CHAPTER III

A READING OF THE EXTENDED PARABLE:
THE VOICE
CHAPTER III

A READING OF THE 'EXTENDED PARABLE': THE VOICE

Only an obstinate, foolish will to live, the simple insistence of the veins which leaves have, cowslips, oxen, ants have just as well, can account for most men's going on, since such a will moves blindly, in roots beneath the ground, in bottleflies and fish, and our feelings are the price we pay for being brained instead of finned. Perception, Plato said, is a form of pain.


Gabriel Okara was only too deeply aware of the problem of language in African literature as it has existed from the outset when Africans started to write in the language of their colonial rulers. It is a problem which surfaced through the writer's own process of self-discovery, and there have been varying degrees of perception and awareness in this regard. They range from indifferent casual scrutiny to the realization that it is a problem which the serious African writer must face and must resolve to overcome. Viewed in this context Okara's The Voice is a
remarkable illustration of how the English language can be made to suit the needs of an African writer. His reputation as a poet and a writer of short stories is further enhanced by this piece of imaginative writing which has all the charm of a poetic composition.

It was Arthur Ravenscroft who first used the term 'extended parable' to refer to the unique nature and distinct quality of The Voice. Now, parable undoubtedly has a didactic dimension to it as is obvious from the parables of Jesus. Commentators of the scripture have gone into the diverse significance of the term, and some of them do seem relevant to the present study. William Barclay has noted that Jesus' teaching in parables suggests a departure from the traditional way of teaching in the synagogue.² "Jesus began again to teach by the lakeside... He began to teach them many things in parables, and, in His teaching, He began to say to them, "Listen! The sower went out to sow" (Mark 4:1,2). Jesus was willing to take religious preaching and teaching out of its conventional setting in the synagogue into the open field and among the crowds of ordinary men and women. There must have been many among the orthodox Jews who regarded this new departure of Jesus as sensationalism; but he was wise enough to know when new methods were necessary and was courageous enough to use them.
This new departure obviously needed a new method, and the new method this incomparable teacher chose was to speak to the people in parables. According to Barclay, "[A] parable is literally something thrown beside something else; that is to say, a parable is basically a comparison. A parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning." Thus in a parable something on earth is compared with something in heaven so that the heavenly truth may be better grasped and understood in the light of the earthly illustration.

Scripture scholars have thought deeply over this particular mode of teaching found in the gospels and have written extensively about its implications. But the arguments offered by William Barclay are highly revealing on the rationale of this method, which in turn proffer insights relevant to our analysis of *The Voice* as an extended parable. Barclay comments that Jesus chose the parabolic method primarily to make people listen. He was not now dealing with an assembly of people gathered in a synagogue, but with a crowd in the open air who were quite free to walk away at any time. Hence it was essential to get the crowd interested in what he had to teach lest they should drift away.

Secondly, when Jesus used the parabolic method He was using something with which Jewish teachers and audiences were entirely familiar, and which they could easily comprehend.
The third and a very significant point is that through the parables Jesus was making the abstract idea concrete. There is a sense in which abstract ideas like beauty, goodness etc... can become actualised in a person or in a deed. Knowing well that it was useless to expect simple minds to cope with abstract ideas, he put them into concrete stories. Lastly, the great virtue of the parable is that it compels man to think for himself, make his own assessments and discover the truth for himself. Truth has always a double impact when it is a personal discovery. Jesus did not wish to save men the mental sweat of thinking; he wished to make them think and lay the responsibility on them; to inspire them to do their own thinking He presented them with truth which, if they would make the right effort in the right frame of mind, they could discover for themselves and possess it in a way that is uniquely theirs. C. J. Cadoux has said of the parables:

A parable is art harnessed for service and conflict.... Here we find the reason why the parable is so rare. It requires a considerable degree of art, but art exercised under hard conditions... In its most characteristic use the parable is a weapon of controversy, not shaped like a sonnet in undisturbed concentration but improvised in conflict to meet the unpremeditated situation. In its highest use it shows the
sensitiveness of the poet, the penetrations, rapidity and resourcefulness of the protagonist, and the courage that allows such a mind to work unimpeded by the turmoil and danger of mortal conflict.\(^5\)

