

A LITERARY PRAGMATIC EXPLORATION OF POLITICAL CLIENTELISM IN BEN OKRI'S *THE FAMISHED ROAD* AND IKECHUKWU ASIKA'S *PIMPLES ON WRINKLES*

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Abstract

Political clientelism remains a persistent obstacle to democratic accountability in postcolonial Africa. This study examines how Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* and Ikechukwu Asika's *Pimples on Wrinkles* construct and challenge patronage networks through literary and rhetorical choices. Using speech act theory, Gricean pragmatics, and Kenneth Burke's (1973) concept of literature as equipment for living (which is structured around the proverb function, perspective by incongruity, and the therapeutic function), the paper investigates how both novels carry out civic work at the level of utterance, narrative structure, and implicature. Three findings emerge. First, both novels use pragmatic devices to encode the structural logic of clientelism: Asika employs face-threatening rhetoric and willful transgressions of the quality maxim, while Okri uses personification and explanatory crowd rebuttals. Additionally, both employ incongruity to contest the normalisation of patronage: Okri uses the contrast between the community's physical coercion and its verbal clarity, while Asika deploys satirical mapping of public extraction onto the elite body. Third, both serve complementary therapeutic purposes: Asika through structural admonition, and Okri through group exhortation. The study concludes that postcolonial fiction serves as a rhetorically purposeful civic tool for challenging entrenched patronage networks, making a literary pragmatic contribution to African literature and political scholarship.

Keywords: political clientelism, postcolonial literature, literary pragmatics, Kenneth Burke, Nigerian fiction

Introduction

This study examines how Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991) and Ikechukwu Asika's *Pimples on Wrinkles* (2017) depict political clientelism as a system of exchange between patrons and clients for power or material gain, and how both novels use literary and rhetorical strategies to critique its entrenchment in contemporary Nigerian society. Political clientelism, also referred to as 'client politics,' involves the implicit or explicit exchange of goods and services for patronage, political support, or vote buying (Stokes et al., 2013; Pellicer et al., 2021). The practice is characterised by an asymmetric relationship between patrons, brokers, and clients, where organised interest groups or influential individuals benefit at the expense of the public. Hicken et al. (2022) and Kramon (2017) note that clientelism interacts strongly with identity and ethnic dynamics, particularly in systems where political competition is concentrated among a small number of powerful groups.

Hicken (2011) identifies four defining features of clientelist relationships: dyadic ties, contingency, hierarchy, and iteration. These features distinguish clientelism from corruption, though the two frequently coexist. Corruption involves dishonest conduct for personal gain, whereas clientelism distributes benefits not to the perpetrator but to third-party affiliates as rewards for loyalty and support (Kawata, 2006). This distinction matters because clientelism takes forms (like nepotism, vote buying, and coercion) that are not always immediately recognisable as corrupt, each of which undermines objective leadership and the equitable distribution of public resources. Though patron-client relationships have a long cross-cultural history, their postcolonial configurations in Nigeria are distinct as products of specific institutional weaknesses, colonial administrative legacies, and conditions of material scarcity that give exchange its coercive force (Kramon, 2017; Mares and Young, 2016).

In postcolonial societies, clientelism has become a near-normalised feature of political life, operating at both individual and group levels. At the individual level, politicians use material benefits to secure electoral support from specific voters (Mares and Young, 2016), while at the group level they target swing voters or loyal blocs to maximise electoral returns. Brokers facilitate these exchanges at hybrid, organisational, and party levels, making the system structurally resilient against reform. The consequences extend well beyond electoral manipulation: clientelism degrades democratic institutions, diverts

public resources from collective goods, and produces a political culture in which accountability becomes structurally impossible (Hicken, 2011). Research has demonstrated that voters embedded in clientelist systems resist sanctioning corrupt politicians through democratic means, fearing institutional reprisal from the very networks on which their material survival depends (Bøttkjær and Justesen, 2021). Addressing these effects requires strengthening transparency, civic engagement, and institutional responsiveness at the structural level, rather than at the level of individual conduct (Pellicer et al., 2021).

