Planeyo Journal of Arts and Humanities (PLANJAH), Volume 2 No.4, 2025
Online ISSN 2672-507X
Print ISSN 2651-5954

A POSTCOLONIAL SEMIOTIC READING OF SELECTED POEMS IN MARTIN AKPAN'S *RIPPLES* OF *REBIRTH*

By

Eyoh Etim

Department of English

Akwa Ibom State University

eyohetim29@gmail.com

+2348027898705

Abstract

In this paper, I study two selected poems in Martin Akpan's *Ripples of Rebirth* from the theoretical positionality of postcolonial semiotics, which is the hybridisation of two fields of theoretical knowledge, postcolonialism and semiotics. The study is informed by the need to centralise discussions on Akwa Ibom indigenous literature as an emerging literary discourse in our time. The reading of the selected poems, 'Dialogue with Naija' and 'Bigheaded Town Boy', reveals the robust semantic possibilities gained through the eclectic approach, especially through harvesting meaning at once at the level of form and content. Akpan's utilisation of language is marked by linguistic hybridity as exemplified in the use of abrogation and appropriation, glossing and untranslatability, among other postcolonial linguistic figures and tropes. At the level of content, the study unravels the postcolonial issues that plague the poet's society, including cultural dislocation, poor leadership and its attendant consequences to the postcolony, all which are accounted for through postcolonial themes like Otherness, hybridity, alterity, neocolonialism and ambivalence. All these are read as constituting the symbolism for the understanding of the postcolonial realities in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria and Africa. From the findings, the research concludes that Akpan's poetics are rich in form and content, packed with tropes that are drawn from the oral tradition of the Akwa Ibom milieu.

Keywords: *Akwa Ibom Poetry, Postcolonial semiotics, Nigerian poetry, Ripples of Rebirth, Martin Akpan*

Etim, E., (2025). " A Postcolonial Semiotic Reading of Selected Poems in Martin Akpan's *Ripples* of *Rebirth*". *Planeyo Journal of Arts and Humanities (PLANJAH)*. Volume 2, Number 4, 76-95.

Introduction

The field of postcolonial studies is at once diverse and complex, involving different disciplines, methods and approaches. Being an interdisciplinary field predisposes the field to collaborate with other disciplines and theories in order to yield useful semantic harvests beyond its primary hermeneutical nuances. Existing interdisciplinary studies involving postcolonialism are linked with fields such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, political science, linguistics and literature. In this paper, I assemble critical tools drawn from postcolonialism and semiotics in order to carryout a postcolonial semiotic reading of the poems in Martin Akpan's *Ripples of Rebirth*. Postcolonialism is a theory which studies the literature of formerly colonised peoples, paying attention to themes and concepts such as hegemony and resistance, neocolonialism, hybridity, unhomeliness, alterity or Otherness, subalternity, metropolis and province, ambivalence, liminality, alienation, double consciousness, marginality, linguistic oppression, abrogation and appropriation, mimicry, identity and identity crisis, metanarrative versus small narrative, globalisation, migration and the diaspora, among others.

Hegemony in postcolonial studies plays out not only in the power relations between the former colonisers and the formerly colonised peoples, but also, most importantly, in the power dynamics between postcolonial leaders and their subjects in the postcolony, whereby these leaders still act the ideological and structural script laid by the former colonial masters, leading to the sustenance of the structures of oppression and underdevelopment due to unbalanced power relations in society. The unbalanced power relations between the postcolonial African leaders and their subjects have been the subject of many scholarly discourses, ranging from how neocolonial African leaders perpetrate colonialist oppression to how the agency of these leaders has evolved over time to assume autonomous and independent actantiality. Randolph Persaud (2021) discusses the problematics of hegemonic power relations in postcolonial African societies, noting how hegemony is sustained through the mix of consent and coercion by the elite class. According to Persaud (2021), 'The consent/coercion equation is understood to be some kind of balance whereby the historic bloc that underwrites the hegemonic project is able to manage stable reproduction of the structures of accumulation, and to do so without a preponderance of violence' (p. 3).

The manipulation of state structure through the application of consent and coercion speak to the politics of control that plays out in most postcolonial African societies. Hegemony, according to Persaud (2021), is also maintained through 'the spreading of ideas or even the worldview of the dominant social forces within the block, such that they become taken for granted . . .' (p. 3). The understanding of how hegemony works at this second level is linked to ideology, which serves to also solidify the first level of consent and coercion. The ideologisation of hegemony is what seals the fate of the postcolony, where most of the subjects live at the mercies of the transactional enlightenment and educational campaigns and programmes carried out by the elite to keep the masses perpetually ignorant about their precolonial culture and values. Another level of ignorance fostered by the elite class for the purpose of mass control is through a deliberate calibration of the formal education system to produce half educated graduates who lack a comprehensive understanding of how the systems – political and economic – in the postcolony work in relation to the rest of the world.

