

Language, Literature and Social Exclusion in Some Contemporary Northern Nigerian Novels

Ibrahim Muhammad Abdullahi

Department of English and Literary Studies, Al-Qalam University, Katsina

Abstract

This paper investigates how literature employs Language in its crucial roles in exploring the themes of social exclusion in some contemporary Northern Nigerian novels. The paper navigates classic representations on the quest for the genesis of social exclusion in the contemporary Northern Nigerian novel. The concept of social exclusion overlaps with the notions of poverty, incapability and deprivation: an accumulation of social disadvantage with respect to material resources, social and economic participation and personal growth. It first arose in Europe in the 1970s in the context of radical economic restructuring and concerns over risks to social cohesion and stability. The paper adapts Armatya Sen's (1999) "Capability Deprivation Theory" as its theoretical framework and, the qualitative text-based method as its analytical tool. The findings reveal that through the power of language, literature depicts the experiences of individuals who are socially excluded in numerous ways, while highlighting the emotional and psychological impact of exclusion on human beings in Northern Nigeria. It concludes that by encouraging the study of literature, readers can reflect on the importance of connection, empathy, and understanding in combating social exclusion and fostering a sense of community not only in Northern Nigeria, but in the Nigerian nation.

Keywords: Language, Literature, Social Isolation, Poverty and Community.

Introduction

In the contexts of Nigerian and African fictions, language has played a significant role in shaping the literary representation of social exclusion, particularly in the works of authors like Chinua Achebe, Mariana Bar, and Sembene Ousmane. These works provide the classical perception of social exclusion in Africa. In Northern Nigeria, writers like Abubakar Adam Ibrahim (2015) and A'isha Bello (2019) are two contemporary novelists whose works reflect the contemporary state of the phenomenon in Northern Nigeria. Both authors have used language to expose and challenge dominant narratives and promote inclusivity.

Language and literature have been defined variously and with the passage of time, more definitions could emerge. *The Longman Dictionary* (2017) defines language "as a system of communication by written or spoken words, which is used by the people of a particular country or area." However, David et al (2003) in the *Longman Anthology of English Literatures* describes literature as "... a range of artistically shaped works written in a changed language, appealing to the imagination at least as much as to discursive reasoning" (p. 906). This clearly shows that language and literature correlate to facilitate discursive cultural conversation.

Kaplan (2005) opines that the alliance between language and literature is a direct intercourse. He holds that in every society, the individual citizens share a common culture thorough language use and, this culture is sustained by use of the language and is transmitted

to posterities and to other nations by means of the language. One significant way of this transmission is “literature” which is also an “institution of culture” like language (Kantarcioglu, 1997). Kaplan (2005) in his book *Culture and Language*, posits further that this cultural institution is a kind of art that is composed of language. However, the language of this art, i.e. literature, is more different from ordinary language. Jakobson illustrates that “the language of literature is a deviation, transformation and intensity from standard use of language in the society” (Jakobson, as cited in Eagleton, 1983, p. 75). Obviously, this style of usage becomes part of literary work: the ornaments of literature in the work of art.

A literary work consists of form and content. Content is created through form. In other words, content is presented through language according to the selection of the author. It suffices to say that literary language stimulates emotional and psychological reaction by addressing the human senses. This stimulant is encoded in the images used in the work (Stephanie, 2006). This artistic use of language constitutes what the Formalists call “defamiliarization” (Eagleton, 1983, p. 79); In other words, language in literature is a powerful device that captures audience’s attention through involving the reader’s imagination in the discursive processes.

Literature plays a crucial role in the intellectual fight against social exclusion by giving voice to marginalised and underrepresented communities, shedding light on important social issues, and fostering empathy and understanding among individuals from diverse backgrounds. Through storytelling, literature challenges stereotypes, breaks down barriers, and creates a sense of shared humanity. By portraying characters and perspectives from different cultures, races, genders, sexual orientations, and social classes in their works, authors help readers to see the world through someone else's eyes and develop a greater sense of empathy and connection with people who may be different from themselves. This can be particularly important for individuals who may not have much direct exposure to people from diverse backgrounds in their own lives.

