



## The Poetic Cannon; Addressing Social Injustice Poetically: A Comparative Study of Six Poems

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### ABSTRACT

This paper presents a comparative study of six poems drawn from across Africa and beyond. One of the poems is drawn from the USA and it is meant to provide a comparative element between the predicament of the people of African origin living in Africa and the Negroes in America. The paper seeks to examine the quality of life that the Africans live under the oppressive post-colonial regimes. Indeed the research establishes the irony of African masses who lead lives of abject poverty while the political leaders live in opulence. The particular poems selected include: “Naturally” by Austin Bukenya; “Peasants” by Syl Cheney-Coker; “I am the People, The Mob” by Carl Sandburg “A Song for Ajegunle” by Niyi Osundare; A.J Seymour’s “Tomorrow Belongs to the people” and Micere Githae Mugo’s “Up Here, Down There”. The selection of these poems was based on the comparable element in their subject matter where it was established that the poems sought to address the oppression of the poor masses in the society. The ultimate solution that each of these poems proposed is the awakening of the masses through revolutions to redeem themselves from the endemic shackles of oppression. The research thereby proposes that the bane of Africa is not necessary the autocratic leaders but the egocentric, corrupt, inept proletariat class that perpetrates acts of oppression to the masses. It is only in getting rid of these repressive social classes that the African masses can liberate themselves.

**Keywords:** *African, Gabriel Okara, Poetry*



## 1.0 Introduction

Gabriel Okara was born in Bayelsa state in Nigeria in 1921. He pursued his studies in Government College Umuahia where he developed a passion in reading and writing poetry. He later attended Yabba Higher College and on graduation enrolled for his university education at North Western University in the USA. Okara has been hailed as the first English Language African writer and the first poet of Anglophone Africa. Indeed Okara's immense contribution to Negritude philosophy largely championed by Francophone scholars such as Leopold Sedar Sengor, Birago Diop, and Franz Fanon led to his being fondly referred to as the "Nigerian Negritudist". Okara's writing characteristically incorporates Negritude seminal ideas of African thought, African religion, and African folklore. In his first novel Okara experiments the fusion of English language with his local Ijaw language. Okara imposes Ijaw language syntax into English in a bid to stretch this foreign language to accommodate his African experience. The result is a novel that crafts a landscape that embodies the forces of African traditional culture against a background of western materialism. Gabriel Okara's novel *The Voice* presents a protagonist Okolo, whose name means 'the voice'. Okolo is in search for 'It' from the beginning of the novel to the end. The author does not attempt at any point to explain the meaning of 'It' rather he lets the reader work out the meaning of the concept 'It'. The complex meaning for 'It' does not emerge clearly for Okolo feels that 'It' should be without a name. For Okolo "...Names bring divisions and divisions strife. So let it remain without a name; let it be nameless.... (Okara 112). Our endeavour to find the meaning of 'It' will therefore best be achieved through the deconstructive reading strategy. The protagonist in Okara's novel *The Voice* is an embodiment of the African intellectual who is estranged from the world of African contemporary politics. The novel *The Voice* is therefore intended to address the inconsistencies demonstrated by the Africa political elite. African political elites denounced certain social vices harboured by the colonial masters only to perpetrate the same to their subjects upon gaining political power after independence. These discrepancies are the ones Okara seeks to address in his novel *The Voice*.

Goodley Nancy avers that attempts by literary scholars to give a restrictive delimitation of the concept "It" in Okara's novel *The Voice* are futile. Goodley notes that "It" represents a type of threat to the political leaders. Arthur Ravencroft proposes that "It" represents "a meaning of life" while Eustace Palmer argues that "It" embodies "that indefinable thing" which gives integrity honesty, spiritual values and faith in God and man. These scholars grapple with the meaning of the ephemeral concept "It" without much success. Our research proposes to contribute to this debate on the true meaning of the concept "It" in an ultimate bid to understand African post independent politics in depth.

