DISCURSIVE REPRESENTATIONS OF SOCIAL MEANING IN BEN OKRI'S ABIKU FICTION

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Abstract

Writers adopt different strategies of communicating social meaning. The strategies enable them to represent individual and group identities, ideologies, attitudes, biases, feelings, prejudices and social relations. In Okri's novels on *abiku*, the spirit child, namely *The Famished Road* (1991), *Songs of Enchantment* (1993) and *Infinite Riches* (1998), he adopts gossip/rumour and communal/cosmic conversational structure as strategies of communicating the social and political situations of his Nigerian society. The gossip/rumour strategies are narrative forms of supplying additional information the central narrator does not have access to, while the dialogic/conversational structure represents the African communal perspective and the intercourse between the natural and the supernatural.

Keywords: Ben Okri, discursive representation, social meaning, gossip/rumour, dialogue/conversation

1.0 Introduction

Discourse is understood as the domain of language use that enables speakers to make functional choices at all levels of structure, whether across sentence and larger unit boundaries, inside clauses and phrases, or even within words. Schiffrin (2006) said that discourse is the "branch of linguistics that focuses on language use above and beyond the sentence" (p.170). She also observed that while linguists "focused mainly on the forms of language…how language was used in context was not explored…for example, culture is more than what we do: it is a way of thinking about the world and a way of locating ourselves in that world that guides the way we act" (p.170-171). In other words, culture influences the way we see the world and how we orient ourselves within it. The understanding of language as a semantic and social phenomenon has been of interest to many linguists. Social oriented linguists view language as part of culture and society and go further to explore how society influences language and how language in turn influences society. This approach presupposes that language and its meanings cannot be effectively studied or understood outside the socio-cultural contexts in which it functions. This is what Pride (1971) called the "social character of language" (p.2). It is the agitation for the inclusion of the social and cultural variables of language in linguistic enterprises that gave birth to the discipline known today as sociolinguistics. The sociolinguistic view believes that the social meaning

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1816-7659/05/13 1-9

of language is culturally, socially and contextually determined. There are also some scholars who go beyond the sociological view of language in their understanding of its social role. These scholars perceive language as a social semiotic. The social semiotic view of language originates from the systemic functional linguistics (SFL) model of M.A.K. Halliday. SFL views language as a strategic, meaning-making resource. Linguistic analyses that are based on SFL orientation, according to Eggins (2004), focused on the "analysis of authentic production of social interaction (texts), considered in relation to the cultural and social context in which they are negotiated" (p.2). Knowledge from the social view of language can be and has been used in the interpretation of literary discourse. The social view of language enables the reader to perceive the social relations between fictional characters and the interpersonal relationship between the writer and the reader. Chilton (2004) argued that the notion of cognitive frames is central to the understanding of discourse because readers are forced to rely on the theory of implicature, presupposition and induced inference to activate, and to augment, and perhaps even to modify or re-value the speaker's utterances in order to make coherent meaning of verbal input.

This part of the study examines Okri's use of conversational strategies in the presentation of social meanings in the world of the texts under consideration. Conversation/dialogue is the verbal exchange or communication between individuals who are involved in social interactions and who also share certain values or knowledge. Verbal exchanges reveal the attitudes, knowledge or ideologies of individuals on a certain proposition. Besides revealing the attitude or knowledge of the interactants on a particular proposition, dialogue in literary discourse can be used to supply additional information to the reader, which the central narrator cannot provide owing to certain limitations. In the texts under consideration, Okri employs the dialogic strategy to provide certain information that his restless and immature narrator, Azaro, cannot supply directly. The first of such strategies is what is known in literary discourse as anonymous dialogue.