It is within this context that literature becomes a significant analytical resource, and the selection of *The Famished Road* and *Pimples on Wrinkles* as primary texts is informed by two considerations: their shared preoccupation with clientelism across different historical moments of Nigerian political life, and the significant gaps in existing scholarship on both texts. Ben Okri is a Nigerian-British novelist whose fiction draws on Yoruba cosmology, African oral tradition, and modernist narrative technique to construct what he has described as 'spiritual realism' (a mode in which the boundaries between the spirit world and the world of the living remain permeable and politically charged). His novel *The Famished Road*, winner of the Booker Prize for Fiction in 1991, follows Azaro, an abiku or spirit child, whose liminal identity gives him an observing perspective on the political corruption, party violence, and social deprivation of postcolonial Nigeria. Ikechukwu Asika is a Nigerian novelist and playwright whose work engages with the social and political conditions of contemporary Nigeria through political satire and social realism that stands in deliberate contrast to Okri's mythic register. His novel *Pimples on Wrinkles* (2017) centres on the Odiolisa family, whose progressive dispossession by a corrupt bureaucratic system serves as the vehicle for a direct, unallegorised critique of patronage networks, pension fraud, and the sexual coercion that economic desperation enables. The contrast between Okri's symbolic indirection and Asika's satirical directness is not incidental; it constitutes the comparative rationale for reading the two novels together, since each mode of literary representation equips readers differently for recognising and contesting the same political formation.

Taken together, the texts offer a temporal arc (from early postcolonial formation to late neoliberal entrenchment) that allows for a more layered account of

clientelism than either novel could provide alone. Critical studies of *The Famished Road* have concentrated largely on postcolonial identity and magical realism (Chaabane, 2024; Wani, 2023; Tambling, 2022), without sustained attention to its construction of patronage politics, while *Pimples on Wrinkles* remains critically underexamined, with Ozoh (2021) representing its sole published engagement.

The analytical framework for this investigation is Kenneth Burke's (1973) concept of literature as equipment for living, integrated with the apparatus of speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), face-threatening act analysis (Brown and Levinson, 1987), and Gricean implicature (Grice, 1975). Burke argues that literary texts function like proverbs: they name recurring social situations and equip readers with strategies for navigating them. This framework is particularly productive for a comparative literary pragmatic study of clientelism because it directs attention simultaneously to what both novels say about patronage and to how their specific linguistic and rhetorical choices perform the act of saying it. By reading both texts through these complementary frameworks, this study addresses three interconnected gaps: the absence of a pragmatic rhetorical reading of either novel's construction of clientelism, the critical neglect of Asika's work within Nigerian literary scholarship, and the broader underrepresentation of literary pragmatic approaches in studies of African political clientelism.

The objectives of this study are threefold: to analyse how both novels use specific literary and rhetorical strategies to name and expose the structural logic of political clientelism in postcolonial Nigeria; to examine how perspective by incongruity in both texts disrupts the reader's acceptance of patronage as a natural or inevitable political condition; and to assess the therapeutic literary strategies through which both novels model individual and collective responses to clientelist entrenchment. Applying Burke's (1973) concept of literature as equipment for living alongside the tools of linguistic pragmatics, this study argues that *The Famished Road* and *Pimples on Wrinkles* function not merely as representations of political clientelism but as rhetorically purposeful civic instruments that equip readers to identify, interrogate, and resist patronage networks through specific literary devices including symbolism, irony, satire, directive speech acts, and implicature.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Kenneth Burke's (1973) concept of literature as equipment for living, integrated with the tools of literary pragmatics to form a composite analytical framework. Burke (1973, p. 296) argues that literature is not a passive aesthetic object but a repertoire of symbolic strategies through which writers name recurrent human situations and equip readers with attitudinal orientations for confronting them. McGowan (2003, p. 119) corroborates this, positioning literature as a pragmatist resource that furnishes strategies for navigating the practical and ethical challenges of social life. The framework rests on three interconnected tenets identified by Henderson and Williams (2001, p. 107). Literary texts operate sociologically by classifying recurring predicaments (such as exploitation, systemic injustice, and institutional betrayal). These texts subsequently attach named strategies of response to those predicaments, thereby converting private experience into shared cultural knowledge. The naming process is never neutral: the selection of a metaphor, a narrative structure, or a character type frames the reader's perception towards certain dimensions of social reality while suppressing others. Literature also functions through identification, the rhetorical process by which readers recognise their own social conditions in fictional representations and, through that recognition, acquire a readiness for action. Rueckert (1982) elaborates this performative dimension, arguing that symbolic action in literary texts mirrors social reality and simultaneously provides the curative orientation through which readers restructure their relationship to power, inequality, and resistance.