Literature also provides a platform for the marginalised groups to speak out about their experiences and advocate for social change. By telling their own stories in their own words, these voices (from Chinua Achebe, Sembene Ousmane, Mariama Bar, Abubakak Adam Ibrahim, Aisha Bello etc.) can help to challenge dominant narratives and bring attention to issues such as discrimination, inequality, and social injustice.

The themes of language, literature, and social exclusion are interconnected and have been explored in various works of literature and academic discourses. Language is a powerful tool that can both connect and exclude individuals. In literature, language is often used to convey emotions, thoughts, and experiences. Characters in literature may experience exclusion due to language barriers: inability to communicate effectively, or being misunderstood by others. On the other hand, language can also be a means of connection, allowing individuals to share their experiences and forge interpersonal relationships.

Literature, through its exploration of human experiences, often delves into themes of social exclusion. Literary works by authors like Abubakar Adam Ibrahim and A’isha Bello portray characters who are socially excluded due to various reasons such as societal norms, personal choices, or external circumstances in Northern Nigeria. Literature serves as a mirror to society, reflecting the impact of social exclusion on individuals and communities. Social exclusion is, therefore, a prevalent theme in literature in Northern Nigeria and a reality for many

individuals in society. Characters who experience social exclusion may struggle with feelings of alienation and disconnection from other social relationships. Literature often examines the causes and consequences of social exclusion, shedding light on human condition and the need for connection and belonging. However, social exclusion is also the deliberate social denial and relegation to the fringe of society.

The term, social exclusion was first employed in Europe and was initially put to use in France in the late 20th century (Silver, 1994). While contextualising the concept of social exclusion to EU situation, the European Commission defines it as:

... a situation whereby a person is prevented (or excluded) from contributing to and benefiting from economic and social progress (EC, 2001).

This implies that social exclusion is a total denial that precludes the individual from contributing or benefiting from one's rights and privileges. This may vary from one culture to another, relative to the prevailing circumstances. Thus, it is used variously by scholars across disciplines: education, linguistics, sociology, psychology (Peace, 2001; O'Donovan et. el, 2018). Social exclusion is therefore, the process of denying individuals full access to social rights, opportunities and resources which are normally accessible and available to members of a different group, and which are fundamental to social integration and observance of human rights within that particular group (e.g. due process).

Alienation or disenfranchisement resulting from social exclusion can be connected to a person's social class, race, skin color, religious affiliation, ethnic origin, caste, educational status, childhood relationships (Salvation Army Annual Appeal 2008), living standards, and or political opinions, and appearance. Such exclusionary forms of discrimination may also apply to disabled people (Oliver, 1983; Barnes, 1991; Morris, 1991), minority tribes, drug users, HIV patients, the elderly and the young (Patton, 1990; Epstein, 1996; Hall, 1997; Bessant, 2003). Anyone who appears to deviate in any way from perceived norms of a population or the dominant belief system may thereby become subject to coarse or subtle forms of social exclusion.

Impact of Social Exclusion

Although the impact of social exclusion is relative to the nature and extent of exclusion, the common outcome of this social phenomenon is that the affected individuals or communities are prevented from participating fully in the economic, social, and political life of the society in which they live (Young, 2000). This may result in frustrated resistance in the form of demonstrations, protests or lobbying or arson from the excluded people (Young, 2000).

Another way of articulating the definition of social exclusion is its multidimensional process of progressive social rupture, detaching groups and individuals from social relations and institutions and preventing them from full participation in the normal, normatively prescribed activities of the society in which they live (Hilary, 2007).

Theoretically, social exclusion manifests at the individual or group level in four correlated dimensions: i) insufficient access to social rights, ii) material deprivation, iii) limited social participation and iv) a lack of normative integration. It is then regarded as the

combined result of personal risk factors (age, gender, race); macro-societal changes (demographic, economic and labour market developments, technological innovation, the evolution of social norms); government legislation and social policy; and the actual behaviour of businesses, administrative organisations and fellow citizens (Joel-Gijsbers & Vrooman, 2007).

This paper therefore, investigates how literature employs Language in its crucial roles in exploring the themes of social exclusion in Northern Nigeria as a common existential distraction of Africa's socioeconomic and political endeavours to self-realisation and eventual attainment of self-actualization for economic development, through the lenses of randomly selected fictions.