2.0 Use of anonymous dialogue

The anonymous dialogue technique is a kind of public comment that reveals the opinions or feelings of the general public on certain events or individuals. It is called "anonymous" because the commentators are usually unknown and do not participate as distinct or distinguishable characters in the narrative. Deandrea (2003) contended that it was meant to represent a sort of popular and public opinion, commenting on the novel's events and characters. In *The Famished Road* when Dad starts training as boxer some unknown speakers comment:

"His son starves"
"His wife is lean"

> "Have you noticed that as he gets stronger…"
> "His son gets thinner."
> "While his power increases…"
> "His wife's presence decreases"
> "While he learns new tricks…"
> "His son's legs become like sticks".
> . . . . .
> "Big man . . ."
> "With no shame"
> "Big muscles . . ."
> "With no brain" (p.367).

Even though the narrator informs that the pair "laughed drunkenly" at the end of their comments, their observations are quite revealing because they show (the reader) the true situation of things in Dad's home. Their well articulated rhetoric is not that of drunks. The use of balanced structure (antithesis) *stronger*/*thinner*, *increases*/*decreases*, *Big man*/ *with no shame*, *Big muscles*/ *with no brain*, etc in the dialogue shows that the comments are well articulated and rehearsed thoughts. Millar and Currie (1994) observed that "The balanced structure helps to point up the differences in the ideas expressed" (p. 47). The parallel relationship of sameness in meaning between "starves" and "lean" reinforces the ideas being expressed in the antithetical structures. The commentators employ the balanced structures to appeal to the emotion of the reader. They want the reader to compare Dad's robust stature as a boxer with that of his lean family members. Again, the speakers' exploitation of the phonological parallelism in strong**er**/thinn**er**, in**c**rea**s**e**s**/de**c**rea**s**e**s**; tri**ck**s/sti**ck**s; **s**tarve**s**/muscle**s**; lea**n**/brai**n**; **m**an/sha**m**e; in**c**reases/de**c**reases/tri**ck**s/sti**ck**s;**m**uscles/ **m**an/sha**m**e;lea**n**/brai**n**/ma**n**;**s**tronger/increa**s**e**s**/decrea**s**e**s**/trick**s**/**s**tarve**s**/muscle**s** enhances the rhythm and cadence of the text and also helps in meaning realization. These phonological properties have been properly structured to strengthen the idea being expressed in the balanced structure.

The use of declarative sentences indicates that the interlocutors are sure of their facts. Even the incomplete question, "Have you noticed that as he gets stronger…" is not intended to elicit a (yes or no) response from the second speaker, hence the second speaker's response is not an answer to a question, but a filler to the first speaker's deliberate hedging. This is a rhetorical strategy that is intended to strengthen and justify their denunciation of Dad's seeming irresponsibility.

However, in denouncing Dad, the interlocutors break the maxim of quality; one of Grice's Cooperative Principles. The maxim of quality states that cooperative interlocutors should not say what they believe to be false or cannot be substantiated. Thus, the speakers' claim that Azaro's legs are like sticks or that Dad has no shame

and no brain is false. The implicature however is that Dad should show more seriousness and a greater sense of responsibility to his family life in order to stave the hunger and starvation facing his family instead of engaging in the futile dream of correcting social injustice through boxing. The commentators want to bring to public knowledge the level of poverty and suffering in Dad's home. The speakers, the audience, and the readers also know that Dad's family income has dwindled considerably and their sufferings have increased since Dad started his training exercises because he now eats much but provides little. Also significant is Okri's deliberate use of Free Direct Speech (FDS) in a manner that conceals the identity of the interlocutors, and the number of participants involved in the conversation. It is a rhetorical strategy that is intended to create confusion in the mind of the reader. It is not clear why Okri chose to conceal the identity of the speakers, but it can be inferred from the discourse context that the commentators symbolize the moral conscience of the society/community. They represent a communal commentary and voice of sanity in a decadent and immoral social order. Okri thus uses characters that are not recognizable in the narrative world as a voice of reason to comment on the moral excesses of individuals and groups in the society. They are metonymic frames for public opinions, appraisal and judgement on social behaviours. Another example of anonymous dialogue can be found in *Infinite Riches* (p.311) but the constraints of space will not permit us to discuss it here.