It is this sense of urgency and the compulsion to recognise truth conveyed by the parable that makes the analogy relevant to the novel. Further, parables not only suggest meaning more vividly because they are more poetic in conception, but also (as the narrator in St. Mark’s Gospel keeps pointing out) draw a veil over the meaning intended. Ravenscroft thinks that perhaps it was prudent for Okara to disguise his meaning somewhat in the Nigeria of 1964, when African government was still strongly associated with Independence—before Soyinka and Achebe had yet attacked the Nigerian establishment as they were to do.\(^6\) One might find The Voice on an obvious level as a gloomy parable of political and social life in Nigeria soon after independence. But the insistence throughout on the importance of words and their suggestive quality (including the title which has distant echoes of 'the voice in the wilderness'),\(^7\) forces one to perceive it also as a parable of the moral function of the artist in the society, committed to the interpretation of the mystery of life, and the right and wrong aspects of human actions.
Thematically The Voice marks a significant departure from the numerous 'bush-village idylls', melodramas, popularized anthropological reportage, reverential treatment of the tribal past and innumerable versions of the black-white encounter that characterize African writing. On one plane it embodies a veiled bitterness about what a conscious artist discerns as the immediate results of independence, yet it reflects a convinced belief in a hopeful future for their people based on the leavening personal integrity of individuals. It is obvious that Okara takes a unique polemical stance, representing the "struggle between darkness and light" in the interaction of characters, and suggests a heavy moral tone which Wole Soyinka would qualify as "the voice of vision in his own time." On the linguistic level, it is an essentially experimental prose where English is written with Ijaw syntax and stands midway between the traditional form offered by Amos Tutuola and the outright imitation of western models we have in Ekwensi. Indeed, although the novel mirrors and explores contemporary issues and remains African in style and point of view, there is a dimension of the universal implied in the character of Okolo and the working out of his existential dilemma, which takes the novel beyond the confines of parochialism in literature. The narrative unfolds in "mid-twentieth century actuality, yet its landscape is dark and hazy, as though glimpsed in a
nightmare; it is symbolic in a way that recalls allegory, and its theme is at once contemporary and timeless.\textsuperscript{10}

Also, Okara is pointing towards the disintegration, spiritual sterility and materialism of his society, and images the search for human values in such conditions by using age-old myths to relate a local situation to the universal one. The novel's obvious affinities with symbolic religious fables at once reminds us of \textit{The Pilgrim's Progress}. Just as Christian there is engaged in his search for salvation, Okolo is ultimately in search of 'it'. He wanders through a kind of wasteland, sterile and materialistic, in search of 'it'. The goal of Okolo's quest is never more explicitly defined. Yet as the narrative progresses, we begin to perceive certain associations of meaning forming around the word 'it', and steadily being added to, until the vagueness disperses. By the end of the novel, the nature of Okolo's quest, and that of 'it' acquires a very firm meaning by a "process of cumulative synthesis."\textsuperscript{11} This theme of quest, central to the development of \textit{The Voice}, as we saw earlier, is closely related to an emerging individual consciousness, marked by the search for new, personally validated norms. What Okolo searches for is an elusive spirituality, its sphere the inner man, its demands rigorous, visionary. Never is it allowed to degenerate into the explicit or the didactic.
On a realistic level, *The Voice* deals with the fortunes of the young man Okolo, which means 'the voice', in the small town of Amatu. After having been away from the town for a long time as a student, he returns home with a desire to discover the true meaning of life. His questioning spirit is resented by the elders, and especially by chief Izongo, as they see in Okolo a potential threat to the traditional system of belief and to their own newly-won authority.