The fallout of hegemonic practices in Africa has been noted and recorded by Mojibayo Fadakinte (2017) when he writes that '. . . among the continents that experienced colonial rule, Africa remains the most backward, being the only continent that still depends on her colonial masters for food, and healthcare, economic and financial supports' (p. 119). The existential crisis limned above is linked by Fadakinte to the crisis of hegemony and the crisis of state observed in the postcolony. He blames this problem to the power lacuna and the unbalanced power distribution in the postcolony which renders the elite powerless in the sustenance of peace and its values (p. 119). Selected poems in Martin Akpan's *Ripples of Rebirth* can be read as signifiers that point to the hegemonic nature of the society that produces them. This is because hegemony results in the replication of inequality, oppression and violence in society.

Another key postcolonial concept that applies to the research is neocolonialism, which explains fresh dimensions of colonialism in the postcolony after the departure of the colonial masters. There are two ways to view neocolonialism and its structures in the postcolony. The first is in how the new black leaders treat their subjects exactly the way the colonial masters treated them. The second way is in how the colonial masters continue to remote-control the culture and economy of the postcolony through subsisting colonial

structures and multinational corporations. In other words, neocolonial societies ape the structures of colonialist societies, hence their inability to escape the traps of poverty, poor leadership and underdevelopment. Maximilian Feldner (2018) says that 'neocolonialism is marked by the postcolony's continuous dependence to the metropolitan centre despite the claim of independence' (p. 2). Gayatri Spivak and Robert Young (1991) have interesting perspectives on what constitutes the neocolonial for the postcolony. According to Spivak and Young, neocolonialism emphasises economic control over territorial conquest, maintaining that the emphasis on culture in the postcolony is a mere coping mechanism to deal with economic loss (p. 222). In analysing the selected poems in Akpan's *Ripples of Rebirth*, the realities depicted in the poems are rendered as the complexions and habits of a neocolonial society.

Hybridity is a term drawn from biology, especially in the crossbreeding of plants and animals so that the resultant species contains traits from the two primary crossbreeding organisms or plants. In postcolonial studies, hybridity is a term used to designate the embodiment of two, often contradictory and opposing, cultures in the colonial subject. Hybridity informs the polarity of realities in the postcolony in the sense that two cultures exist side by side, consciously and unconsciously practised by the colonial subjects in their daily actions and choices. Hybridity can be exemplified in the dress codes, language and other forms of cultural practices in the postcolony. Based on this, it is realised that even the poems in Akpan's *Ripples of Rebirth* slated for our reading have marks of hybridity in them, apart from them depicting a hybridised society. According to Prayer Raj (2014), 'Hybridity is a cultural transactive creating a temporal interactive sequential between the colonizer and the colonized, bestowing a conciliation inestimably concussive beyond the managed identity of the dominant' (p. 125). Hybridity designates impurity that arises from the violent (or even non-violent) clash in cultural relations, leading to cultural exchanges that have enduring and dualised marks on the subjects.

Hybridity can lead to unhomeliness because the competing of two cultures can result in a state of unease about one's self, identity and place in the culture. Proposed by Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994), unhomeliness explains the psychological state of the colonial subject which is characterised by unease in the homeland projected from the mind that has been disfigured through violent ideological invasion (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 10-

12). In unhomeliness, there is no home in the home. Unhomeliness results in psychological refugeehood, which usually prompts the colonial subject to flee from home. Exile then, which is a direct consequence of unhomeliness, does not only imply the physical absence from home, but also a psychological absence whereby the colonial subject is physically present at home but psychologically in exile. Unhomeliness, therefore, accounts for all the behaviour the colonial subject exhibit to suggest that they have been culturally and psychologically displaced. All this can be accounted for in the isotopies of the selected poems in Martin Akpan's *Ripples of Rebirth*.

The colonial subject occupies the structure of Otherness in the postcolonial socio-text. Otherness is synonymous with alterity which constitutes the postcolonial Manichean binary opposition system that sees reality in terms of dual opposites: good versus evil. The other part of Otherness is the Self, which is the preferred, loved, privileged and accepted. The Other, on the other hand, is presented as the despised, the rejected, the inferior and the marginalised.The relationship between Self and Other defines a wide range of categories in the postcolonial schema. For one, it is usually deployed to define the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised, where the coloniser is the Self while the colonised is the Other. In gender discourses, man occupies the category of Self while the woman occupies the category of the Other. In the relationship between neocolonial leaders and their subjects, the leaders are the Self while the subjects are the Other. Perhaps, this explains Clement Odia's assertion that that '. . . alterity projects self to the exclusion of the Other' (Odia, 2025, p. 51). The various categories of Otherness will be analysed and accounted for in the selected poems in Akpan's *Ripples of Rebirth*. Subalternity is synonymous with Otherness, as it depicts the state of being subaltern, a term that synonymises with Otherness. The subaltern are the common people often thought of as occupying the oppressed structures in society. In postcolonial terms, Gayatri Spivak views the subaltern as the marginalised colonial subject thought to have lost their voice. Though Spivak believes that the subalterns do have the capability to represent themselves (Spivak, 1988, pp. 24-28), it is generally understood that the subaltern is a term that designates poor, oppressed people in postcolonial criticism.