Literary pragmatics supplies the linguistic precision that Burke's rhetorical framework requires but does not itself provide. The field, as Sell (1991) established it, treats literary texts as communicative events whose meaning cannot be accounted for by formal analysis alone; it requires an account of the pragmatic conditions (speaker intention, reader inference, contextual implication) under which literary language produces its effects. Mey (2001) extended this stance by demonstrating that speech acts, implicature, and presupposition are not peripheral to literary interpretation but constitutive of how texts construct social meaning and orient readers towards the situations they depict. Pilkington (2000), drawing on Sperber and Wilson's (1995) relevance theory, shows further that poetic language generates its widest range

of contextual implications precisely through the pragmatic effort it demands of the reader, particularly in texts that refuse to resolve the tensions they create.

Applied to *The Famished Road* and *Pimples on Wrinkles* in the present study, Burke's overarching account of literature's civic function and the pragmatic tradition's attention to how individual utterances perform that function at the level of speech act, implicature, and contextual inference operate as complementary instruments. This integrated framework analyses how both novels use specific linguistic and rhetorical choices to identify clientelism, defamiliarise its normalisation, and model conditions for resistance. The theory, however, is not above scrutiny. Foss, Foss, and Trapp (2002) caution that Burkean pragmatism tends towards a functionalist reductionism in which aesthetic complexity risks subordination to social utility. This study acknowledges that constraint, treating the combined framework as a guiding rather than exhaustive instrument, one that illuminates the civic and political work performed by both novels without foreclosing attention to their formal and stylistic distinctiveness.

Review of Related Literature

The relationship between literature and political corruption in postcolonial Africa has attracted considerable scholarly attention, though the specific intersection of clientelism and literary pragmatics remains largely unexplored. Within the broader discourse on political corruption, Eli (2020) surveys how Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe, and Ayi Kwei Armah treat corruption in postcolonial fiction, illustrating that these writers consistently frame graft as a moral and existential crisis that erodes collective trust and reproduces underdevelopment. Odinye (2017) reaches the same conclusion through Niyi Osundare's poetry, where corruption is positioned as a direct driver of poverty and civic despair.

Moreover, Ego (2024) connects corruption to political violence and insecurity in Soji Cole's *Embers*, arguing that systemic graft produces the public indifference that enables Boko Haram's growth. Ezennadiri and Tony-Ugbejie (2024) read corruption as class exploitation in Ngozi Chuma-Udeh's *The Presidential Handshake* through a Marxist framework, while Awobi and Anumudu (2025) use Grice's conversational implicature to show how corrupt elites use language to sustain dominance in Chukwuemeka Ike's *Our Children*

Are Coming! These studies are valuable for situating the present texts within a larger African literary tradition, though none constructs a systematic analytical framework on literary pragmatics for examining how specific narrative choices carry out social critique of clientelism in these literary narratives.

Studies on Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* have approached the novel predominantly through postcolonial frameworks. Wani (2023) examines how myth and spirituality function as instruments for critiquing Nigeria's postcolonial situation, arguing that the novel's stream-of-consciousness narration captures the cultural tension between indigenous tradition and colonial inheritance. Chaabane (2024) builds directly on this by situating Azaro's spirit-child identity within a postcolonial gothic framework, reading hybridity as a tool for interrogating colonial power hierarchies and imagining hope amid systemic collapse. Tambling (2022) takes the argument in a different direction, connecting the novel's magical realism to Baroque literary traditions and reading it as a subversion of modern bureaucratic and institutional failures. These three studies, read together, confirm that *The Famished Road* functions as a sustained commentary on postcolonial political conditions. Yet none isolates clientelism as a distinct analytical object in their narratives.