3.0 Rhetorical reticence (Aposiopesis)

Traditionally, rhetorical reticence is an oratorical technique that deliberately leaves out certain information unsaid for the listener or reader to complete the idea. Boulton (1980) described it as the "trick of suddenly breaking off a sentence, leaving something unsaid that the hearer or reader can add" (p.166). Okri employs this technique as a means of invading the subconscious of his characters to filter out what ordinarily they would not have revealed to their audience. Further, it is also used to facilitate a kind of filler-game in which the addressee assists the speaker to complete his/her utterances or statements by revealing the opposite of what the speaker would have said – the deceit in the speaker's mind. It shows the kind of relationship that exists between the speaker and the addressee or the two different groups in the society. Examples of this can be found in *The Famished Road*. The exchange is between the politicians of the Party of the Rich and the inhabitants of the ghetto.

> ". . . IF YOU VOTE FOR US. . ."
> ". . . we are finished," someone added.'
> ". . . WE WILL FEED YOUR CHILDREN. . ."
> ". . . lies."
> ". . . AND WE WILL BRING YOU GOOD ROADS. . ."

". . . which the rain will turn into gutters!"
". . . AND WE WILL BRING ELECTRICITY. . ."
". . . so you can see better how to rob us!"
". . . AND WE WILL BUILD SCHOOLS. . ."
". . . to teach illiteracy!" (p.123)

Part of the legitimation strategy employed by the politicians include direct appeals to the audience, making exaggerated promises, boasting about performance and other forms of positive self-presentation. However, the audience recognizes that their rhetoric conceals other negative attitudes that engender negative face wants. The fillers supplied by the ghetto people are in contradistinction to the speaker's proposition and show that the addressees already know the speaker's insincerity, perhaps, from previous interactions. This gives the impression that the interlocutors are talking from shared knowledge. The exclamation marks that end the last three responses are indications that the addressee can read through the speaker's mind – can decipher his/her rhetoric of falsehood and deceit. This is only possible because the inhabitants appear to have activated or filled out certain knowledge frames that enable them to interpret the speech of the politician. The politician's promises are foregrounded in capital letters (to stress the desperation and density of the appeal) while the responses of the inhabitants are presented in small letters. Ideologically, the capital letters are graphological attempts to reveal and enshrine the social might of the politicians. In an attempt to disprove the addressee's accusations (a face saving act), the speaker unconsciously substantiates the accusations:

WE ARE YOUR FRIENDS. WE WILL
BRING YOU ELECTRICITY AND BAD
ROADS, NOT GOOD MILK, I MEAN
GOOD ROADS, NOT BAD MILK (p.123).

The claim "We are your friends" is another form of positive self-presentation in which the politicians claim affinity or closeness to the ordinary people. The aim is to obtain the trust and confidence of the addressee. Persuasion is central to political discourse, hence the politician's appeal to the emotion and conscience of the inhabitants. Again, the claim by politicians of the Party of the Rich that they are friends of the masses presupposes that the opposition, Party of the Poor, is the enemy of the people. This is an implied blackmail of the opposition. The Party of the Rich wants to assert moral ground and evoke a feeling of oneness with the ordinary people and indirectly incite the audience against the opposition. Further, the author uses the slip of the tongue committed by the politician to reveal the true nature of the Party of the Rich. Okri in *Infinite Riches* referred to it as "contradictory promises" (p.200). The recognition of the contradictory promises of the politicians by the audience results in the following interchange:

> " TRUST US! TRUST OUR LEADERS! TRUST OUR GARRI! OUR PARTY BELIEVES IN SHARING THE NATIONAL GARRI AND . . ."
> "LIES!" someone cried from the crowd.'
> "THIEVES!" said another.'
> "POISONERS!"
> "MURDERERS!" (*The Famished Road*, p. 153)

The four negative fillers supplied by the inhabitants give the impression that the party will create and spread social vices in the community if voted in. The bold and courageous responses of the masses are a form of resistance discourse to that of an oppressive regime. The narrator recorded the effects of the resistance on the politician thus: "The four voices broke the stranglehold of the loudspeaker. The politician who had been launching into his litany of promises lost control and stammered" (*The Famished Road*, p.153). The fillers supplied by the inhabitants show they reject the positive self-presentation strategies of the Party of the Rich because they recognize them to be false and deceptive. This implies some form of damage to the fellowship face wants of both groups.