Another important concept in postcolonial criticism that applies to this paper is metropolis and province, which are often deployed to explain the dialecticality in space and ideology,

where the metropolis stands for the city or urban space viewed as developed, civilised and sophisticated, while the province describes the rural space linked to underdevelopment, primitivity and barbarism. For instance, between London and Lagos, the former is considered the metropolis, while the latter is considered as the province. Between Lagos and Uyo, Lagos is considered the metropolis, whereas Uyo is the province. Both the metropolis and the province are ideologically charged in the sense that the metropolis is considered the centre of culture and the people who live there are often considered civilised and sophisticated. Provincialism, on the other hand, is marked by narrow-mindedness, including all forms of crudity and unsophistication, often associated with the people in those spaces. It is important to note that this is the colonialist conceptualisation of spatiality as part of the project of degrading the colonised. In actual postcolonial discourses, the structuring of metropolis and the province can be troped and overturned. Selected poems in Akpan's *Ripples of Rebirth* can be analysed based on the dialectics of metropolis and the province.

Ambivalence is the love-hate attitude that characterises the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised, whereby the coloniser views the colonised as at once inferior and exotic Other, while the colonised regards the coloniser at once as enviable and corrupt. Homi Bhabha (1994) deploys ambivalence to interrogate mimicry and its operationality in postcolonial discourses, especially 'the ambivalence of mimicry' which is 'almost the same, but not quite' (p. 86). Ambivalence also exists in the postcolonial relations between the neocolonial leaders and their subjects, whereby the leaders view the people as inferior but useful, while the subjects view the leaders as enviable but corrupt. We can read all postcolonial texts written in the coloniser's linguistic codes as a form of mimicry, often mitigated by certain creative strategies to create authenticity and difference.

Abrogation and appropriation are linked to the literary codes of the postcolonial texts and how they constitute a force of resistance to the linguistic hegemony of the coloniser. Abrogation refers to the deliberate refusal of the colonised to obey the rules of the coloniser's language, while appropriation designates all the creative strategies adopted by the colonised to alter or modify the coloniser's language in order to shoulder the burden of their linguistic needs (Bill Ashcroft *et al*, 1989, p. 38). There are aspects of abrogation and appropriation in Akpan's *Ripples of Rebirth* which I intend to analyse in the course of this

paper, including glossing, use of pidgin and untranslatable language, all which transform and are transformed by the semiotic tropes in the isotopy of the poems.

Theoretical Posturing: Postcolonial Semiotics

Algirdas Greimas' semiotic model is deployed for the study of selected poems in Martin Akpan's *Ripples of Rebirth*. Specifically, the paper is anchored on Greimas' concept of isotopy which denotes the recurrence of semes in a text to create semantic direction, consistency and coherence (Louis Hebert, 2006, online). However, peripherally, the actantial model and the semiotic square will be deployed to interpret the selected poems where necessary and applicable. Isotopy was developed by Greimas in his 1966 publication entitled *Structural Semantics*. The concept has also been criticised, revised and improved upon by Umberto Eco, Catherine Kerbat-Orecchioni and other scholars to emphasise how basic semantic units and elements cohere at the levels of linguistics and semantics to give direction to the structure of the text. The semantic coherence of the text is often achieved through the repetition of semes and measured through homogeneity (Evangelos Kourdis, 2012, online).

The combination of semiotics and postcolonialism results in the framework of postcolonial semiotics, which accounts for the deployment of tools from semiotics and postcolonialism to quest for meaning in works published in formerly colonised spaces. Thus, when a semiotic theoretical model is applied to postcolonial texts, what emerges is postcolonial semiotics (Hamza Hassan and Teo Lee, 2020, pp. 43-53), a hyphenated field in which 'linguistic and other signs are linked to the colonial and its ongoing relevance in the construction of value' (Angela Reyes 2021, p.291). In other words, postcolonial semiotics studies postcolonial signs in the literature and arts of formerly colonised spaces in order to gain fresh semantic perspectives on the postcolonial conditions in those spaces.