The very first sentence in the novel, "Some of the townsmen said Okolo's eyes were not right, his head was not correct" (23) captures the atmosphere of the novel and prepares us for Okolo's alienation and the continuing discord between him and the townsmen, all because "he was in search of 'it' with all his inside and with all his shadow" (23). This basic attitude to each other, and to life, is explored by Okara with a deceptive simplicity as he portrays Okolo at different decisively significant encounters of his life. The major incidents in the novel into which this conflict is absorbed are his meeting the townsmen at Tuere's house, his journey to Sologa, his conversation with the whitemen leading to a new awareness of things, his decision to return home and face the Elder Izongo, and the final catastrophe. Each of these events adds to the magnitude of Okolo as the hero who stands out Timon-like till the end, revealing the "original and authentic rhythms within the gloomy paradox of a world."12
The 'conflict' in the novel is not between traditionalism and modernism as some critics imply, but "between spiritual sterility and materialism on the one hand, and a concern for moral values on the other." Okolo's call for authenticity and a spiritual revitalization, his interest in "the bottom of things," imbues him with an uncommon clairvoyance. It is a moral perception he is burdened with, one which enables him to realize that "everybody has locked up inside" (34) and that "their insides are smelling bad" (34); it is the same perception which gives him the courage to refuse to "change and do as others are doing" (49) and see that "having an open inside makes one know many things" (55). In fact there is a consistent insistence on "thinking straight". The elder Tebeowi agrees that Okolo's "spoken words are true and straight" (49), though lacking in power to do anything. Gradually, this prophetic, Christ-like image of Okolo is developed to its full stature. Inevitably, he considers it his mission to preach a new gospel, aimed at the purity of the inner man:

If you put a black paint over a white paint, does it mean there is no white paint? Under the black paint the white paint is still there and it will show when the black paint is rubbed off. That's the thing I am doing--trying to rub off the black paint (50).
His insistence on "knowing the bottom of things" (36) and "changing people's insides" and having an inside that is "unruffled like water in a glass" (39) entails him with the stature of a reformer with intense convictions and an almost absolutist faith in the human potential:

Our fathers' insides always contained things straight. They did straight things. Our insides were also clean and we did the straight things until the new time came. We can still sweep the dirt out of our houses every morning (50).

Although Okolo's quest is not politically motivated, his call does have political overtones in the given context. Izongo and the elders realize that they can only retain power as long as they succeed in obscuring truth under their rhetoric, and the people continue to be credible. A number of telling phrases also suggest that theirs is a vacuous existence, devoid of any values. Early in the novel the footsteps of the people who came to seize Okolo are described as "bad footsteps" and "knowing nothing footsteps". Later as they drag him through the town, their feet are described as "blind feet". People are often described as having no 'shadow', referring both to their hollowness and lack of moral strength. Significantly, Tuere, a social reject, yet one of the strongest people in her society, has a clearly
defined shadow. A very relevant passage concentrates this sense of spiritual nothingness:

So his inside many questions asked. Faith and faithlessness adding up to nothing. Man has no more shadow, trees have no more shadow. Nothing has any more meaning but the shadow-devouring trinity of gold, iron, concrete (89).

It fills the reader with a sense of everything being reduced to an appalling nullity, where all that matters is material success symbolised by the grotesque parody of the trinity. Yet despite the power this trinity weilds, and despite the grandiloquence of his demagogic rhetoric, Izongo in his moral cowardice fears Okolo, whose voice is "like the voice of a mosquito which had driven even sleep out of their eyes" (91).

Political corruption and material considerations, though subservient to the main plot, form the structural background where Okolo is portrayed. The general trend of thinking, other men's outlook on life etc., reinforce the uniqueness of Okolo's character, as well as that of his incessant search for 'it'. Like Amatu, the town of Sologa too is preoccupied with cars, food and concrete houses; the slogans painted on the walls of the eating house are significant, "eat and drink 0, die one day we go" (92).
The worldview projected in Sologa is basically opposed to the stoic ideology of Okolo, and is like the polarity between the mundane and the transcendent that is also focused on in the novel. He is repeatedly told here that "this thing you are searching you cannot find here" (83). The futility of the search and the impossibility of the situation is expressed by the owner of the eating house, "...it is like trying to see if the body of a person who is in the water with you is dry" (83). The solution offered by him for this frustrating experience sums up his whole philosophy of life: "Do not think anymore, my man. The people who have the sweetest insides are the think-nothing people and we here try to be like them" (84).

Like Achebe, Armah and other African novelists who have dealt with the disintegration of modern African society, Okara realizes that Izongo's success is partly the result of the indifference, or even the tacit acquiescence of the people themselves. The second messenger, for instance, is a representative of those who unwittingly support the system by their complacency:

As for me (shrugs his shoulders), if the world turns this way I take it; if it turns another way I take it. Anyway the world turns I take it with my hands. I like sleep and my wife and my one son, so I do not think (25).
It is into this amoral flux of a society that the prophet-like figure of Okolo is precipitated. We know very little about his past, and next to nothing about his physical appearance and personal habits, a deliberate vagueness reinforcing the impression of a symbolic prophetic character. But his moral courage, conviction and idealism remain undeniable. Having decided to embark on his search for 'it', he single-mindedly pursues the task, and never allows himself to be deflected from his goal by fear of any kind, including the fear of death. His name means 'the voice', and is probably selected for its symbolic significance. More details about his personality are not given because the interest is not in the man, but in the 'voice' that he represents; his identity is realized in terms of the moral force absorbed into him and his nonconformist attributes. Indeed, it is his existential commitment to his "messianic mission" that raises him above those who do not similarly search for or possess 'it'.