Theoretical Framework

Sen's (1999) Capability Deprivation Theory is the principle that guides this paper. This theory is a deviation from the dominant income-centric practice of exclusion analysis. It was initially developed by the economist and philosopher Amartya Sen. The Capability Deprivation Theory interrogates the "informational space" on which considerations of various forms of exclusion: poverty, inequality, injustice, and so forth, could be based. In his *Development as Freedom* (1999) Sen outlined the theory. He identified equality of appropriate "space" for analysing exclusion as fundamental. According to this theory, what people are capable of doing or becoming in life is the only fundamental space for evaluating social exclusion and inclusion. Sen argues that people's incomes and their resource holdings only have instrumental importance because of what they allow a person to do or be. In other words, what a person can do or be is intrinsically more significant. Sen (2009) introduces the notion of "conversion factors" (p. 17) - individual differences in people that may require different amounts of resources in order to achieve the same beings and doings. However, the existence of "conversion factors" and the nonmonetary nature of some dimensions of social well-being offer two reasons for identifying and adopting this theory.

Language, Literature and Social Exclusion in Northern Nigeria

Exploring the themes of language, literature, and social exclusion in African literature, with particular emphasis on Northern Nigerian literature is a complex endeavour. These elements are deeply intertwined, reflecting the diverse cultural and social landscapes across the continent, the country and the region under reference. Literature in Africa serves as a powerful tool for representing and challenging social issues, including exclusion and marginalisation. By amplifying diverse voices and narratives, literature sheds useful light on the experiences of marginalised communities and promotes social change. Social exclusion in Northern Nigeria as in Nigeria and in Africa is influenced by various factors, including economic inequality, ethnic discrimination, and unequal access to resources and opportunities. Language and literature can both reinforce existing power dynamics or challenge them, depending on how they are used, perceived and represented.

A critical examination of the intersections of language and literature in the portrayal of social exclusion in Northern Nigerian fictions would provide valuable insights into the complexities of identity, power, and representation on the continent. The theme of language,

literature, and social exclusion in Africa is a rich and complex one. These cultural variables are deeply intertwined, reflecting the diverse cultural and social landscapes across the continent. Language plays a crucial role in shaping and preserving cultural identities in Africa. The use of indigenous languages in literature allows the expression of unique perspectives and experiences that may not be captured in dominant colonial languages. However, the dominance of certain languages in education and official settings can marginalise native languages, thus, perpetuating social exclusion and creating cultural dependence.

Therefore, social exclusion in Northern Nigeria as in Nigeria and Africa is influenced by various factors, including economic inequality, ethnic discrimination, and unequal access to resources and opportunities. Language and literature can both reinforce existing power dynamics or challenge them, depending on how they are perceived, used and represented.

Language and Literature in Northern Nigeria

Language plays a significant role in shaping the literary depiction of social exclusion in Northern Nigeria. The choice of language is crucial and sensitive to avoid language exclusion. However, to facilitate more open and general conversation, it is pertinent to use the English language for its being the common and level ground for intercultural dialogue. This is regardless of its colonial affiliation. The English language is the recognised language of official transactions in Nigeria. It is the language of instructions in our schools, language of the law, and language of national and global discourses. Literature in Northern Nigeria deploys the English language for its utility in facilitating discourses with the outer worlds. Thus, the crucial language function of signifying meaning and encoding content is achieved through:

- i. **Language choice:** The choice of language used by authors can influence how social exclusion is portrayed. For example, writing in indigenous languages can highlight the experiences of marginalised communities, while using colonial languages may perpetuate dominant narratives.
- ii. **Linguistic representation:** Language can be used to represent marginalised groups in a stereotypical or demeaning manner, thus, reinforcing social exclusion. Alternatively, authors can use language to subvert these stereotypes and promote inclusivity.
- iii. **Narrative perspective:** Language influences the narrative perspective, with authors using language to create a particular tone, voice, and point of view. This can impact how social exclusion is presented and perceived by readers.
- iv. **Cultural expression:** Language is deeply tied to culture, and authors use language to express cultural experiences, beliefs, and values. This cultural expression can either perpetuate or challenge social exclusion.
- v. **Power dynamics:** Language can be a tool for social control, with dominant languages and discourses marginalising minority languages and voices. Authors may use language to challenge or reinforce these power dynamics.
- vi. **Code-switching:** Authors may use code-switching (switching between languages or dialects) to convey social exclusion, highlighting the complexities of identity, culture, and power.