In reading Akpan's *Ripples of Rebirth*, the poems in the collection are to be read at the level of isotopy because 'isotopies. . . enable the reader to comprehend the recurrent themes, including ideological implications' (Yasemin Uysal 2022, p. 98) in the work of art. In this study, we assume that isotopies operate at various levels in a poem, from a line to a stanza and the whole poem. Even an entire collection can be assigned an isotopy after one has

gone through its content. For the purpose of this study, isotopies are conceived as thematised units or textual categories that have semiotic value. Apart from this, isotopies are also conceived as textual or semantic units that are troped and which can be assigned a semiotic value. In other words, isotopies are charged with ideologies whose origins spring from linguistic and semiotic interrogation of textual realities. It is the sign and the trope that interrogate and transform the text into meaningful utterances in the semiotic sense. The postcolonial and the semiotic are analysed at once when the text is scrutinised to yield its semantic treasures. The first approach is to identify the semes in the isolated text. This is done by examining the key signs in the text and their signifiers. The isolation of the semes will then yield its isotopy, thus giving the reader the path towards meaning realisation for the text. The isotopy has to lean towards the postcolonial, transformed by the poetic figures in the signs.

A Postcolonial Semiotic Analysis of Martin Akpan's *Ripples of Rebirth*

Published in 2019, Martin Akpan's *Ripples of Rebirth* is a poetry collection that interrogates the postcolonial ethos of the Akwa Ibom, Nigerian and African societies. The collection is organised in three sections: Ripple One: The Aperitif, Ripple Two: Mixed Grill and Ripple Three: Sparkles in the Horizon. Ripple One has one poem entitled 'Dialogue with Naija'. Ripple Two has 45 poems, while Ripple Three has 24 poems, making it a total of 70 poems. While a list of all the poems is not possible given spatial and discourse constraints, poems selected for study are 'Dialogue with Naija' and 'Bigheaded Town Boy'. In studying these poems, I intend to identify the relevant postcolonial isotopies in them and to analyse these isotopies in keeping with the tenets of postcolonial semiotics.

The poem 'Dialogue with Naija' embodies Neocolonial isotopy. The poem is rendered in the form of a dialogue between a father and his son. The father is 'Naija' which is a classeme that represents Nigeria, while the son is 'Naijason' which refers to one of the concerned citizens of the Nigerian nation. The dialogue, it should be noted, imbues the poem with its dramatic texture. The dialogue is necessitated by the occasion of Naija's 58th birthday, which calls for reflection, hence the question by Naijason, 'Can you say you're a proud and fulfilled father at 58?' (Akpan, 2019, p.17). This question begins the inquest and self-reflection process for the Nigerian nation, as 'Naija' is pidgin and signifies Nigeria in

the poem's discourse field. Throughout the poem, it is seen that Nigeria is a postcolonial nation bound by neocolonial chains connoted by poverty and all forms of underdevelopment. Yet the country lives in denial, claiming to be a giant and a proud father with 180 million children. The classemes 'father', 'Naija', 'Naijason' and 'birthday' result in the isotopy of /fatherland/, which Nigeria is usually identified with as a nation. Hence, the whole poem is a discourse on the failings of Nigeria as a postcolonial nation; it is a fatherland that has failed its children.

The slow pace at which Nigeria as a nation is developing is described in the poems with classemes as 'crawling' and 'running at snail's speed' (Akpan, 2019, p.17). The signifier'crawling' paints an imagery of an adult who cannot walk or run at the age of 58, which is an anomaly, pointing to the fact that there is something terribly wrong with the development trajectory of the nation. The sign 'running at snail's speed' is a metaphor that compares Nigeria's development pace to that of the developed nations of the world. Nigeria's disjointed and uneven pace of development is depicted in the statement by Naijason, '. . . instead of mastering how to run well, you are opting to fly, albeit with borrowed wings' (Akpan, 2019, p.17). These words speak to the idea that Nigeria's development is unplanned and unsystematic, relying heavily on ideas borrowed from the West and their economic institutions which do not have relevance in Nigeria's development context. This is indeed a symptom of a neocolonial society, where structures of development are hinged on the ones left behind and reinforced by former colonial masters.

Another level of understanding the poem is that Naija represents the neocolonial Nigerian leadership while Naijason represents the citizens who are asking questions why the country has remained underdeveloped 58 years after independence. It should be noted that Nigeria attained 58 years of independence in 2018, a year before the collection was published, which explains why Naijason uses the term 'global village' to describe the zeitgeist of the era, driven by technological innovations that result in the collapse of spacetime. Ironically, these innovations deepen Nigeria's backwardness, seeing how other nations have moved forward while Nigeria is stuck in the rut of underdevelopment. Nigeria is also depicted as a postcolonial nation plagued with challenges that are difficult to surmount, including having 'to feed 180 million ravenous mouths!' (Akpan, 2019, p.17),

which is an instance of synecdoche, where a part is used to represent a whole. The trope deployed in the line is indicative of Nigeria's large population, as well as the prevalent hunger and poverty in the land.

