by the title *The Famished Road*.

In Achebe's *Arrow of God* (another novel about the Igbo early in the twentieth century), there is a road under construction by the colonial administration; it has no particular significance in itself, but its construction is an occasion for brutal exploitation of the labour of the local community. In Okri's novel, by contrast, roads function as multivalent images resonant with meaning. To an extent the road stands opposed to the forest. Roads are of course quintessentially human constructions; they are directional and purposeful, easily seen as symbols for movement and progress. The students to whom I have taught this novel often want to see roads as evil, but that is surely an oversimplification. Roads radiate many different kinds of meaning. They are hungry—famished—and demand sacrifices. Their construction often involves destruction of trees and the natural environment. There are, as the herbalist protests, too many of them. But at the same time roads are linked to natural phenomena—the novel opens with a reference to a road that was once a river: 'In the beginning there was a river. The river became a road and the road branched out to the whole world' (1967:3). The construction of roads can be a noble human endeavour. When the seven-headed spirit takes Azaro on a visionary tour, they see people who have devoted two thousand years to building a beautiful jewelled road; in all that time they have constructed only two feet. When they complete this road, they will die, because, so the spirit explains, 'they will have nothing to do, nothing to dream for, and no need for a future' (Okri 1993:329).

One intriguing motif Achebe and Okri have in common is a prophetic notion of the nature of toxic waste: in both novels, the by-products of bad magic are an enduring source of dangerous pollution, just as in our own age nuclear waste, pesticides, and other by-products of the 'magic' of technology, along with disease-causing organisms stored ostensibly for the purposes of research, will remain virulent hazards to human beings and the environment for generations to come. As we have seen, in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* one of the factors that makes Evil Forest evil is 'the potent fetishes of great medicine men' (1959:148), 'evil essences loosed upon the world by the potent "medicines" which the tribe had made in the distant past against its enemies but had now forgotten to control' (1959:104). What is significant is that these poisons are here consigned to the world of nature—the 'bad' nature represented by Evil Forest. In Okri's *Famished Road*, the products of

magic similarly constitute a persistent hazard, but they are found not in the forest but on the road. When Azaro falls ill, his father says:

He probably went and walked on all the bad things they wash on the roads. All those witches and wizards, native doctors, sorcerers, who wash off bad things from their customers and pour them on the road, who wash diseases and bad destinies on the streets. He probably walked on them and they entered him (1993:119).

In Achebe's fiction, the toxic residues of magic pollute the forest and make it an evil place, whereas in Okri's work it is the road that becomes polluted—neither part of nature nor a realm that is set apart as evil, but the thoroughfare on which all must travel; the sorcerers' poisons are just one element of many that contribute to the complex nature of roads.

At the end of the novel, when Azaro reiterates his decision to remain in the world rather than return to the realm of the spirits, he frames his decision in terms of roads. He is, he says, 'a spirit-child rebelling against the spirits, wanting to live the earth's life and contradictions'. What he wants is 'to have to *find or create new roads* from this one which is so hungry, this road of our refusal to be' (1993:487; e.a.).

Earlier, when Madame Koto warns Azaro that if he misbehaves, 'The forest will swallow you', the dialogue that follows illustrates Azaro's childlike way of thinking—and his strong imaginative empathy:

'Then I will become a tree', I said.

'Then they will cut you down because of a road'.

'Then I will turn into the road'.

'Cars will ride on you, cows will shit on you, people will perform sacrifices on your face'.

'And I will cry at night. And then people will remember the forest' (1993:219).

Azaro imagines himself; first, becoming a tree—part of the forest that Madame Koto presents as hostile, identity-consuming territory. When Madame Koto threatens that the tree will be cut down 'because of a road', Azaro imagines himself turning into that road. Even if the crying road does no more than remind passers-by of the forest that once was,

Azaro's imaginative identification both with the trees of the forest and with the man-made road is moving and impressive, as is his persistence in seeing a connection between the two. We can all learn from Azaro's empathy for the world he lives in and his ability to identify with both trees and roads.

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Department of English, University of Zululand
(Research Fellow)