Critical attention to Ikechukwu Asika's *Pimples on Wrinkles* remains limited. Ozoh (2021) is the only published academic study of the novel, offering a content-based reading of its portrayal of Nigeria's patrimonial political culture and the normalisation of corruption within it. Useful as it is as a starting point, the study does not treat clientelism as a category separate from general corruption and applies no theoretical framework systematically to its narrative organisation.

The near-absence of critical work on Asika's novel, alongside the lack of any pragmatic rhetorical reading of *The Famished Road* and the failure of the broader corruption scholarship to engage clientelism as a theoretically distinct political formation, constitutes the gap this study addresses. This paper investigates how each novel names clientelism as a recurring social situation, uses incongruity to challenge its normalisation, and models conditions for resistance using Burke's (1973) three-dimensional pragmatist model. In this way, the study offers a literary pragmatic contribution to a body of scholarship that has so far engaged these questions only in part.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive research design, employing close reading as its primary method of data gathering and interpretation. Leedy and Ormrod (2019, p. 355) describe this approach as the careful, systematic analysis of textual meaning through layered engagement with a literary source in order to uncover the deeper social and cultural significance embedded in its language and structure. The analytical framework integrates Kenneth Burke's (1973) framework of literature as equipment for living with the tools of linguistic pragmatics, specifically speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), face-threatening act analysis (Brown and Levinson, 1987), and Gricean implicature (Grice, 1975). The key aspect of the exploration is built on Burke's three pragmatist dimensions. These are the proverb function, through which texts name recurring social situations and encode strategies for managing them; perspective by incongruity, which examines how literary devices disrupt normalised orientations towards social conditions; and the therapeutic function, through which narratives diagnose social ills and propose pathways for resisting such issues.

The pragmatic tools supply the linguistic precision for examining how individual utterances, narrative structures, and rhetorical choices perform civic and political work at the level of speech act and implicature. These frameworks are applied comparatively to Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* and Ikechukwu Asika's *Pimples on Wrinkles* to show how both novels construct, sustain, and contest political clientelism in postcolonial Nigeria. For ease of representation throughout the analysis, *The Famished Road* and *Pimples on Wrinkles* are abbreviated as *TFR* and *POW*, respectively.

Analysis

a. Literature as Proverbs Writ Large: Naming the Situation

Burke (1973) argues that literature functions like a proverb: it gives a recurring human situation a name and, through that naming, equips the reader with a strategy for recognising and responding to it. Proverbs, Burke contends, are not decorative sayings but "strategies for dealing with situations," compressed

instruments through which a culture encodes its collective wisdom about recurrent predicaments (Burke, 1973, p. 296). Both *TFR* and *POW* perform this naming function through deliberate linguistic and rhetorical choices that render clientelism legible as a structural system rather than a collection of individual acts of wrongdoing, and both do so through language that carries what Austin (1962) calls illocutionary force (the capacity of an utterance to perform a social act rather than merely describe one). The comparative value of reading the two novels together at this level is precisely that they name the same political situation through entirely different linguistic registers: Okri through sustained symbolic language, Asika through the direct, unmediated speech of those who operate the patronage system from within.

Okri's primary naming device is the personification of the road, a figure that accumulates political and spiritual meaning across the entire novel before arriving at its most concentrated expression. The road has stood witness to party thugs, election bribes, and the systematic starvation of the community surrounding it. At the moment of the symbol's fullest articulation, Azaro has just observed another cycle of political manipulation, and the narrative voice delivers what amounts to the novel's central diagnostic statement about the postcolonial state:

The road was young but its hunger was old. And its hunger had been reopened. The road had been hungry throughout all the eons of its ancient slumber. It had been hungry in the dreams of its makers, hungry before it was made, and hungry after. The hunger had only been sleeping. (*TFR* 484)

The personification of the road as a hungry body is the primary rhetorical device, and it operates on two symbolic registers at once. A road is ordinarily understood as a sign of development and state provision; by attributing hunger to it, Okri inverts this symbolism entirely. The contrast between the road's physical youth and the antiquity of its hunger collapses the temporal distance between the postcolonial present and the colonial past, suggesting that the deprivation the community endures is not a recent governance failure but a continuous historical wound. The verb "*reopened*" is particularly precise: it figures deprivation as a recurring injury rather than a simple absence. At the level of linguistic pragmatics, the passage functions as what Searle (1969) categorises

as a declarative speech act (one whose utterance does not merely describe a state of affairs but constitutes a new understanding of it). By naming the road 'hungry', the text performs the act of indicting the state. This naming strategy is extended through a second passage in which the landlord converts housing into a political instrument. The scene occurs when the landlord summons his tenants and issues what he presents as a simple administrative notice, though its linguistic structure reveals it as something far more coercive:

'It doesn't matter if you answer or not. I have said what I have to say. If you have ears, listen. If you want to be my tenant, when the election comes you will go and vote for my party man. Anybody who wants to live in my house must vote for my party. It is simple. There is nothing to discuss.'
(TFR 199)

The phrase "*it is simple, there is nothing to discuss*" is a rhetorical device of false simplicity that performs closure before any response is possible. Analysed through speech act theory, the landlord's utterance is a directive speech act or specifically a threat whose illocutionary force is coercive: compliance, with homelessness as the implied perlocutionary consequence of refusal. The conditional syntax "*if you want... you will... you must*" removes the tenant's civic agency entirely, replacing it with a condition of material survival. In Gricean terms (Grice, 1975), the landlord's speech also violates the maxim of quality by presenting a coercive transaction as though it were a reasonable arrangement, thereby generating the implicature that resistance is futile. Burke (1973, p. 304) describes proverbs as strategies that "size up situations," and Okri's landlord does precisely this: his speech is itself a proverb of the patronage system, one that names the terms of clientelism with brutal economy.

Asika names the same political situation through the direct, unashamed articulation of clientelism's internal logic by Commissioner Azubuike, the novel's most articulate spokesman for the patronage system. Mr Odiolisa, an upright retired civil engineer, has come to the Commissioner's office seeking a contract and has attempted to explain that the contractors typically awarded such work have no genuine interest in completing it. Odiolisa has argued that public funds will be shared as kickbacks while ordinary people continue to suffer, and it is at this moment that Azubuike's response crystallises the moral vocabulary of the entire system:

'And who cares? Who cares? Is your name Masses? Is your

surname Masses? Your first name? Your middle name? God has always taken care of them. He will never abandon them but you don't know that Government comes and goes, the masses survive. They are like the air, they are everywhere. So forget about the masses. You are here to serve yourself and the government, not the masses. Your own stomach first, then the government and then the masses, if you want.'
(POW 96)

Azubuike's repeated rhetorical question "*who cares?*" is not a genuine enquiry but what Brown and Levinson (1987) classify as a face-threatening act, an utterance that publicly demolishes Odiolisa's moral standing by treating his civic concern as socially unintelligible. The series of questions about whether Odiolisa's name is "*Masses*" performs a systematic linguistic erasure, reducing the citizenry to an abstraction without a proper name. The simile comparing the masses to air ("*they are everywhere*") is double-edged. Air is essential to life and entirely taken for granted, encoding in a single figure the political position the patronage system assigns to the public it nominally serves. The deliberate hierarchy (self, government, masses) violates Grice's (1975) maxim of manner by stating openly what the political system ordinarily conceals. It further generates the implicature that Odiolisa's integrity is not merely unusual but professionally dangerous. Asika's second naming formulation arrives later, when Azubuike is pressing Thelma to exchange sexual compliance for her husband's contract. Thelma has resisted, and Azubuike reaches for the system's own proverb to justify his demand:

'*You use what you have to get what you want.*' (POW 109)

The balanced grammatical structure of this line "*what you have*" mirrored by "*what you want*" gives it the formal properties of a proverb, the quality Burke (1973, p. 297) identifies as a strategy that conveys truth-value in human societies. Analysed as a speech act, the statement functions as an indirect directive (Searle, 1969): its surface form is a general observation, but its illocutionary force, in context, is a command. The indirection is itself the rhetorical strategy: by delivering coercion in proverbial form, Azubuike normalises exploitation as received wisdom, implying through Gricean implicature that what he is asking of Thelma is simply how the world works. Read together, Okri's hungry road and landlord's conditional syntax, alongside Asika's face-threatening rhetoric and proverbial coercion, name clientelism through complementary but distinct linguistic instruments, collectively

performing the proverb function Burke identifies as literature's most foundational civic act.