The politicians in trying to persuade their audience violate the Gricean maxims of quality, quantity and relation. They violate the maxim of quality by making false promises, which the audience/inhabitants recognize as such and their attempt to cover up leads to the violation of the maxim of quantity which results in the politicians' contradictory statements. They also break the maxim of relation by making irrelevant statements and references that ruin their argument and appeal. The promise of sharing "national garri" instead of the traditional "national cake" is a wrong proposition and irrelevant to their argument. The dialogue throws up a range of inferences such as: since the politicians will bring "bad roads, not good milk", there is no basis to rely on their promises because they are bad elements; since they can only share national garri instead of national cake, they have nothing to offer; since they have supplied bad milk in the past, they are likely to supply bad garri now; since the politicians have been noted for deceit, they are not to be trusted, and so on. This view is consonant with Chilton's (2004) assertion that humans can detect distorted communication in social discourse or interaction. Rhetorical reticence enables the reader to perceive the type of social relations that exists between the political class and the ordinary people of the community. Rhetorical reticence also enables Okri to reveal the emotions, attitudes and feelings of each group toward the other. The exchanges show the two groups cannot work together for common good because of ideological differences and mutual mistrust.

4.0 Use of triangular dialogue

Triangular dialogue as used in here is a form of "triadic" communication that involves three participants who occupy three separate spaces or levels of existence in which only two of the participants are conscious of the presence of the third party. Traditionally, dialogue is a dyadic communication between two interlocutors who are conscious of each other's presence, but a conversation may however involve more than two parties who take turns to speak (Levinson, 2005, p.297). Dialogue/ conversation is an interpersonal affair, that is, it is used to establish social interaction between discourse participants. Levinson (1983) contended that conversation is characterized by turn-taking in which one participant talks and allows others to also have the floor, and the point of transition where speakers may change or take turns is known as transition relevance place (TRP). Significantly too, all the participants in the interlocution must be physically present in a face-to-face conversation and conscious of each other's presence.

However, in Okri's fiction on *abiku*, the three participants occupy three different spaces/levels of existence: Ade exists in the ethereal space; Dad/Mum occupies the terrestrial space; while Azaro floats between the two spaces, thereby representing a conflation of the ethereal and terrestrial spaces. Thus, there is a conversation between (i) the spirit (the dead – represented by Ade); (ii) the half-spirit-half-human (represented by Azaro); and (iii) the human (represented by Dad/Mum); with the middle character (Azaro) mediating the conversation. Temporally, Ade represents the past; Dad/Mum the present; while Azaro represents the interspaces between the past and the present that enhance the continuum of existence.

The conversational structure as constructed by Western scholars in Pragmatics does not recognize the existence of conversations that stretch between the natural and the supernatural. Consequently, the conversational structure (the turn-taking system) within the theory of Pragmatics has to be modified by the reader to accommodate the cultural beliefs of Africa that recognize the conflation of regions of existence. Africans believe in the existence of man, spirit, and man-spirit ambivalence and accept the possibility of conversations between characters that inhabit the separate spaces. Okri employs this aspect of the magical realist mode to frame the notion of man-spirit ambivalence and enhance his rhetoric about the duality of existence. It is part of Okri's effort to assist the reader to have a deeper understanding of the existential realities of his society.