The nature and mode of expression of power is the epicenter of Edwin Thumboo's research. Thumboo studies the importance of context with English as an expression of power in focus. Thumboo contends that the sense of power varies from culture to culture a fact that has implications on the status of English and the literatures in English. Thumboo argues that Okara explores a variety of possible "nativisation" of the English language and the creative process. Ebi Yeibo examines lexical sets that exude related semantic properties that have enabled Gabriel Okara to transmit his social vision. These lexical items, Yeibo argues, enables Okara to achieve artistic aesthetics in his novel *The Voice*. Boukari Noureni and Leonard Koussouhon examine the overall message conveyed in Okara's novel *The Voice*. Noureni and Koussouhon's study is grounded on systemic functional linguistics. Their focus is on the investigation of the ideational meaning by examining the transitivity patterns. Albert Ashaolu, examines Okara's conception of the allegory of the artist as a social reformer based on the mode of operation of Okolo, the protagonist, in the novel *The Voice*. Ashaolu argues that Okolo's tribulations represent the predicament of the social reformer in a predominantly corrupt society. The misfortunes of Okolo represent the dilemma of any intellectual who dares to speak up against the corrupt regimes in Africa. Jacques Derrida proposes a reading of a text that involves a search for the concealed contradictions within the text that undercuts its apparent unity. For Derrida, deconstruction is not the 'demolition', but the 'de-sedimentation', the 'deconstruction' of all the significations that have their source in language. For Derrida no language can be adequate in what it seeks to describe. Consequently then any given text is susceptible to multiple meanings based on the particular reader involved in the reading process. Indeed for M.H Abrams deconstruction involves a double reading where he considers the first of these two readings as 'construing' and the second as 'deconstruction'. Such a double reading is not achieved by a specific method but multiple methods are involved. For Abrams deconstruction appears as a mode of thought rather than a method or technique. Based on these arguments our reading of Gabriel Okara's novel *The Voice* is intended to unravel the multiple meanings to which the ephemeral concept "It" can be ascribed.

## 2.0 'It' as a political parable

Our first view is that 'It' refers to the political state of the Federal Republic of Nigeria in the early 1960's. We refer to the political situation of the federal republic of Nigeria before the 1966 military coup. The political leadership was characterized by rampant corruption, incompetence, greed and materialism. Okolo becomes a rebel and goes to the villages asking the people whether they had got 'It'. When confronted by Chief Izongo Okolo puts forth his now seditious question:

‘We know Okolo is in one dark corner there covering himself with darkness. If you refuse to give him to me we will burn your house to the ground’ Chief Izongo said... Here I am he said with a voice cool as cool water. Do not touch her. If you want me I will come but you must tell me the bottom of *it*. ‘Do not ask the bottom of things,’ Chief Izongo said after laughing a surface water laugh. ‘Do not ask the bottom of things my friend. I want you and that is the end.’ ‘You have to tell me the bottom of it,’ Okolo insisted. (35-36)

Okolo confronts the otherwise unchallenged Chief Izongo. He proceeds to ask the difficult question that no one in the village of Amatu can dare to ask. Okolo is concerned with the kind of leadership that the village of Amatu has to grapple with. Evidently Chief Izongo has managed to silence any voices of discontent from the midst of the villagers. He can therefore boast to have the people solidly behind him. Chief Izongo’s stranglehold on the residents of Amatu is an embodiment of the dictatorial powers wielded by political leaders in the independent African nations. Chief Izongo is so powerful that Second Messenger laments that he has leant to be complacent in all matters concerning the Amatu village. The second messenger puts it thus: “As for me... if the world turns this way I take it; if it turns another way I take it. Any way the world turns I take it with my hands. I like sleep and my wife and my one son, so I do not think” (Okara 25). This kind of complacency is indicative of the disillusionment that the citizens in the independent African nations suffer. Most citizens are of the opinion that these dictatorial regimes are likely to remain in power. These groups of citizens do not expect to any significant change to take place in the political landscape of their countries. Okolo however sets out to correct the wrongs in their society. He sets out as an advocate of social justice by pointing out to the dictatorial regime their oppressive schemes. Okolo confronts Chief Izongo thus:

‘You have a very ugly inside,’ Okolo said looking at him with strong eyes. ‘Look my valuable friend,’ Chief Izongo a started in a low voice. In this town you and your followers alone think so and you are only two. The whole town is at my back. So what you say will do nothing to me.’ He ended in a very high voice. (Okara 37)

Okolo declares that Chief Izongo has a very ugly inside. This statement refers to the chief’s conduct as the village executive. Chief Izongo wields immense political power therefore he cannot condone any form of dissenting voice. His word is law thus cannot

be questioned on anything. The treatment that Okolo receives from the charged crowd, for daring to confront Chief Izongo, is indicative of the dictatorial powers that chief Izongo wields in Amatu. The treatment indicates how Chief Izongo's regime is intolerant of people perceived as dissidents. The crowd turns rowdy and manhandles Okolo:

The people snapped at him like hungry dogs snapping at bones. They carried him in silence like the silence of ants carrying a clump of yam or fish bone. They put him down and dragged him past thatch houses that in the dark looked like pigs with their snouts in the ground; pushed and dragged him past mud walls with pitying eyes; pushed and dragged him past concrete walls with concrete eyes. (Okara 38)

The rowdy mob molests Okolo by pushing and shoving him up and down like a criminal. The narrator notes that the mob snapped at Okolo, an indication that they battered him as well. They then drag him past thatched houses which suggest the kind of poverty that the villagers dwell in. By comparing the houses to pigs the narrators insinuates that these poverty stricken villagers are greedy as well. Owing to the greed for cash handouts from the political leaders' the villagers trample on truth and justice championed by advocates such as Okolo. The villagers are misused by the political leaders; Chief Izongo, to molest Okolo, an advocate of justice in the village. The narrator further says that the villagers dragged Okolo past mud walls with pitying eyes. These walls refer to the villagers who empathize with Okolo for venturing to advocate for truth and justice in their rigid society. Most of the villagers in Amatu are totally disillusioned. They feel the oppressive regime will thrive to eternity. The narrator further observes that the concrete walls 'have concrete eyes' which suggests that the village authorities are impermeable to truth and justice. The village authorities are not willing to administer acts of justice to their subjects. Rather Chief Izongo concentrates with gaining a political stranglehold on the villagers by engaging more political cronies and henchmen. The narrator observes:

Outside he walked strongly with no fear in his feet and no fear in his inside. But as he passed, women moved away from his front, casting bad eyes at him and from his front, casting bad eyes at him and from dark interiors of houses people looked at him with Chief Izongo's eyes and behind him walked his friends walking with Chief Izongo's feet. (Okara 41)

The contempt that the villagers harbour for Okolo, for his 'subversive' activities of advocating for truth and justice, proves that they are chief Izongo's cronies. The villagers

stare at him with Chief Izongo's eyes a confirmation that they are solidly behind him. The villagers abhor Okolo with as much vehemence as Chief Izongo, though he is championing for their rights. The villagers consider Okolo a rebel without a cause thus they shun his activities. Furthermore, the villagers consider Okolo to be insane thus they avoid any contact with him. The narrator notes:

'He's coming he's coming!' Okolo's feet stuck to the ground. Women grabbed their children and ran. If the saliva from the mouth of one whose head is not correct enters one's mouth, one's head also becomes not correct. So they ran and some men too who had no chest or shadow in them also ran. (Okara 27)