b. Perspective by Incongruity: Breaking the Grip of the Normal

Burke developed the concept of perspective by incongruity across two key works: its foundations appear in *Permanence and Change* (1935) and receive fuller elaboration in *Attitudes Toward History* (1937), where Burke describes it as the deliberate yoking together of terms from categories that a society normally keeps separate. This, in turn, produces a collision of meanings that disrupts the habituated inability to see one's own condition clearly (Burke, 1937). Applied to literary texts, perspective by incongruity is not merely a stylistic device but a cognitive strategy. It forces the reader out of the interpretive framework that normalises a given social situation. Both *TFR* and *POW* deploy this strategy simultaneously, though through different literary modes, and both achieve their sharpest incongruities at moments where language and action, or official rhetoric and material reality, are placed in direct, unresolved contradiction.

Okri's most sustained use of incongruity occurs at the political rally, where two parties have arrived in the community distributing garri from a van and broadcasting their promises through loudspeakers. The community has gathered, and the exchange that follows places the politicians' official slogans against the crowd's responses in a structure that makes both voices visible simultaneously. The scene has been building across several preceding pages, with Azaro observing the ritual from the margins, and it reaches its climax during the direct exchange of slogans and counter-slogans:

'IF YOU VOTE FOR US...' '...we are finished,' someone added. 'WE WILL FEED YOUR CHILDREN...' '...lies.' 'AND WE WILL BRING YOU GOOD ROADS...' '...which the rain will turn into gutters...' 'AND WE WILL BRING ELECTRICITY...' '...so you can see better how to rob us!' 'AND WE WILL BUILD SCHOOLS...' '...to teach illiteracy!' The crowd kept surging, kept pushing and jostling, kept fighting towards the van. (*TFR* 123)

The typographical incongruity (uppercase for the politicians, lowercase for the crowd) is a visual staging of power asymmetry: institutional speech

commands the capital letter while subordinated response operates only in lowercase. Each crowd rebuttal is an example of verbal irony in which the promised good is replaced by its actual social consequence: roads become gutters, electricity enables robbery, schools produce illiteracy. Analysed through Grice's (1975) cooperative principle, the politicians' slogans violate the maxim of quality (they assert what they know to be false) generating the implicature that democratic promises are structurally dishonest. The crowd's responses restore the quality maxim by supplying the truth the slogans suppress, functioning as what Austin (1962) calls expositive speech acts: utterances that clarify, confirm, or correct the meaning of a prior speech act. The deeper incongruity, however, lies in the action that accompanies this verbal clarity: despite naming every promise as its opposite, the crowd surges towards the van. Burke's perspective by incongruity operates not in the verbal exchange alone but in the gap between the crowd's speech and its physical movement, a gap that the narrative refuses to close because the gap is the political truth.

Okri deepens this incongruity through a second scene, in which the photographer, whose work has recorded state violence and given it "great prominence on the pages of the newspaper" (*TFR* 156), becomes the target of collective mob violence. The attack is delivered through a rapid series of commands, each issued by a different voice within the crowd:

'Kill the photographer.' 'Beat the photographs out of him!' 'Finish him off!' 'Bind him.' 'Blind our enemies!' 'Destroy them!' 'Teach them a lesson.' 'Show them Power!' 'Break their fingers.' 'Crack their heads!' 'Crush the photographer.' 'And leave his body in the street.' 'For mocking our party.' 'Our power!' 'Our Leader!' (*TFR* 179)

The series of short imperative utterances are directive speech acts (Searle, 1969) whose collective illocutionary force constitutes mob violence as a coordinated institutional act rather than spontaneous rage. The incongruity is that the crowd attacking the photographer uses the same vocabulary of political ownership ("Our power! Our Leader!") that was being mocked with perfect lucidity in the previous scene. Brown and Levinson (1987) would classify these utterances as bald on-record face-threatening acts, delivered without any mitigating strategy precisely because the speaker's institutional power removes the need for mitigation. The same community that answered political promises

with accurate sarcasm now repeats the politicians' language to destroy its own witness. This reversal is one of Okri's sharpest incongruity in the novel: the oppressed performing the work of their oppressors, using the master's language to silence the one figure capable of holding the system accountable.