One of the features of the postcolonial text is its problematic linguistic structures, often characterised by abrogation and appropriation, linguistic hybridity and untranslatable language. For instance, the nomenclature of the main actants in the poem are rendered in pidgin: Naija and Naijason. Pidgin is an instance of the colonised's abrogation of the colonialist's English through indigenisation. Untranslatable language is seen in the expression 's*ia afo aba nte eba ebot; owo mutuakka, mmong eba iwuoho*' (Akpan, 2019, p.18), which transliterates to 'you are like the goat's breasts which can only produce milk when hit', referring to the reactionary nature of Nigeria's postcolonial leaders who are known to wait and act only on emergencies, instead of planning for situations. The Ibibio expression also situates the text as Akwa Ibom indigenous literature.

Nigeria is also plagued by a postcolonial paradox, whereby the nation is rich in natural and human resources, but the people live in abject poverty. This explains the question by Naijason, '. . . given your enormous wealth and riches, are we getting our fair share?' (Akpan, 2019, p.18). One of the areas where the nation has failed woefully is in education, where she is scored 'F9', a failed grade in the Nigerian education system. The education system in Nigeria is plagued by incessant industries actions by the workers owing to poor funding and failing infrastructures. This explains why educational tourism is rife in Nigeria, as those who can afford it travel abroad for their education, where the system is stable and optimal.

The dialogue between Naija and Naijason further reveals Nigeria as 'one of the most impoverished [nations] in the world' as indicated by 'The World Poverty Clock', which is a signifier for the World Bank Report on Africa. The ironic and the paradoxical nature of the Nigerian poverty situation is depicted in the expression where Naija is referred to as 'a rich father with poor children' (Akpan, 2019, p. 19). Given the current state of the nation's leadership, the persona doubts if Nigeria would be able to meet up with the development goals outlined for all nations by 2030, including ending extreme poverty. Yet the problem with this kind of leadership is that it has failed to own up to its shortcomings, as seen in the

attitude of Naija towards the queries of Naijason. For instance, Naija calls Naijason *Mr Too Sabi*, pidgin for someone who knows a lot or claims to know so much. This is the usual derogatory way postcolonial leaders view their critics and intellectuals. Naija also says that Naijason has allowed himself to be brainwashed by the enemies of the country. All these are strategies of denial by the postcolonial leadership so as not to deal with the problems in the country.

The neocolonial space is plagued by paradoxes, including rags-in-riches situations like youth unemployment described by Naijason in terms of how 'My younger ones . . . are roaming the streets without jobs', weak institutions, poor healthcare facilities, decaying infrastructures, insecurity and infant mortality occasioned by failing healthcare structures, among other issues (Akpan, 2019, p. 20).Towards the end of the poem, Naija, inundated by facts from Naijason, begins to realise the truth, which is that he has been deceived by sycophants who have been singing his praises despite the challenges in the land. In the poem, these frenemies are described as, 'bootlickers and fair-weather friends who don't mean well for the family' (Akpan, 2019, p.21), where 'family' sustains the seme of son-father relationship limned in the poem to suggest that Nigeria is supposed to be a union marked by love and unity, but perpetually plagued by poverty and disunity.

It is important that Naija eventually accepts the realities as described by Naijason, noting that the problem is with the leadership: '. . .the problem. . . is in the area of management and equitable distribution of the family resources to all of you to ensure equity and fair play' (Akpan, 2019, p. 21). Naijason calls for a dialogue where all the members of the family can sit down and discuss their problems, with a view to finding solutions for them. This mirrors the national dialogue that has been proposed and executed over time in Nigeria, especially on the issues of true federalism and resource control championed by national figures like Obong Victor Attah and the Late Chief Edwin Clark.

The neocolonial isotopy in Akpan's 'Dialogue with Naija' is sustained by the seme of family and nationhood found in the poem's classemes, which have given semantic directions to the poem and aided its proper interpretation. The poem embodies two dominant actants, Naija and Naijason, whose relationship begins in a disjunction and ends in a conjunction. The disjunction in their relations is seen when Naija refuses to accept

Naijason's prognosis on the state of the nation, choosing denial and listening to praise singers over proper and conscious self-assessment. The conjunction in the relations of the duo is seen when Naija finally agrees with the son's explanations of the state of things in the family, as well as opting for dialogue in resolving the burning issues.

Going by Greimas' actantial model, the poem's narrative structure is made of up of six actantial roles: subject, object, helper, opponent, sender and receiver. The subject is Naijason who desires a developed and an egalitarian Nigerian society, which forms the object of the narrative. Naijason doubles as helper through patiently interrogating Naija, the opponent, in order to make him see reason for redirecting efforts and resources for the development of the postcolony. The sender is Naijason and later Naija when he has been convinced by Naijason.The receiver of the desire is Naija and his 180 million children.