This kind of treatment meted on the advocate of social justice is indicative of the fear that the villagers harbour for the town authorities. It could also be symptomatic to the extent of the damage caused by the smear campaign that Chief Izongo's cronies have meted on Okolo. The messengers proceed to seek Okolo from his hiding place then hand him over to the authorities. The messengers in accomplishing their task successfully are thus walking with Izongo's feet; they were performing Chief Izongo's errands. Chief Izongo's firm political stranglehold of his cronies is self-evident in the puppet-like behavior of the villager elders. While in the presence of the almighty Chief, the elders behave like marionettes. The elders laugh only when commanded by the chief: "Laugh! He commanded, and the elders opened their mouths showing their teeth like grinning masks and made a noise that could hardly pass as laughter" (Okara 41). The mechanical laughter from the elders is indicative of their political cronyism. They do not have a brain or a mind of their own, yet they are the village elders. They operate only to satisfy Chief Izongo's ego. The narrator notes:

Hear him... always asking questions. Questions will take you nowhere. I keep telling you these teaching words. He looked at the elders and they nodded their heads vigorously in their agreement. "Untie my hands. This is no question. All I ask from you is to let me be free. At this Izongo laughed and the elders taking the cue also laughed. (Okara 42)

The elders behave like marionettes, in their endeavour to please Chief Izongo. The elders strongly agree that the political situation in Amatu is beyond reproach thus should not be questioned. They also feel Chief Izongo is beyond criticism. This makes Chief Izongo gain the status of a deity. Chief Izongo then becomes an embodiment of extremely powerful heads of state that independent Africa countries nurtured after attaining their

independence. Dictatorial regimes in Africa have a tendency of manipulating parliament to legislate in their favour. Such regimes use coercion, intimidation and even corrupt deals to control the legislative arm of government. This perspective is confirmed by Abadi's speech to the elders. Abadi opines thus:

What could you have been without our leader? Some of you were fishermen, palm cutters and some of you were nothing in the days of the imperialists. But now you are elders and we are managing our own affairs and destinies. So you and I know what is expected of us, and that is, we must toe the party line. We must have discipline and self-sacrifice in order to see this fight through to its logical conclusion. (Okara 43)

The elders are said to have led normal lives till they were appointed to become elders. The elders are the ones managing the affairs of the village. Furthermore the elders are required to toe the party line. The elders then are an embodiment of parliament in the independent African states. It is ironical that for the dictatorial regimes, the legislature is under the control of the heads of state. Okolo, who claims to be the voice of justice, laments that even the elites have joined bands of cowards and political conformists who cannot dare to question the corrupt oppressive regimes. Abadi is one such elite who prefers to work with the dictatorial regimes. Okolo laments:

You have your M.A., Ph.D., but you have not got *it*? Okolo interrupted him, also speaking in English. All eyes including Chief Izongo's left Abadi and settled on Okolo. Abadi's face became twisted in rage but he held himself. (Okara 44)

Okolo challenges Abadi that he lacks the insight and boldness that is expected of elite, to question the ills perpetrated by the dictatorial regime to society. 'It' here means boldness or 'a daring spirit' that questions the excesses of the oppressive regime. Indeed Abadi confirms that he is one of the parliamentarians in Amatu. Abadi says:

I have my M.A., Ph.D. degrees... But I, my very humble self, knew where my services were most required and returned to Amatu to fight under the August leadership of our most honourable leader. I cannot therefore stand by when I see our cause about to be jeopardized by anyone. (Okara 44)

Abadi returned from Sologa to Amatu after his studies to fight under the August leadership. The term August house is usually used to refer to parliament. As a member

of parliament, Abadi claims to be in a position to serve his people better. He claims to be a protector of the liberty of Amatu. However Okolo accuses Amatu of joining politics for selfish ends. Okolo feels that Abadi joined politics merely to benefit from the corrupt deals characteristic of many African parliaments. Okolo Says:

Whom are you fighting? Okolo interrupted him. 'Are you not simply making a lot of noise because it is the fashion in order to share in the spoils. You are merely making a show of straining to open a door that is already open. (Okara 44)

Okolo laments that in the independent African states, corruption is a deeply entrenched vice. It is the motive behind some greedy individuals taking leadership positions. These individuals lack 'It'. In this case then 'It' refers to patriotism that would drive the leaders to make sacrifices for their country. Such leaders, motivated by greed and materialism, lacks nationalism thus can be said to lack 'It'.