In *Songs of Enchantment*, there is a conversation involving Azaro (half-spirit-half-human), Ade (spirit - dead) and Dad (human). The initial conversation is between Ade and Azaro, but Dad later joins in the conversation thinking that Azaro is conversing with him, since there is no third party physically present. It is much

later that he realizes it is either he has intruded into a conversation between Azaro and another invisible individual or that Azaro is involved in some form of intra-personal communication with himself. Intra-personal communication involves a conversation between the physical component of an individual and his/her spiritual/inner counterpart or being. Such dialogue could be verbal or gestural or a combination of both. The conversation runs thus:

Ade: Your father is right
Azaro: About what? . . .
Dad: What?
Ade: Everything is alive
Azaro: Like what?
Dad: What?
Ade: Many things. . .
Azaro: How come I've never seen a stone cry?
Ade: Because you don't use your eyes
Dad: Why should a stone cry?
Azaro: How should I use my eyes?
Ade: By not using your head first
Azaro: But how?
Dad: Azaro, what's wrong with you?
Azaro: Nothing
. . . . . .
Ade: It's the light in the eyes that sees
Azaro: What light?
Dad: Are those lights back?
Azaro: No
……
Dad: Azaro, who are you talking to, eh? (pp.262-263).

(The characters have been arranged in a dramatic form in order to emphasize the conversations more vividly.)

The exchanges show the interpenetration of regions that is found in African cosmology. The context of interaction is essential to understanding the conversation. It is obvious that Dad's responses (or contributions) do not key into the Ade – Azaro dialogue/conversation, because he does not share the same Mutual Contextual Belief (MCB) with Ade and Azaro nor does he enjoy a joint attentional space with them. Odebunmi (2005) observed that a meaningful participation in a conversation entails that "the hearer must share knowledge of subject matter and other properties of context with the speakers, at least to some extent; if otherwise, adequate information

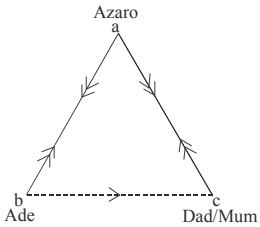
has to be contextually provided" (p.39). While Azaro and Ade possess supernatural powers which enable them to see and communicate with each other meaningfully, Dad does not have such potential; hence his statements in the interrogative form are occasioned by his ignorance of the subject of discourse. Dad does not share the contextual "knowledge of spatial and temporal location" (Levinson, 1983, p.23) or setting from which Azaro and Ade operate. Azaro bestrides the natural and the supernatural worlds, and so skillfully coordinates the exchanges that it takes Dad some time to realize that Azaro must have been communicating with a presence that is not physically visible and thus challenges him by asking: "Azaro, who are you talking to, eh?" Azaro is the interspace or intersection between the dead and the living - a paradoxical embodiment of the living-dead. A similar conversation between Ade, Azaro and Mum occurs in *Infinite Riches* and runs as follows:

Ade: The six-headed spirit has been asking after you.
Azaro: Why?
Mum: Why what, Azaro?
Ade: Because you owe him something
Azaro: Lie!
Mum: I've never lied to you, my son (p. 252).

(Dramatic arrangement is mine).

Initially Mum thinks Azaro is addressing her, hence she responds accordingly. Thus, Mum, like Dad in the first excerpt, does not enjoy the same attentional space with Azaro and Ade. The conversation between the living, the half-living-half-dead, and the dead can be diagrammatically represented thus:

Figure 1: *Triangular dialogue along different contextual spaces*



The inverted arrows on the a-b axis show that Azaro can see and communicate with Ade; that is, there is a two-way intelligibility between the two participants; and the inverted arrows on the a-c axis also indicate there is another two-way intelligibility between Azaro and Dad/Mum, hence both participants can see and communicate with each other. However, the dashes on the b-c axis show the absence of mutual intelligibility between the participants, hence the two cannot have a face–to–face communication. The dashes represent a kind of "semiotic silence" between

both individuals. The one way directional arrow indicates the African belief that the participant on the b-axis can see the one on the c-axis, but the one on the c-axis cannot see or communicate with him because of the metaphysical screen that divides the two spaces. In other words, the interactants do not share a joint mental or attentional space. The participant on the c-axis can only see or communicate with the one on the b-axis through extraneous medium, that is, if he/she is a mystic or possesses some supernatural powers. What is therefore presented in the *abiku* novels is a cosmic communication that transcends the mechanical or natural form of interpersonal communication that exists in Western epistemology. It shows that it is possible for one to be an embodiment of the "living-dead" (like Azaro) and possess the capacity to communicate with both the living and the dead simultaneously. It also reveals the slim border that separates the living from the dead in the African worldview.