Going by Greimas' semiotic square, the narrative schema in the poem can be plotted as follows:

Leadership (S_1) Followership (S_2)

Not Leadership ($-S_1$) Not Followership ($-S_2$)

The analysis of the poem indicates that Naija occupies the position of leadership. In the poem, leadership is in denial, refusing to accept that things are not going well in the country where he governs. On his 58th birthday, leadership expects accolades from everyone, but he is shocked to be subdued with criticism by followership represented by Naijason in the poem. The followership in the poem represents the common people who face the daily realities in the country. This is why followership is in a good position to inform leadership about the true state of things in the country. In the poem, it is seen that both leadership and followership are in a dialogue which aims to bring them to the point of realisation on the socio-political and socio-economic realities in the nation.

The Not Leadership ($-S_1$) structure is still occupied by Naija and is seen in all the qualities that he exhibits that do not qualify for effective leadership. For instance, Naija appears not to be in touch with the realities that confront the followership in the society. When confronted with truth, facts and statistics on the rut in the system, he gets offended and opts

for self-praise. This is the character of most African leaders who seek praise and avoid criticism. Also, as already stated, it is not a good leadership attribute for the leader to deny the living realities of the people. All this accounts for the Not Leadership structure in Greimas' semiotic square that operates in the poem. The Not Followership ($-S_2$) binary scheme accounts for the sycophants in the poem who praise Leadership (Naija) notwithstanding the fact that nothing is working in the country. They represent the bad qualities of the followership in the poem. The ideal citizenship is one that praises the leaders when they do well, and provides constructive criticism when the leadership fails. However, the reality in the poem is that some of the citizens have been praising Naija even though he has failed in his leadership responsibilities to the nation.

Isotopy of Metropolis versus Province in Martin Akpan's 'Bigheaded Town Boy'

Martin Akpan's 'Bigheaded Town Boy' conveys the isotopy of metropolis versus province as postcolonial space dialectics. One important seme that points us to the existence of this isotopy is the classeme /town/ seen in the poem's title, which at once contrasts with /village/. Apart from this, there are tropes deployed in the poem which transform its textual signifiers in order to make us appreciate the poem. The conventional reading of space in postcolonial studies usually presents the metropolis as at once sophisticated and preferable compared to the province, which is linked to the narrowness of the mind. In 'Bigheaded Town Boy', however, the persona deconstructs and inverts this system of meaning, portraying the province as a cultural centre of indigenous knowledge, whereas the city-space is represented as space that turns young African's mind away from indigenous cultural values.

The encroachment of the city-space and its hegemonic ideology spells doom for the youth of Africa. In a way, this poem is a lament of the loss of pastoral innocence associated with precolonial Africa, caused by the creation of city-spaces in the wake of the colonial encounter. It is a narrative poem whose narratology squares with the semiotic interpretation of its tropes. In the first part of the poem, the persona bemoans the ignorance of modern young Africans who have abandoned their homestead, spending more time in the city and never caring about visiting the village to learn indigenous culture and tradition. Speaking of the 'Bigheaded Town Boy', the persona writes in the second stanza

of the first part of the poem: 'Your life is empty/And bereft of depth/Because it's anchored/On arid grounds/Without the manure/Of our culture and ancient values' (Akpan, 2019, p. 73). The dominant trope in this except is metaphor, seen in how the persona describes western culture as shallow and largely unproductive compared to African culture. In the next stanza, the persona deploys rhetorical question, biblical allusion and metaphor to decry the unenviable life that the town boy lives in the city in the name of sophistication, thus: 'I do not envy you/Son of a townie/How can I when you're/Suffering under the incubus/Of damaging acculturation/Which you mistake for sophistication?/Poor boy, you are carrying the cross of ignorance/Into the Golgotha of a blighted future' (Akpan, 2019, p. 73).

In the second part of the poem, the persona queries the town boy on the last time he visited the village. The persona goes on to list those experiences the boy has missed out on, on account of not visiting the village. For instance, since the boy has not visited the village, he would not know certain plants whose nutritional value is needed to replace the harmful food he consumes in the city. As a result of young people fleeing the village to the city, the homestead lies desolate, filled with either the very old or the very young. This raises the issues of unhomeliness, exile, provinciality and rootlessness in the poem. In 'Bigheaded Town Boy', Akpan links the abandonment of the homestead to the abandonment of the indigenous culture.The metaphor behind the statement that the homestead is overgrown with weeds implies that there are no young people in the village to keep the place clean and secure. It also speaks to the notion of rural-urban migration that rocked Africa at the advent of colonialism, when young people left the villages to the city in search of means of livelihood and education. However, once in the city, these young Africans are held bound by the allures of the city, making them forget where they came from. Years could go by without them returning to the village. This explains why the persona states that the town boy's grandma 'expressed concerns/About your whereabouts' and that 'She's not even sure/You can trace your way/To your compound' (Akpan, 2019, p. 74). The stanza ends with the rhetorical query, 'What are you doing in the city?'