### **3.0 'It' as African cultural purity**

Okolo's search for 'It' refers to his search for adherence to African culture and the African philosophy of life. Okolo's determination to search for 'It', is described as having been in earnest. The opposition that he faces from the villagers is overwhelming. The villagers proceed to brand him all sorts of names for his quest. The narrator observes:

Okolo had no chest, they said. His chest was not strong and he had no shadow. Everything in this world that spoiled a man's name they said of him, all because he dared search for it. He was in search for it with all his inside and with all his shadow. (Okara 23)

The villagers accuse Okolo of having no chest and shadow. In the African setting the shadow would mean 'the soul' or 'the spirit' since African languages do not necessarily differentiate the two entities. Okolo's decision to retreat to Tuere's solitary hut portrays him as a wizard with Tuere as his witch companion. From a cultural perspective we infer that Okolo is only safe in Tuere's hut because of his adherence to African culture. Unlike the other villagers who have contaminated their souls with Christianity and other foreign religions, Okolo has remains true to the African culture. The other villagers confess that they have embraced foreign religions. Seitu says: "'Stand!' a voice from the crowd's back urged, 'Stand' she cannot do anything to us. We are all church people. We all know God. She cannot do anything to us" (Okara 30). Those villagers who have embraced Christianity



are estranged to Tuere's life. Tuere becomes an embodiment of a traditional goddess; a goddess of beauty. The fact that Tuere has been castigated to a life of seclusion, living in a lonely hut at the edge of the forest, is an indication of the estrangement of the villagers to African tradition and culture. Tuere is portrayed as an individual who possesses supernatural powers from childhood. The narrator observes:

She had been a girl of unusual habits, keeping to herself and speaking to herself. She did not flirt with boys though she had a hunger striking beauty. So it was in the inside of everyone that perhaps she had no parts of a woman. They did not because of these strange behaviors call her a witch. They openly called her a witch when her mother and father died one after the other within a few weeks and after every young man who proposed to her died one after the other. (Okara 31)

Tuere's supernatural habits are noted since her childhood; her failure to flirt with boys, having no 'woman parts'. The young men who dare flirt with her are mysteriously eliminated. Tuere then strikes us as an African goddess but the villagers brand her a witch. Okolo's quest for 'It' takes him to Tuere's 'shrine' at the edge of the forest. Tuere's hut becomes a fortress for Okolo and traditional African religion. Indeed Tuere accuses the Christians of being hypocritical in their dealings with her. Seitu is accused of peddling lies knowingly. Tuere says:

Is it you who speaks thus? Said Tuere. 'Is it you Seitu? It was you who first called me a witch and then others followed you to call me a witch. Now you say nothing I can do to you. When did your belief in the powers of witchcraft finish in your inside? You say you area know-God man be. (Okara 30)

The hypocritical nature of Christian converts in Amatu village is evident in their accusation of Tuere that she is a witch. Furthermore Christian converts claim to be free from superstitious beliefs yet they cannot dare confront Tuere. Seitu claims to be a staunch Christian but still fears the 'witchcraft' practiced by Tuere. Tuere is falsely accused of having eliminated her parents. Tuere says:

You know time finishes. Yet when my father's time finished and he went away, you people put it on my head. And when the time of my mother finished and she went away, you said I killed her with my witchcraft. Whose time finishes not? ...our time is finishing just as the time of some of your relations. Your

fathers and mothers finished and they went to the land of the dead. You did not kill them with witchcraft. But it is I who killed my father and mother with witchcraft. Yes you say I am a witch, so I am a witch be. (Okara 30)