We have seen that the dialogic strategy can be effectively used to reveal the feelings and attitudes of characters that inhabit the world of a literary text as well as intergroup relations. It is also used to portray the social conditions of members of each social group in the society. The aim of this technique is to provide a different perspective from which the reader can view the realities of the society. This is made possible through the speakers' use of the resources of language. Similarly, gossip and rumour serve as a means through which the reader can obtain additional information on the characters of a literary text and the social relationship that exists between them. Rumours are usually carried in "hear say" particles or phrases which show the speaker is not sure of the authenticity of the information. Gossip and rumour are effectively used as a discourse strategy in the texts under consideration to provide additional information to the reader.

5.0 Gossip and rumour strategy

Rumour is generally regarded as news that is orally transmitted from one person to another without factual basis. It is an interpersonal channel of communication through which unconfirmed and unofficial information is spread within a society. To Oyewo (2002), it is a "specific or topical proposition for belief passed along from person to person, usually by word of mouth without secure standards of evidence being presented" (p.7). Rumour as a social interaction is found in every human society.

While it is difficult to ascertain the authenticity or veracity of any information obtained through the medium of gossip and rumour, in a literary text, there could be a source of additional information that is not directly accessible to the central narrator or any of the major characters in the narrative. Thus, the reader or listener could rely on such information to pass judgement on a character or situation or still have a better understanding of the ideology of the text. Rumours and gossips are

generally based on "hearsay" or "they say" information, hence their sources are hard to trace. Consequently, when a narrator gives "hearsay" information, he/she is indirectly trying to dissociate Self from the source of the story, as it might turn out to be true or otherwise. Commenting on the concept of dissociation of the speaker, Fabb (1997) said that "hearsay particles can be used by the speaker as a way of indicating that he or she does not have full responsibility for the truth of the story, and hence that the story might not be true" (p.263). Fabb (1997) further submitted that "the exact effect of a hearsay particle - whether it strengthens or weakens the evidence for the assumptions communicated – depends on the culture" (p.265). This shows it is the culture of a society that determines the seriousness or otherwise with which "hearsay" or "they say" information is taken.

Okri uses gossip and rumour as a narrative strategy, a means of communicating popular opinions or feelings about certain characters and events. They are also used to supply those pieces of information that Azaro is not an eye witness to. Thus, what Azaro tells us in such situations is what he heard from other sources whose authenticity or "deictic or spatiotemporal specificity" (Toolan, 1988, p.35) cannot be easily ascertained. For instance, on what happened to Madame Koto at the feast, he confessed that "I didn't see it myself but it was said…" (*Infinite Riches*, p.226). This is because news filters through to them "in the form of ghostly rumours" (*Infinite Riches*, p.335). Rumours and gossip spread so fast in Azaro's society that the inhabitants come to rely so much on them as authentic sources of information. They also generate much anxiety and disaffection between groups and within groups.

At the psychological level, uncertainty and anxiety are the two significant variables of rumour mongering. Oyewo (2002) contended that uncertainty is produced by doubt while anxiety is produced by "apprehension about an impending, potentially negative outcome" (p.9). In *Songs of Enchantment*, during the clashes between political masquerades and thugs, Azaro informed that "Every day we listened to endless rumours to find out which side had become stronger overnight" (p.71). In *Infinite Riches*, there are "rumours of violence" (p.125) and Dad is arrested over the death of the Carpenter based on the false "rumours spread by the party of the poor…" (p.17). However, rumour mongering serves a cathartic effect as a "way of letting out anxieties and perceived hostilities amongst individuals within society" (Oyewo, 2002, p.80).