- vii. **Silencing:** Language can be used to silence marginalised voices, and authors may depict this silencing as a form of social exclusion.
- viii. **Resistance:** Language can also be a tool for resistance, with authors using language to challenge and critique social exclusion and promote social justice and inclusivity.

Language and Social Exclusion in Northern Nigeria

Language and social exclusion in Africa/Nigeria is a complex and multifaceted concern. Nigeria, for example, has over 250 ethnic groups and more than 500 languages (Euba, 2013) spoken, making it a linguistically diverse country. However, this diversity can also lead to language-based social exclusion, where certain groups are marginalised or excluded from social, economic, and political opportunities due to their language or linguistic identity. Instances of the interaction of language and social exclusion in Northern Nigeria and Africa include:

- i. **Dominance of colonial languages:** In many African countries, colonial languages like English, French, and Portuguese are often the languages of power, education, and government, thus marginalising indigenous languages and their native speakers.
- ii. **Linguistic discrimination:** People who speak minority languages or dialects may face discrimination, stigma, or ridicule, leading to social exclusion and marginalisation.
- iii. **Restricted access to education and information:** In some cases, education and information are only available in dominant languages, excluding those who do not speak these languages.
- iv. **Political and economic marginalisation:** Language can be a factor in political and economic marginalisation, with certain groups being excluded from decision-making processes and economic opportunities due to their language or linguistic identity.
- v. **Cultural erasure:** The dominance of certain languages and cultures can lead to the erasure of minority cultures and languages, further exacerbating social exclusion (Marsela, 2014).

Literature and Social Exclusion in Northern Nigeria

Analysing Northern Nigerian literature through the lens of social exclusion requires a comprehensive look at various texts that address this theme in Nigeria and perhaps, in Africa. This would enable us to identify the common thrust of the phenomenon and possible peculiarity. One notable work that delves into social exclusion in Africa is *Nervous Conditions* (1988) by Tsitsi Dangarembga. This novel, set in postcolonial Zimbabwe, explores the challenges faced by women and girls in a patriarchal society, shedding light on how social norms and structures can perpetuate exclusion and marginalisation. The novel skillfully depicts the struggles of the protagonist, Tambudzai, as she navigates the limitations placed on her by gender, class, and educational access. Through Tambudzai's experiences, the novel highlights the intersecting forms of social exclusion that shape African societies, particularly for women and marginalised communities.

Arrows of God (1964), *So Long a Letter* (1979), and *God's Bits of Wood* (1960) are three other influential African literary works that explore social exclusion in different contexts.

Arrows of God (1964) was set in colonial Nigeria. The novel examines the exclusion of indigenous cultures and people by British colonialism. Through the protagonist's struggles to maintain his cultural identity and resist the imposition of foreign values, and through other characters and plot developments, Achebe explores the theme of social exclusion. One significant example of social exclusion in the novel is the character Ezeulu, the chief priest of Ulu, who becomes increasingly excluded from his community due to his rigid adherence to tradition and his refusal to adapt to the changing political and social landscape brought about by colonisation and colonial system. Ezeulu's social exclusion is further compounded by the manipulation by colonial officials and Christian missionaries who exploit his isolation for their own gain. As Ezeulu loses influence and respect within his community, he becomes marginalised and ultimately suffers a tragic fate. Through the character of Ezeulu and other instances of social exclusion in the novel, Achebe interrogates traditional power structures and explores the complexities of community dynamics in the face of external pressures and internal conflicts.

In Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* (1979), social exclusion is also a significant theme that is examined through the experiences of the main character, Ramatoulaye. The story revolves around Ramatoulaye's struggles as a widow in a society that often marginalises and excludes women who are divorced, single or in one way or another, not part of a marital relationship.