'Bigheaded Town Boy' accounts for how the advent of colonialism and the creation of the city-space have impacted the homestead and the African culture, creating the metropolis-province dialectic, which is charged with ideologies. The fact that those in the city-space

view those in the city as ignorant and unsophisticated is seen in the lines: 'That your grandpa whom you/Dismiss as an ignoramus/Is a fountain of great values/And lasting treasure' (Akpan, 2019, p.74), where the persona debunks the claim that the province is synonymous with ignorance and all forms of unsophistication. Indeed, the persona is of the view that the town boy has a lot to learn from the old people back home since they embody traditional values and ancient wisdom. In this poem, Akpan sets out to educate the Africans that, against what the colonial ideology would have them believe, the province should be viewed as 'The first centre/Of learning and civility' (Akpan, 2019, p.74).Thus, in 'Bigheaded Town Boy', Akpan deconstructs the metropolis-province dialectic, alongside their conventional perception in the postcolonial theoretical schemes.

In the third part of the poem, the persona queries the town boy to test his traditional wisdom: 'The banana you eat with so much relish/Do you know the sucker that/bears its fingers?' (Akpan, 2019, p.75).To answer this and other questions posed by the persona, the town boy needs to pay a visit to the village to learn firsthand the traditional knowledge of the people, as the lack of traditional education places limitations on the town boy's cultural experience. This is captured in the lines: 'Let me tell you some home truths/Your education is grossly deficient/Because it lacks the ingredients/Of traditional upbringing/And the norms and ethos/Of your people' (Akpan, 2019, p. 76). What Akpan appears to state in this poem is that modern education not balanced up by traditional education leaves the youth inadequate and ill-prepared for life. Akpan advocates the decolonisation of the education system in Africa so that the imported books are reduced in favour of indigenous ones which will expose the youths to Africa's precolonial epistemology.

In the fourth part of the poem, the persona turns to his personal experiences to help enlighten the addressee on what he misses by avoiding the provincial space and its quaint values, which include discipline in the upbringing of the child and inculcation of the value of hard work, as limned in the lines: 'Son, when I was like you/*Nne* woke me up from sleep/At cockcrow with the cane/I carried my calabash/To the village stream/To fetch water for the homestead/' (Akpan, 2019, p.77). This is against the current modern system where children are over pampered, resulting in the lazy-youth phenomenon with little or no sense of responsibility to self and the land. The persona contrasts modern cultural values with traditional ones through the interrogation of the metropolis-province

dialectics. For instance, the persona describes a carefree childhood full of joy and happiness: 'In our childhood days we celebrated/The moon and its stellar lineage/We drummed and danced/To herald a new moon' (Akpan, 2019, p. 79).

In 'Bigheaded Town Boy', Akpan deploys abrogation and appropriation at the level of language as a way of juxtaposing the values of the metropolis and the province and their corresponding values. For instance, the use of untranslatable language in the poem is meant to heighten the awareness on the existence of indigenous knowledge which the town boy needs to learn. The fact that the town boy has not been visiting the village means that he cannot speak the indigenous language, as stated in the following lines: 'My friend, you speak big grammar/Of *oyinbo* country/But your native language/Remains an anathema' (Akpan, 2019, pp.79, 80).

The poem's narrative structure reveals actantial roles that align with Greimas' discourse model. The subject of the discourse in the poem is the desire for traditional education to complement modern education. To achieve this, the persona aims to enlighten the youths on the need to visit their home town and learn the cultural values from the elders, instead of fleeing to the city and being sucked by alien cultures. The persona also occupies the subject position in his desire to educate the younger generation on the importance of indigenous culture. The object of the discourse is the province and its ideologies, exemplified by the persona's exhortation to the bigheaded town boy to go to the village and be educated on Africa's precolonial values. In this poem, the relationship between the subject and the object is a disjunction because the addressee is not schooled in the culture of his ancestors. The helper in the discourse is the persona who takes it upon himself to advise the town boy to return to the village and be taught the values of indigenous culture. The opponent in the discourse is the metropolis and its value system, which have enslaved the town boy, making him to forget about his roots. The sender is the persona who advises the town boy on what to do in order to have a balanced cultural experience. The receiver is the town boy who stands to enrich his life culturally if and when he hearkens to the instructions of the persona.