The hypocritical Christian converts accuse Tuere of having murdered her parents through witchcraft. This accusation is false since as Tuere argues even her accusers' parents also died. Though the parents of the Christianity converts died they do not take responsibility over their parents' death. The converts however accuse Tuere of having a hand in her parents' death. Tuere however manages to speak to the lost souls of her accusers. These villagers cannot face her due to their guilty conscience. In addition, Tuere's prowess as a goddess scares her accusers and they free from her presence. As the narrator observes:

'Then I to you come.' As she said thus and moved slowly towards the crowd, the crowd moved back and the people turned their backs, including Seitu, the voice of the people, and ran. They ran with the backs of their feet touching the back of their heads. Who would want to die of itches. So they ran with their insides and with all their shadows. (Okara 32)

The Christian converts pretend not to be superstitious but they still believe that any confrontation with a goddess would result to death. The community in Amatu believes that such a confrontation would result to death through itches. The people run with their 'insides' and 'shadows' which means their 'souls' and 'spirits'. The act of Christian converts fleeing from Tuere, an African Goddess, indicates the ultimate subjugation of foreign culture by African traditional culture. African traditional culture is inadvertently elevated over the dominant foreign culture. Similarly traditional African religion is elevated over western and eastern forms of religion like Christianity and Islam.

The dialogue between Okolo, the wizard, and Tuere, the witch, focuses on the need for the villagers to embrace traditional culture. Tuere says:

How do you expect to find *it*? How do you expect to find it when everybody has locked up his inside? ...How do I know this, you want to ask me? I know. I hear every happening thing in the town even though I am locked up here in this hut. How or where do you think you will find it when everybody surface-water-things tell, when things have no more root? How do you expect to find it when fear has locked up the insides of the low and the insides of the high are filled up with nothing but yam? Stop looking for it. Stop suffering yourself. (Okara 34)

Okolo's quest to have the villagers in Amatu embrace tradition and shun modernity in all its aspects has resulted in his expulsion from the village. He is forced to seek refuge in Tuere's hut. Tuere laments that the villagers have lost their cultural roots and embraced modernity. Consequently the villagers have lost their cultural identity and uniqueness. The mystery expected of a people rooted in their culture is missing thus "everybody-surface-water-thing-tell". A communities' uniqueness and sense of secrecy can only thrive in their traditional culture since modernity can be well understood in the global village. Tuere further says that "things have no more root" which insinuates that the village has lost its cultural roots. Tuere associates the villager's act of embracing modernity and Christianity with fear of probably being labeled backward. The inhabitants of Amatu, driven by fear embrace modernity in a bid to rhyme with the other communities. Tuere is thus appalled by the increased modernization and adoption of foreign religions in Amatu and Africa. Tuere thus concludes that Okolo's search for it is likely not to yield fruit.

#### **4.0 'It' as African 'Humanism' and Molarity**

Okolo's quest in the search for 'It', a concept that is not given a name forms the basis of our study. The complex meaning for 'It' does not emerge clearly for Okolo feels that 'It' should be without a name. For Okolo: "Names bring divisions [in life] and divisions strife. So let it be without a name; let it be nameless... (Okolo 112). Okara therefore puts the meaning 'It' as a puzzle and the reader is expected to work out this meaning. Our deconstructive reading of the text reveals yet another meaning of 'It' where we infer that 'It' means African humanism and values in life. Okolo interrogates his fellow villagers to establish whether they still possess a 'human heart'. From an African perspective, humanism has a moral meaning connected with the value of an individual's life in relationship to the lives of their fellow men. The concept of African humanism can be explained thus:

So Okolo sat with his knees drawn up to his chin trying not to touch anybody's body. This little he had now leaned. He smiled in his inside. But is it possible for your body not to touch another body, for your inside not to touch another inside, for good or for bad? (Okara 110)

Okolo feels that African humanism is founded on communal welfare. Every individual has the responsibility of welfare of their neighbours. An individual's 'body' must 'touch another body'. This means that African humanism is grounded on an individual's concern for the welfare of the other human beings in their neighbourhood. Such an individual is

expected to mind the material and emotional wellbeing of their colleagues. An individual's 'inside' is expected to touch the 'inside' of those in his environment meaning that they not only live at peace with each other but also mind each other's wellbeing.