Even though Okolo is more of a symbolic force than an average townsman, there is a steady growth into increased self-consciousness in the characterization. This is very subtly worked out, yet perceptible. In giving a palpable form to the consciousness of the hero, and making it a tangible reality, Okara consistently employs the technique of contrast, whereby as Okolo's personality acquires an added dimension, the 'it' is more visibly and tangibly realized.
Okolo's participation in the social life is restricted to a few encounters, and always characterized by a penetrating observation into the nature of the reality represented. They are as much gestures of defiance as of his intense personal convictions. The best instance would be his journey to Sologa.

The canoe is safely distanced from the banalities of the world for an increased aesthetic effect, yet it is a miniature universe in every sense, and containing a richness of its own. It is a microcosm of Amatu and Sologa society, and the sleeping passengers symbolically demonstrate the spiritual lethargy and complacency that marks these worlds. By effective strokes of characterization Okara highlights all that is unpleasant and unattractive about the crew, who capture our attention with their hard, loud voices and quarrelsome nature, whereas the positive is symbolised by the two silent passengers—Okolo and the bride-girl. As they sleep, the unattractive qualities are temporarily smothered beneath the surface, but as the storm breaks out, it unleashes all hidden passions revealing the disintegration of human self. Okolo's integrity and innocence is vividly demonstrated and contrasted with the malice of the worldly-wise. The sixteen year old girl huddles close to Okolo for protection against the driving rain with innocent, trusting faith in him, and Okolo, pitying her, offers her protection.
His action is unwittingly indiscreet, and the malicious mother-in-law, the whiteman's cook, and the policeman suspect Okolo of having violated the girl. Despite the indiscretion of it, Okolo's action stems directly from the spontaneity and naivette of his impulses. Okara's ability to bring a scene to life is apparent in this episode. First there is the storm itself, which shakes them out of their slumber and lethargy, and then the human comedy as the passengers range themselves on Okolo's or the mother-in-law's side, and the various personality clashes find expression in other 'sub-disputes'. However the comedy does not inhibit a serious moral judgement: the boat episode expresses Okara's pessimistic view of life, reinforced later in the tragic ending of the novel.

Okolo's disillusionment with Sologa too seems to imply that the moral degradation he decries is not confined to Amatu alone, rather it is a universal phenomenon. Reaching the shores of Sologa, he watched people; as Okara says:

People doubting, people marrying, people divorcing, priests turning away worshippers, people hoping, hopes breaking plate-like on cement floors. Thus Okolo stood watching the crowd pass him by until he saw a constable approaching with eyes that nothing saw and feet that did not touch the ground (77-78).
The passage also communicates Okara's resentment at the muddle in the world. The scene gives the first of the many shocks Okolo experiences in his endeavours to find in Sologa the spiritual strength lacking in Amatu. Instead of superior values, he discovers in Sologa the same decadence, and his experience with the policeman confirms his growing suspicion of universal duplicity and shallowness.

If the street scene shows Sologa as a muddle, the eating house presents the world as a mad house:

'He is the expected one'.

As he who owned the eating house said this they stopped eating and laughed aloud, some with food dropping from their mouths, others with drink going down the wrong side of their throats, choking, coughing, tears in their eyes appearing. The floor held Okolo's feet and he tried to run out (81-82).