It is through the gossip and rumour being spread by the ordinary people of the community that the reader obtains some background information on Madame Koto's identity. Her identity had been a mystery to the community and Azaro informed, "we don't know where she comes from" (*The Famished Road*, p. 93). However, through the rumours and gossips of the women of Azaro's compound the reader

gathers some background information on her. The narrator reported that the women "came out with their chairs and plaited their hair and **gossiped**. It was from them that I first heard the **rumours** about Madame Koto" (*The Famished Road*, p.100. bold emphasis is mine). According to him:

> They said of Madame Koto that she had buried three husbands and seven children and that she was a witch who ate her babies when they were still in her womb. They said she was the real reason why the children in the area didn't grow, why they were always ill, why the men never got promotions, and why the women in the area suffered miscarriages. They said she was a bewitcher of husbands and a seducer of young boys and a poisoner of children. They said she had a charmed beard and that she plucked one hair every day and dropped it into the palm-wine she sold and into the pepper-soup she made so that the men would spend all their money in her bar and not care about their starving families (TFR, pp.100-101)

The rumour is conveyed in hearsay phrases: "The women talked…", "They talked…" and "They said..." The identity and exact number of participants involved in the gossip are not revealed. Similarly, their sources of information are unknown. This explains why Oyewo (2002, p.16) described rumour mongers as faceless individuals. However, the text frames what seems to be a public opinion on the character of the referent, Madame Koto. It reveals their attitude and feeling about her and the type of social relations they share with her. The use of features of Indirect Speech (IS) - the absence of inverted commas; the use of past tense; and the reporting verb "said"; and the subordinating conjunction "that" are linguistic markers or indicators that the narrator is merely reporting or interpreting, in his own words, what the women said. This, to some extent, removes the burden of proof on the narrator. However, this technique makes the report less vivid and less authentic as a result of what Toolan (1988) called possible "narratorial tinkering with the phraseology" (p. 121) by the narrator. Toolan (1988) claimed that "we feel a greater distance and detachment from characters and their words when these are mediated via indirect speech" (p. 121). Okpanachi (2007) observed that the author wants to cover up something by "giving his voice to a character, who is remote from the spatio-temporal context of the event he reports as an ear witness rather than an eye witness. It is therefore left to the audience to believe him or not…the speaker has no direct encounter with the event he is reporting implying a second hand information with a weak truth condition of the event" (p.91). The veracity of the information becomes more doubtful when it is realized that the "faceless" speakers whom Azaro reports did not disclose their source of information. It may also be that Azaro tinkered with that part of the information in his mediated report. All these broaden the narratorial space or distance between

the reader and the narrative world that is being constructed by the narrator and the authenticity of the information that is being communicated to the reader. All this notwithstanding, the rumours seem to provide answers to the several "**whys**" that burden both the inhabitants and the reader on the enigma known as Madame Koto. From the rumours the reader now knows why Madame Koto does not have a child of her own; why the children in the area are always ill; why their husbands never get promotions; and so on. The rumours confer as well as unveil the aura of mystery around the identity of Madame Koto.

It is also through the "small talk" (euphemism for gossip) of the compound people that the reader comes to learn of Madame Koto's involvement in politics and mega-business. The rumour reaffirms her diabolic nature. The "small talk" runs thus:

> "Is it true…that Madame Koto now has prostitutes in her bar?" "That's what I heard."
> "And that she has joined the party?"
> "Not just that"
> "What else?"
> . . . . . .
> "People say she is going to buy a car?"
> "A car?"
> "And get electricity?"
> "And she paid cash for bales of lace"
> "Bales of lace?"
> "To do what?"
> "To sew dresses for party people"
> . . . . . .
> "She must have used witchcraft"
> "Or juju"
> "Or joined a secret society"
> "Or all three"
> "Plus more" (*The Famished Road*, p. 280).

The conversation is reported without narratorial mediation unlike the first excerpt, hence the use of the Direct Speech (DS) technique. Direct Speech is an environment where characters think and speak for themselves, unlike the Indirect Speech where the narrator is "more overtly still in control, reports on behalf of the characters" (Toolan, 1988, p. 121). The DS rendering is often felt by readers to be more vivid and authentic. However, the interrogative clause "Is it true…?" that opens the conversation casts doubt on the veracity of the information, while the response, "That's what I heard", establishes that the speaker relies on "hearsay", whose source

and authenticity she cannot substantiate. Interrogatives are used eight times in the discourse situation for four different purposes or functions:

(i) to seek confirmation or negation of information:
"Is it true…that Madame Koto now has prostitutes?"
(ii) to seek more information or details: "What else?"
(iii) to express surprise: "A car?"
(iv) to interrogate an action/seek further clarification: "To do what?"