Okolo's bid to practice African Humanism is realized when he resolves to share his rain coat with a fellow passenger in a boat on the way to Sologa. The narrator observes:

Okolo had a rain coat. He stood up and put it over his head and back and sat. It was old and had holes but it stood rain more than ordinary cloth. The people pressed each other for warmth. The girl who was going to her husband pressed on Okolo. All her body was almost wet. Okolo looked at her. She had no cover. He again stood up and with his elbows he opened out his raincoat to cover the girl and sat. The girl from the waist up faced Okolo, hesitated and then pressed closer to make rain cloth cover her body. (Okara 63)

Okolo's humane act of sharing his raincoat with the passenger who sits next to him in the boat is exemplary of African Humanism. Derived from African philosophy, African humanism holds that an individual is merely part of the whole community. An individual is never complete being without the other members of the community. In minding the welfare of the wet shivering girl, Okolo practices African humanism. It is ironical that Okolo's act of kindness in sheltering the girl from the raging storm is misconstrued to be a heinous act of immorality. The girl's mother in law laments that:

'So in your silence you were knotting bad thoughts in your inside. This big thing will not finish here. All of you my witnesses be. You saw how my son's wife was on his lap covered with raincoat. Did he anything to you do?' she the girl asked. 'Did he no part of your body touch?' (Okara 65)

The passengers in the canoe misconstrue Okolo's act of kindness to be an act of flirtation with the girl. The girl's mother-in-law asks her whether Okolo was caressing her. No amount of denial from the girl or Okolo can persuade the passengers otherwise. This is an unfortunate state of affair since African humanism cannot thrive in a condition of mutual mistrust. The kind of mistrust with which the passengers in the boat regard Okolo with kills the spirit of African Humanism. African humanism is devoid of materialism. This philosophy shuns vices such as greed and egocentrism while emphasizing communalism. The passengers in the boat then lack 'It' since they are given to greed and materialism. The policeman in the boat boasts of having accumulated considerable amounts of wealth through corrupt deals. The narrator notes:

This man had said he had taken home bags of money and was now returning to Sologa. He was a policeman and to him on earth it was the best work, especially if one has a lucky head. If you have a lucky head and if you catch a rich trader stealing from a white man's shop then on heaps and heaps of money you stand up to your knees. Why take a man like that to the station when stealing from a Whiteman's shop? Whiteman take all our money to his country. (Okara 60)

This particular man lacks African humanism since he is given to corruption. The man is an accomplice to criminal activities yet he is a policeman who is expected to fight crime in the community. The man's greed has robbed him of 'It' which in this case is African humanism. Similarly the rich trader who steals from a white man's shop lacks African humanism since stealing is a vice that is strongly castigated in the African philosophy. Such a rich trader driven by materialism lack's 'It' and is thus a human wretch. In addition African humanism encourages humility while it discourages pride and self-conceitedness. The middle aged woman in the boat boasts of having a son who was learned and was now working as a clerk thus earning a lot of money. The narrator observes:

"She had with a deep masculine voice torn to pieces the engine's sound saying her son having passed standard six the previous year was now a clerk. A heap of money he was now earning and the girl was his wife. ...She it was who had paid for her son's training and for this job paid twenty pounds and for his wife thirty pounds. (Okara 60)

The woman lacks 'It' since her conceited self boasts of her son's prowess and success in studies as well as in accumulating wealth. She claims to have promoted her son's success through fees payment and bribery for him to secure his job. Her act of bribery further results to her failure to possess African humanism. The Whiteman's cook also lack's 'It' since driven by greed and materialism he boasts of having a son in college who would earn a lot of money on graduation. The narrator notes: "He was the white man's cook, so he said. He had told everybody loudly that he had, with his cooking, sent his son to college. His son would soon finish and join the council and then money 'like water flow' he had said, rubbing his hands, and laughed a laugh which made the groaning engine sound like a feeble buzz of a mosquito (Okara 59). The Whiteman's cook is given to pride thus he lacks in African humanism. His greed is evident in his act of bragging that his son would earn a lot of money on graduation. He expects the son to join the council thus he

attributes corrupt deeds to the council. This man thus lacks 'It' which means he lacks African humanism.