The 'insanity' of Sologa society is reflected in the eating house, but by the conventions of this society, it is Okolo who is mad. The eating house images the values of the world, and the slogans on the wall too express a mood of despair, resignation and pessimism: "Even the whiteman's Jesus failed to make the world fine. So let the spoilt world spoil" (82).
In an environment with enormous pressures on the individual, the chief mode of preserving one's integrity, as Obiechina points out, is "artistic individualism". During his sojourn in Sologa the lone spot of light encountered by Okolo in an enveloping gloom is a carver, proclaiming his faith in the Transcendental by carving heads out of wood. In the world of The Voice, where political oppression has taken over and emasculated the collective will of the people, artistic individualism becomes a safety device for keeping the spirit of man alive. Wandering in 'the think nothing stream' of the streets of Sologa, he is pleasantly surprised to stumble on an oasis of creativity in the desert of barren and blighted lives. The artist who "creates heads out of created wood" (84) is recognized here as an ally in the resistance to the forces of 'darkness'; he is a collaborator in creative freedom. In a bourgeois world, art thus becomes an affirmation, a liberating force anchored in individualism, which symbolises the inner states and subjectively defined reality of the artist. A collective view of life and experience is outside his perspective and is relegated to the periphery, and art becomes, in effect, a new, individualist ethos.

Okara in fact does not develop the full implication of the artist's presence in Sologa. But he has held up primarily a point of contrast, a symbol of light and
creative hope, within the rest of the 'think-nothing' multitude. And it is this enclave of creative effort that strengthens Okolo's conviction, and helps him to continue with his search resolutely. Okolo's encounter with the whiteman on the other hand, only adds to his disillusionment. He had mistakenly assumed that since the whiteman came from another society, he would be perhaps a man of honesty and integrity, and would understand his search for 'it'. But there too all he meets is compromise. The whiteman believes that "these things simply don't exist in real life, if you want to get anywhere, if you want to make good. But mind you, I am not saying I do not believe in them. All I am saying is you have to be judicious" (88).

Having been brought to the reality of the futile nature of his search, and his determination undermined by a haunting fear of failure, Okolo unconsciously sees that "the time is not yet ripe." Looking ahead he could see only darkness, "the kind of darkness you see when you close your eyes at night" (105). Along with this we observe that Okolo has undergone a 'maturing process', i.e., he is less naive now. We view the new conscientious individual during his journey back to Amatu, which parallels the earlier one to Sologa. This time, however, he is careful not to allow anyone to touch his body. Also more mature ideas pass through his mind during the journey. He ponders that his
'spoken words', his philosophy, will not die, but 'will enter some people's hearts' (127). Considering the cross-section of the world in the canoe, he reflects that wars and quarrels are caused by selfishness; he also realizes that everyone ought to have a purpose in life, although these may all be different. Then there is the painful awareness that "many there are like Izongo with no sense of direction like you are in a fog in a river" (111). Though we do not doubt the genuineness of Okolo's quest, one perceives a certain banality in his reasonings as he suggests solutions for the evils of the world.

Okara seems to discourage us from naming, and thus fixing, perhaps killing the 'it'; "so let it be without a name; let it be nameless..." (112); nevertheless there is a sense in which the 'it' becomes clear by the cumulative effect of the narrative and the imagery. Negatively, Abadi does not possess it: 'You have your M.A., Ph.D., but you have not got 'it'. Izongo also does not have 'it' as he has 'a very ugly inside'. Now positively, it is Tuere, the social outcast and supposed witch, who provides a further dimension to Okolo's 'it'. She explains:

My feet know not the door of a school but Woyengi (the tribal deity) who all things created gave each of us human beings an inside and a head to think.
So the many years I have killed in the hut put many thoughts into my inside which have made me see differently (54).

The new vision and conviction gained by Tuere over the years provides her with superior stature and though she is ostracised by conventional society, this vision enables her to see differently. It is highly suggestive that all the underprivileged of the society—an outcast and the cripple and the messengers—should be the ones initiated into the mystery of 'it' and share Okolo's convictions. Though teaching words are the same in any age, not all are privileged to see into the ultimate reality of things. Okolo, along with Tuere and Ukule the cripple, form the strong bond which uphold the individual's right to 'see things differently' (54) as contrasted with the chief, the Elders and their supporters in the establishment who distort matters to suit their greed for power. At the same time he insists that it is an "intuitive rather than merely cerebral knowledge"—an intuitiveness that opens man's sensibilities to the ways of Woyengi and provides them with a receptive awareness of an order of meaning beyond the mundane and the materialistic.