Ramatoulaye's journey highlights the challenges faced by women who are socially excluded based on their marital status and their perceived roles in society. As a widow, she is expected to grieve quietly and withdraw from public life, facing judgment and discrimination from those around her. This social exclusion is further compounded by cultural norms and expectations that limit her choices and opportunities for independence.

Through Ramatoulaye's narrative, Mariama Ba sheds light on the ways in which social exclusion can impact individuals, particularly women, in patriarchal societies. The novel serves as a poignant exploration of resilience, sisterhood, and the power of women's voices in the face of social injustice and exclusion.

In Ousmane Sembene's *God's Bits of Wood* (1960), the theme of social exclusion is deeply intertwined with the broader themes of colonialism, labor struggles, and community solidarity. The novel explores the experiences of African railway workers who face exploitation, discrimination, and marginalisation at the hands of their French colonial overlords.

Social exclusion in *God's Bits of Wood* (1960) is portrayed through the systemic oppression and dehumanization of the African railway workers, who are denied fair wages, adequate living conditions, and basic rights by the colonial authorities. The workers are often treated as disposable labor and are subject to harsh working conditions that lead to injury, illness, and death.

As the workers unite in solidarity and resistance against their oppressors, the novel highlights how social exclusion can be challenged through collective action and a sense of community. The solidarity among the workers transcends ethnic and cultural differences, uniting them in their struggle for dignity, justice, and equality. Through the depiction of social exclusion in *God's Bits of Wood* (1960), Sembene underscores the importance of unity,

resilience, and resistance in the face of oppressive systems that seek to divide and marginalise individuals and communities.

So far, we have seen how social exclusion is fundamentally and variously linked to our common experiences with colonialism, neo-colonialism and Imperialism. It suffices to say, therefore, the phenomenal prevalence of social exclusion in Northern Nigeria is the persistence of neo-colonial legacies in Africa.

However, the experience of social exclusion in Northern Nigeria is similar to the classical period. The difference principally relates to how the causal agent of social exclusion shift. Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *Season of Crimson Blossoms* (2015) offers a poignant portrayal of life in Northern Nigeria, laying bare the complex Web of social, cultural, and economic factors that restrict individuals' capabilities. Jamila's experiences portray how societal norms compromise women's autonomy and agency. Sen (1999) posits that poverty and social exclusion result from capability deprivations, limiting individuals' freedom to achieve valued goals Her experiences further illustrate how societal norms restrict feminine intrinsic capabilities: "A woman's body was not hers to own, not in this city, not in this country" (Ibrahim, 2015, p. 5) This, vividly represents curtailment of women's autonomy, freedom and capability. Consequently, "She felt trapped, trapped by the society's expectations" (Ibrahim, 2015, p. 3) thus restraining her freedom. This deprived Jamila of the right to venture through her human capabilities and talents into new and profitable ventures.

Reza's struggles demonstrate how economic disparities restrict capabilities because "The rich had a way of making you feel poor, even when you weren't" (Ibrahim, 2015, p. 97). This explains how economic exclusion perpetuates economic inequality which impacts self-concept and sense of self-importance. The author laments that "In this city, class was everything. It determined where you lived, what you wore, who you married" (Ibrahim, 2015, p. 147) directly referring to the emergence of a capitalist state in which economic status influences life opportunities. Northern Nigeria is portrayed to have been engulfed in classism which further the divide between the have and the have not. "The Northern Nigeria was a complex place, full of contradiction" (Ibrahim, 2015, p. 19). In other words, Northern Nigeria is caught between two tensions: traditional and modern values. Jamila "... was (equally) caught between two worlds: the traditional and the modern" (Ibrahim, 2015, p. 111). The author portrays the challenges of navigating multiple cultural identities. One cannot be himself and another at the same time. This delicate self identity confusion is what sustain social exclusion in Northern Nigeria.

Critically, *Season of Crimson Blossoms* (2015) highlights how women's body are politicised and controlled, underscoring the capability deprivation that arises from patriarchal norms. Jamila's struggles reflect tension between individual desire and societal norms and expectations, demonstrating how women's freedom is curtailed. Her navigating traditional and modern values reflects the cultural complexity of Northern Nigeria. The novel highlights the conflict between cultural heritage and personal freedom and choice. Jamila's journey illustrates how cultural norms can restrict intrinsic capabilities for personal transformation and growth, underscoring the importance of cultural sensitivity in promoting human development.