The preponderance of interrogative constructions in the text demonstrates the palpable anxiety that goes with rumour mongering given the fact that the speakers are not sure of the sources and authenticity of their information. However, even though the hearsay particles of "Is it true…?" "That's what I heard," "People say…" seem to diminish the veracity of the information, it is later discovered that they are proleptic announcements of Madame Koto's future intentions and actions because she eventually joins politics, hires prostitutes for her bar, buys a car, gets electricity, joins a secret society, and so on, thus confirming that not all rumours and gossip lack substance. Prolepsis is a kind of anachrony that prematurely discloses or flashforwards a future event textually before its time. In the text just analysed, they foreshadow the occurrence of the real events. The reader is therefore not surprised when Madame Koto accomplishes all the substances of the rumour in later parts of the texts.

The damaging rumours about Madame Koto's diabolical personality dents her reputation in the society and strains the relationship between her and her neighbours. According to Azaro, the narrator, "She became, in the collective eyes of the people, a fabulous and monstrous creation" (*The Famished Road*, p. 374) even though some people believe it is her "political enemies who put out all these stories" (*The Famished Road*, p.374). Thus "It began to seem as if there were many Madame Kotos in existence" (*The Famished Road*, p. 375). The expression, "collective eyes of the people", signifies how the majority of the people perceive her. It also means Madame Koto signifies a group different from the "collective eyes" who perceive her differently from the way she and members of her group perceive themselves. The rhetoric of the text shows the ideological conflicts in the society. Thus, while some believe in the negative reports about her and consequently denounce her, others blame the opposition (her political enemies) for the rumours. The latter group wants to mitigate or save her face which the rumours seem to have damaged badly in the community. It tends to challenge the validity of the claims by the opposition that she is evil.

The hearsay particle is also used to explain the "whys" of certain natural phenomena. Myths and other supernatural occurrences are usually explained in hearsay phrases so as to dissociate the speaker from the source of the story. For

instance, in *Songs of Enchantment*, Azaro explained the rainbow that appears thus: "People **said** that somewhere an elephant was giving birth!" (p.96). This removes the burden of proof from the speaker. He does not provide the identity of the people who made the assertion and any proof of evidence for their claim. However, most of his hearers/readers may not take him to task on the matter because he merely reported what he heard some "faceless" people say. Azaro's society appears to be dominantly an oral one where information is communicated through the words of mouth and the veracity of most of the information is hardly subjected to critical scrutiny.

Gossip and rumour as discursive strategies, in the texts, serve as a medium of providing the audience with additional pieces of information that are not directly available to the central narrator, Azaro or any of the major characters in the narrative. Again, it reveals the attitude, feeling and perception of the general public on the characters and social situations under consideration. Okri uses the strategy of rumour and gossip to give the reader an insight into the anxiety and other social conditions of the society. The image of Madame Koto is used to frame the nemesis that the people of Okri's society dread and are struggling to escape from. The gossips and rumours present her as a repressive force that works for the interest of other dominant and hegemonic forces within and outside the community.

6.0 Conclusion

The discourse strategies deployed in the texts enhance our understanding of the social and cosmic realities of Okri's society. The conversational strategies reveal the nature of intergroup relations in the society and their consequences on social cohesion. The strategies also enable the reader to conceptualize Okri's presentation of the interface between the natural and the supernatural, the human and the spiritual, the living and the dead. The conflation of planes and levels of existence represents Okri's experimental conceptualization of the notion of reality. The use of rumour and gossip as discourse strategies deepens the reader's understanding of the social conditions of the communities and the social spaces between groups and individuals within the community.

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