Okolo's insistent search for superior values are suggestive of a religious fervour, as he is faced with a
people who have lost all sense of direction, who have no 'insides', and who do not 'think straight'. He feels a far more profound disquiet than the so-called elders at the fate of this 'think-nothing' people as he critically reflects over it. Rather than opting for a compromise with the spirit of his times, he is concerned with ultimate issues, as the novelist affirms throughout, and this moral purport invests the character of Okolo with a prophetic stature. Now, a prophet is 'a man called by God to communicate something urgent to other men', and often finds himself in radical disagreement with his fellow countrymen. From a careful reading of The Voice emerges a pattern which appears simple, yet very close to the ones we find in the Old Testament books of Prophets; and the prophetic role Okara ascribes to his protagonist is analogous to the task of the Old Testament prophetic figures. In passing judgement on man's moral conduct, they touch upon the social order and attempt to offer correctives to social injustices and sinful conduct. According to Paul Tillich, prophets are "like the refined instruments which register the shaking of the earth on far-removed sections of its surface," and they register "the shaking of their civilizations, its self-destructive trends, and its disintegration and fall" because they are endowed with an invisible and almost infallible sensorium in their souls, "an irresistible urge to pronounce what they have registered, perhaps against their own wills."16
However, for the purposes of our study, a major prophet like Jeremiah alone suffices to embody the spirit that motivates a prophet, a powerful Old Testament figure, whose prophetic ministry extends over an entire generation. As Kuhl remarks, he is "one of the few prophets who give us an insight into the inmost thoughts and intentions of the prophets, their prophetic calling." What makes him specially relevant to a study of *The Voice* is that like the hero of *The Voice*, Okolo, Jeremiah is in continuous conflict with the kings, the authorities of the temple and the priestly class of Israel. In spite of the hostility and the violent opposition to his pronouncements from his people, there is no lessening of the seriousness and rigour of his tone in his denunciation of the immoral practices and social injustice of his time. Like a prophet who is true to his calling, Okolo reiterates his words of judgement on the townsmen for their general dishonesty, and his happens to be a lone voice.

As the theme unfolds, we come across physical descriptions of the characters' states of mind and feeling, vivid rendering of the inner life in terms of the palpable and the immediate: Tuere has heard only 'bad footsteps' from people's insides; Izongo's inside 'is smelling with anger'; Okolo smells 'the smell of hate' in the people's 'sweat glistening on their backs'; Abadi's 'inside began to stink with anger'; when Okolo turns away from the elders, we are
told he 'threw his back at them'; Okolo's mental confusion when he is waylaid in the dark and carried off, is conveyed like this: his 'inside was a room with chairs, cushions, papers scattered all over the floor with thieves'. If Okara's overall concern is with the knowledge that comes from intuitive perception, the concrete language in which he tries to show how the intuitive faculty can work bears a resemblance to William Golding's rendering of neolithic sense perceptions in *The Inheritors*. This 'sixth sense' is made to appear as if it worked like one of the more familiar five senses.

Another dimension of this peculiar application of English words in the novel is the use of the term 'inside', which Ashcroft and others call the 'culturally relevant' English. This method specifically demonstrates the importance of the 'situation' of the word in the discourse by giving rise to lexical items which have various meanings depending on how they are employed in the text. In fact they are employed in a variety of ways in the novel. For example:

'Listen. Asking the bottom of things in this town will take you no place. Hook this up with your little finger. Put it in your inside's box and lock it up' (36).

'Your teaching words do not enter my inside' (36)
'You must leave this town. It will pain our insides too much to see you suffer' (48)

'But Okolo looking at them said in his inside that his spoken words would only break against them as an egg would against a stone' (48).

'These happening things make my inside bitter, perhaps more bitter than yours' (48).

'How can I change my inside'? (49)

'I see in my inside that your spoken words are true and straight. But you see it in your inside that we have no power to do anything. The spirit is powerful. So it is they who get the spirit that are powerful and the people believe with their insides whatever they are told. The world is no longer straight... So turn this over in your inside and do as we do so that you will have a sweet inside like us' (49).