The semiotic square for the poem can be drawn as follows:

Metropolis (S_1) Province (S_2)

Not Metropolis ($-S_2$) Not Province ($-S_2$)

The metropolis-province dialectic creates Self and Other dialectics in the poem, where the metropolis is Self while Province is the Other. Metropolis (S_1) in the poem is both the physical and ideological spaces that the town boy occupies, representing the city and western values, respectively. It is described as a space that makes young Africans to abandon their traditional values and embrace the values of the West. As represented in the poem, the metropolis gives young Africans a false sense of importance, making them bigheaded and proud, so much so that they look down on those in the villages, whom they see as poor, uneducated and ignorant. In the poem, the Province (S_2) stands for the village and its ideologies. In contrast to the metropolis, the province is described in the poem as a place where indigenous knowledge and African civilisation can be learnt. This explains why the persona urges the town boy to visit the village where he will learn the traditional values of his society. The Not Metropolis ($- S_2$) schema speaks to all the traditional experiences and knowledge that the young African in the poem has missed out on owing to his refusal to visit the village, while the Not Province ($-S_2$) refers to all the negative experiences that the poem's addressee is exposed to in the city due to the fact that he does not know his root.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted a postcolonial semiotic analysis of 'Dialogue with Naija' and 'Bigheaded Town Boy' in Martin Akpan's *Ripples of Rebirth*, deploying the concepts of isotopy, actantial model and the semiotic square drawn from Greimas' semiotic model. The analysis of the selected poems reveals the presence of isotopies linked to neocolonialism, metropolis and province, among others. As the poems tell stories about their postcolonial spaces, their narrative structures have been interrogated to yield their actants and their roles, as well as their binary schemes based on Greimas' semiotic square. It is seen that Akpan's poems in the collection are rich in signifiers that point to the state of Africa in the postcolonial era, necessitating a study in postcolonial semiotics and other related fields.

References

Akpan, M. (2019). *Ripples of Rebirth*. XceLMart.

Amina, S. & Ilhem, S. (2019). 'Hybridity, Ambivalence and Mimicry in Postcolonial Algerian Novel'. *Global Scientific Journals*. 7 (4), 698-708.

Ashcroft, B., G. Griffiths & H. Tiffin. (1989). *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures*. Routledge.

Bhabha, H. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. Routledge.

Eco, U. (1986). *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*. Indiana Press University.

Fadakinte, M. (2017). 'Hegemony and Crisis of State in Postcolonial Societies: A Theoretical Exploration.' *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa*. 19 (1), 118-136.

Farahbakhsh, A. & Ranjbar, R. (2016). 'Bhabha's Notion of Unhomeliness in J. M. Coetzee's Foe: A Postcolonial Reading'. *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature (IJSELL)*. 4 (7), 105-112.

Feldner, M. (2018). 'Representing the Neocolonial Destruction of the Niger Delta: Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*'. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*. DOI: 10.1080/17449855.2018.1451358.

Hassan, H. & Lee, T. (2020). 'Depiction of Postcolonialism in South Asian Cinema: A Semiotical Analysis of Bollywood's Film *Pinjar'. International Journal of Applied and Creative Arts*. 3 (1), 43-53.

Herbert, L. (2006). 'Elements of Semiotics'. *Singo*. Accessed: 2nd September, 2025, at http://www.Signosemio.com/elements-of-semiotics.asp.

Kourdis, E. (2012). 'Semantic Isotopies in Interlingual Translation: Towards a Cultural Approach'. *Researchgate*. Accessed: 2 September, 2025, at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/262685667, 105-116.

Odia, C. (2025). 'Alterity in the Poetry of Sophia Obi and Mabel Evwierhoma: A Postcolonial Critique'. *Scholars: Journal of Arts and Humanities*. 7 (1), 48-60.

Persaud, R. (2021). 'Hegemony and the Postcolonial State'. *The Forum: International Political Reviews*. pp. 1-11, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1057/s41312-021-001060.

Raj, P. (2014). 'Postcolonial Literature, Hybridity and Culture'. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Studies (IJHSSS)*. 1 (11), 125-128.

Reyes, A. (2021). 'Postcolonial Semiotics'. *Annual Review of Anthropology*. 50, 291-302.

Spivak, G.& Young, R. (1991). 'Neocolonialism and the Secret Agent of Knowledge'. *Oxford Literary Review*. 13 (1/2), 220-251.

Spivak, G. (1988). 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' Eds: Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. MacMillan, 24-28.

Uysal, Y. (2022). 'Analysis of Postcolonial Signs and Their Translastions in Children's Literature from Semiotics of Translation Perspective'. *Journal of Academic Studies in World Languages, Literatures and Translation (WOLLT).* 3 (1), 96 117.

This Paper is Published Without Open Access Publication Charges
Courtesy the NLNG