### 5.0 'It' as the meaning of life

Finally our deconstructive reading reveals that 'It' refers to the meaning of life. Okoro's search for it involves a search for the meaning of life. Okolo observes that the meaning of life is elusive since everyone has their meaning to life. Okolo wonders thus: "What is the meaning of life? No, they can't one meaning have. Each man to one meaning of life; each woman to one meaning of life. Each one has his meaning of life. ...Yes each man has a meaning of life to himself. And that is perhaps the root of the conflict" (Okara 111). Different people have different meanings for their lives. Some approach life with the prospect of accumulating wealth and living lives of opulence. Included in this category are the political leaders like Chief Izongo and the Big One in Sologa. However even many citizens attach the meanings of their lives purely to material gain or making more money. Included in this category are the White Man's cook, the Policeman, and The middle aged woman only identified as Mother-in-Law. However Okolo feels that his meaning to life is different. He feels that there his meaning in life is to advocate for social justice. The narrator notes:

"Spoken words are living things like cocoa-beans packed with life. And like the cocoa-beans they grow and give life. So Okolo turned in his inside and saw that his spoken words will not die. They will enter some insides, remain there and grow like the corn blooming on alluvial soil at the river side. Is his meaning to of life then to plan *it* in people's insides by asking if they've got it...? (Okara 110)

Okolo attaches meaning to a lived in advocacy for social justice. He argues that through social emancipation the people in society would gain their liberation. Social emancipation would involve giving knowledge through 'the spoken word'. The words or 'the spoken word' would never die but would blossom in people's minds and drive them to agitate for their liberation. Okolo further argues that it is unfortunate that different people have different meanings in life. He feels that there should be some universally accepted meanings which result to the attainment of universally acceptable living for all humanity. Okolo puts it thus: "There may be only one meaning in life and everybody is just groping along in their various ways to achieve it like religion – Christians, Moslems, Animists – all trying to reach God in their various ways" (Okara 112). Okolo concludes that there is

only one meaning in life and everybody is striving to realize it. The only difference is in the modes through which people seek this ultimate meaning in life.

## 6.0 Conclusion

Gabriel Okara (1921-2019) is a renowned poet and novelist. His first novel *The Voice* is an appropriate critique of the post-independence African states and the political climate in these states. In this great literary work, Okara criticizes the autocratic leaders in the independent African states who strive to achieve a totalitarian stranglehold on their subjects thereby exterminating the last vestiges of democracy. The African intellectuals are at a loss since they have to be submerged in the deep and perilous river of complacency and political cronyism, just like Okolo, the Protagonist, in the novel. The research established that Okara's novel *The Voice* is a suitable sermon against vices such as corruption especially among the leaders, moral decadence occasioned by western culture and the increased infiltration of western culture at the expense of the authentic African traditional culture. The novel challenges Africans to embrace the true African humanism as the only path to salvation against western individualism. This research paper was essentially a deconstructive reading of Gabriel Okara's novel *The Voice*. The novel was selected since in the novel, the protagonist, Okolo, is involved in the search for a concept only vaguely identified as 'It'. Our endeavour to join Okolo's search for 'It' was best achieved through the deconstructive reading technique. Our search established that the concept it has various meanings including: 'It' as a political parable of independent African nations; 'It' as African cultural purity; 'It' as African Humanism and molarity; and 'It' as the 'true' meaning of life. It is the hope of the researcher that we have contributed significantly to the understanding of deconstruction and Gabriel Okara's novel *The Voice*.

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