In these passages, it would be possible to attribute to the word inside meanings such as emotions or feelings, self-referentiality, outlook on life, personality, intellectual perception, understanding, intellectuality, heart and mind. But to do so would be to interpret Okara's words and contain them rather than allow their meaning to be determined by their specific context. The term 'sweet inside' is dense with metaphoric possibility, connoting all the
characteristics of harmonious and congenial spirit. It is possible to make some very clear assumptions from these passages about the holistic nature of self in Ijaw culture, of the notions of the 'inside' as that which responds to everything which is 'outside' or 'other'. But Ashcroft and others suggest that it would be erroneous to believe that this sense of self is a contingent component in the communication of the meaning of the term 'inside' when used in the novel. The authors add that the meaning of the word is that composite of uses which emerges in any reading. Thus 'inside' is not a metaphor for 'the Ijaw sense of self' when used in these ways in the novel; it is a metaphor for 'self', and may give rise to the possibility of many meanings: mind, will, spirit or emotion according to the ways in which it functions in the text.

Though The Voice perhaps lacks verbal sophistication, it is refreshingly rich in conceptional imagery. The novel could even be called 'iconographic', in the sense, it is not merely a narrative expounding of the issues but a progressive apprehension of a 'situation' or a 'reality' in terms of a series of images. Besides the symbolic quality of precision and suggestiveness, it has a poetic beauty that is not often found in West African novels. Technically, there is no 'plot' as such, yet as the events unfold before our eyes imperceptibly 'it' becomes the equivalent of 'meaning of life'; in his attempts to concretize a rather nebulous notion
Okara has almost arrived at a spatializing effect. It is not as skilfully worked out as the famous country fair scene in Madame Bovary that Joseph Frank analyses, yet one could simultaneously perceive much of the imagery that constitutes the texture of The Voice—Okolo's encounter with the people at Tuere's hut, his journey to Sologa, the meetings with various kinds of people, his return with deeper convictions, and the atmosphere consistently created by imagery of 'darkness', 'water', 'shadow', and 'smells' as compositional rather than narrative. The effect is cumulative, reflexive rather than linear. Also, the time sequence of the narrative moves very slowly, and our attention is fixed on the interplay of relationships within a limited framework. To a large extent, these relationships are juxtaposed independently of the narrative sequence, providing the novel with a unified impact, "the simplicity of a parable and the poignancy of an epitaph."\(^{20}\)

The same artistic precision is evident even in the concluding chapters. Okolo's return causes a sensation in Amatu, leaving the elders 'cold', 'dumb' and 'silent'. Considered now as a rebel who threatens the established order of society, Okolo is a 'stinking thing' who should be removed immediately; he is more than a 'lunatic'. The note of frustration and pessimism heard throughout the novel is reinforced by the tragic end of Okolo and Tuere. Tuere's
loyalty is depicted very touchingly till the end, and she decides to stand by Okolo in the moments of trial. As they both float down the river the next morning, tied to the seats of a canoe, it implies the death of individual idealism and the resurgence of the competing forces of convention and orthodoxy. The only positive note heard is that there are already signs of Okolo's 'spoken words' taking root in Amatu. And Ukule the cripple promises to tend the fire of their message, "Your spoken words will not die" (127).

Louis James in his essay "Wilson Harris and the Guyanese Quartet" brings out points of comparison between The Voice and The Whole Armour by Harris. He says that this noted Caribbean novelist personally "experienced the mystical awareness of both place and people that haunts his writing." Louis James further adds that at the heart of his novels are instants in which a place or an individual, in the words of another mystic, Martin Buber, steps 'out of the incomprehensibility that lies to hand...and becomes a presence'. The Whole Armour is a book which offers a theme very similar to that of The Voice, considering the 'prophetic' nature of the heroes of both the novels. Harris' novel is set back in the interior, and examines a particular section of the Guyanese community--the river settlements and migrants, largely of African origin, that move into and from the bush. It is a hard, violent life, and the novel explores
the meaning of violence and death. The heroine, Magda, is the 'toughest and best whore in the river district'. The hero, Cristo, is suspected of murder. Examining the nature of guilt, Harris gives the book a "biblical substructure" as indicated by the names of the characters—Cristo (Christ), who spends forty days and nights in the wilderness; Magda (Mary Magdalene); Matthias (Matthew); Peet (Peter), Abram, the father figure; and Sharon, the rose and beauty of love.