Reza and Jamila's relationship represents how human connection can enhance capabilities. The novel demonstrates how love and desire can empower individuals and challenge societal norms

and expectations. This relationship illustrates the potential for human connection to enhance capabilities, promote freedom and personal development.

However, Reza's struggles reflect how economic disparities restrict and deprive access to various forms of social mobility: education, employment and social opportunities. The novel thus, underscores how economic deprivation or inequality affects self-concept, upward social mobility, while perpetuating and recycling poverty. Reza's experiences demonstrate how class based capability deprivation compromise individual freedom, reinforcing the notion that economic empowerment is essential for human development. Hence, reinforcing the impact of capability deprivation.

A'isha Bello's *Adventures of Jogulu* (2019) is yet another novel about a young adult set in Northern Nigeria. The novel explores the themes of poverty, inequality that confirms Sen's (1999) assertion that social exclusion and poverty are consequences of deliberate capability deprivations which limit individual chances of personal achievement and development. Economic capability deprivation is portrayed as Bello decried: "Poverty had become a constant companion, always lurking in the shadows" (Bello, 2019, p. 12). This represents the extent of social restrictions that combined to constrained Jogulu's capabilities and personal initiatives. These social denials, as "The community saw him as an outcast, a boy from the wrong side of the tracks" (Bello, 2019, p. 35) highlights the impact of social norms restriction on individual capabilities and achievements. This is further complicated by Jogulu's lack of education because "School was a luxury Jogulu couldn't afford" (Bello, 2019, p. 50) as indication of how extreme poverty restrained and repressed his intellectual growth and perpetuates his life in accelerated deprivation. Consequently, Jogulu is confronted by multiple social deprivations as "The hospital was too far and the fees too high" (Bello, 2019, p. 75). Jogulu's double tragedy is about access to health facilities and the wherewithal to bear the cost. Poverty is here shown to have totally consumed the common Northern Nigeria citizen. This is how social exclusion deprived the average Northerner of the fundamental rights to self-development and the good life. This is how societal norms and expectations combine to repress the individual. This is how socially motivated capabilities deprivations in innumerable ways, sustain poverty and underdevelopment in Northern Nigeria.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the interplay of language and literature in highlighting the menace and implication of social exclusion in Northern Nigeria through an analytical regional survey of social exclusion in Nigeria and the African continent. The surveyed novels have enabled the paper to navigate the classical mode of literary representation of social exclusion, highlighting the marginalisation of individuals or groups based on cultural identity, gender, or socio-economic status. *Arrows of God* (1964) and *God's Bits of Wood* (1960) explicitly addressed the exclusionary effects of colonialism and how this creates injustice, inequality and mass poverty, while *So Long a Letter* (1979) and *Nervous Conditions* (1988) have represented the lingering patriarchal norms perpetuated by gender exclusion. However, both texts explore the intersectionality of gender and social exclusion, while *Arrows of God* (1964) and *God's Bits of Wood* (1960) focus on the intersection of cultural identity and socio-economic exclusion. All

the novels showcase characters resisting and struggling for ways to overcome social exclusion, whether through cultural preservation, personal narratives, or collective action.

Season of Crimson Blossoms (2015) and *The Adventures of Jogulu* (2019) offer a nuanced portrayal of capability deprivation in Northern Nigeria, highlighting the interconnectedness of gender, class, and cultural factors. Through Sen's (1999) Capability Deprivation Theory, this paper has demonstrated how the novels underscores the importance of promoting freedom, agency, and human development.

This study might have scratched the surface of the phenomenon of social exclusion, yet, it's a great starting point for exploring the complex and thought-provoking themes in these literary works. To address contemporary literature, language and social exclusion in Northern Nigeria and Africa, it is essential to promote linguistic diversity and inclusivity, support mother tongue education, and recognise the value of indigenous languages and cultures. Additionally, policies and programs aimed at promoting social inclusion and addressing discrimination can help to mitigate the effects of language-based and other forms of social exclusion through literary studies.

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