The fear that underpins the novel is symbolized by the mythical tiger that lurks, never seen, in the corner of the villagers' eyes, blamed for violent deaths, including that of Cristo. But the violence is not outside, it is within—mankind itself was the tiger. It becomes identified with Cristo, who in the jungle literally takes on the skin and claws of the tiger. But by taking on the form of evil he transforms it. He becomes the ambivalent tiger of Blake's poem, which Harris quotes, at once a symbol of fear and divine energy. Through the character of Cristo, Harris offers a new vision and hope for Guyana, a psychic redemption from violence. But the police, the representatives of society, come to take him to trial and probable death, leaving Sharon to wear the tiger-skin of redemption. Louis James concludes: "It is the theme of Gabriel Okara's The Voice, with both the strengths and weaknesses of greater intricacy."23
Speaking up for righteousness in thought and action, being misunderstood and finally brought to a tragic end by infuriated elders—this is a pattern perceived in history and uniquely epitomized in the lives of Christ and Socrates. Nathaniel Laor in a study which appeared in *Yale French Studies* that focussed on 'literature and the ethical question' examines this phenomenon, and especially, the treatment Socrates received at the hands of his countrymen is subjected to a detailed analysis by him. Laor too closely follows the comparison between Jesus Christ and Socrates and comments: "How remarkably similar are the fates of Socrates and of Jesus at the hands of their fellow humans," simultaneously referring to the limitations of the comparison. However what is relevant in the context is that Okolo is thoroughly misunderstood and mocked by the public like this great philosopher, who was committed to his quest for the meaning of life. People thought that he had a demon, and that he was misleading others. Both yielded neither to instinct nor to authority, rather obeyed their own 'insides', the moral urge. They never were consumed by a desire for revenge and would willingly submit to death rather than transgress the law. Okolo set himself up as an example in integrity and expected his fellowmen to follow him in the pursuit of righteousness. But it was beyond them to contemplate this option as they had no self-knowledge and as their 'insides' were not straight. Both end up as victims of
the ruthless aggression of their societies. If Nathaniel Laor does not hesitate to affirm that Socrates indeed was a "cultural phenomenon", we may add that Okolo's is that "prophetic voice" which has its echoes resounding beyond the confines of space and time.

The Voice possesses a unique charm. It has "the directness of folk-lore, the mystery of a fairy-tale and the symbolism of a fable or religious quest." Yet, it proclaims that the world portrayed here allows no space to the non-conformist; any seriously individualistic thinking is treated as taboo and the 'thinker', oppressed or ostracised.

Okara very systematically explores into the exact nature of the steady 'alienation' of Okolo from his society as he believed in 'thinking differently'. Being a person who thinks deep and straight, Okolo sees into the complexity of the situation, incessantly searches for a solution, and realizes that his problems do not offer easy answers. In fact Okolo's predicament takes us back to our initial assumptions regarding individualism which suggests that any deviation from conformity is condemned and viewed as revolt. Despite the authenticity and genuineness of his quest, Okolo pays for his individualistic gesture by his life, reinforcing
the traditional dictum that an individual can exist only in terms of the community—'I participate, therefore I am' rather than the Cartesian 'I think, therefore I am'. The singular significance of the novel is that Okolo has been able to shock his townsmen out of their complacency and effectively herald the dawn of a new ethos.
NOTES


2 The term 'synagogue' (from the Greek word for 'assembly', sometimes used in relation to the congregation of Israel) is referred both to the group involved, consisting of a minimum of ten adult males, and to the building in which it met. The chief purpose of the synagogue was the Sabbath service, and during the week days it was used as a school in which the scribes instructed the young people in scripture and its exegesis. See Robert Grant, A Historical Introduction to the New Testament (London: William Collins, 1963) 274-275.


4 Barclay 81-84.

5 Cited by Barclay, 86.

7 In the Gospel of St. Luke 3:4 John the Baptist, who came as the forerunner of Messiah, is referred to as 'the one shouting in the wilderness', whose voice goes unheeded, and is eventually imprisoned and beheaded for pointing an accusing finger at the injustices of Herod. In the Old Testament the Book of Isaiah (40:3) also says, "A voice cries, 'Prepare in the wilderness a way for Yahweh....."

8 It is illuminating that Okara himself told the novelist Andrea Salkey that the book represents the struggle between the forces of darkness and light. (cited by Adrian Roscoe in Mother is Gold, London: OUP, 1971, 113.)

9 Roscoe 113.

10 Roscoe 113.


15 A. Ravenscroft 131.


22 Louis James 165.

23 Louis James 171.


25 Nathaniel Laor 196.

26 Eustace Palmer 166.