Asika achieves a parallel incongruity through the juxtaposition of the elite body and the material conditions of its production. The governor's officials are described in a passage that makes their physical excess the direct legible consequence of public extraction. The scene occurs at one of the governor's private parties, to which no media have been invited and from which phones have been banned, and Asika renders the assembled officials in terms that make their bodies a cartographic record of what has been taken from the public:

They sit in the air-conditioned room, laughing and drinking, their potbellies, round bellies, cup bellies, cubed bellies dangling side by side. They are doing the work of God as they see it. The masses are the reason they are there; their stomachs were made to be filled at all costs, the costs being the masses' hunger, tears, blood and sweat. The governor had no qualms about this. It was the order of nature, the strong eating the weak. (POW142)

The listing of belly shapes (round, cup, cubed) is a form of imagery whose incongruity operates through the contrast between the geometric precision of the descriptions and the human cost they encode. Each belly shape is produced by a specific quantity of diverted public resource, and Asika's satirical register makes this production process visible by placing the physical catalogue directly beside the statement of its cost: "*the masses' hunger, tears, blood and sweat.*" The invocation of "*doing the work of God as they see it*" is an example of what Grice (1975) identifies as flouting the maxim of quality: a statement so manifestly false in context that it generates the conversational implicature of its own opposite. This exposes the deceptive ideology through which the system presents exploitation as divine vocation. The phrase "*the order of nature, the strong eating the weak*" is a metaphor the governor uses to justify the system, but placed immediately after the grotesque catalogue of bellies, the metaphor is exposed as the system's own face-saving verbal strategy (Brown and Levinson, 1987) rather than a natural law.

Asika reinforces the theme of incongruity through the account of Azubuike's professional ascent, where the language of career progression is used to narrate a sequence of criminal acts. Azubuike has just been described as a petty operator in the governor's circle, and the narrative traces his rise through a series of services rendered:

From arranging girls for the top government officials in their party venues and procuring arms for their illegal dealings, he gained their confidence and soon began to also push money abroad for them. The governor soon began to use him to launder money abroad. Azubuike became a money laundering agent for the governor. (POW74)

The verbs "*arranging*," "*procuring*," "*gained their confidence*" naturally belong to the register of professional networking rather than criminal conduct, and this tonal mismatch is Asika's most precise use of incongruity at the level of diction. In speech act terms, the passage functions as a series of representatives (Searle, 1969) or assertions about the state of the world. However, the incongruity between the neutral register of the assertions and the gravity of the conduct described generates the implicature that within this system, criminal capability and civic appointment are not merely compatible but mutually constitutive. Read alongside Okri's crowd performing their oppressors' violence, both passages enact Burke's perspective by incongruity to make the same structural point through different literary instruments: the system has colonised the very language through which it might be contested.

c. Language as a Therapeutic Tool

Burke (1973, p. 296) states that literary strategies equip the readers with social functions like consolation, vengeance, admonition, and exhortation when negotiating recurring predicaments in the texts. The therapeutic function of literature is not simply the provision of comfort; it is the diagnostic work of naming a social ill precisely enough that the reader can begin to orient differently towards it. Both *TFR* and *POW* fulfil this function, though through different Burkean strategies. Okri deploys exhortation (the call to collective reimagining) while Asika employs admonition (the stark presentation of what unchecked injustice produces). The two strategies are complementary in tone and function; and reading them comparatively reveals the full therapeutic range Burke's framework makes available to postcolonial literary fiction.

Okri builds his therapeutic strategy through the character arc of Dad, whose movement from individual heroism to collective consciousness represents the novel's central argument about resistance to clientelism. Dad has been celebrated in the community for his boxing victories over political thugs (victories read as symbolic triumphs of the poor over their exploiters). His mid-novel realisation arrives at the moment when the community begins treating him as an informal patron, bringing him requests for money, hospital access, and school materials. The passage is rendered through free indirect speech, a narrative technique that allows Okri to place the reader inside Dad's evolving understanding rather than observing it from outside:

But it was when people took to bringing their problems to him, when they asked him for money, for advice on everything from how to get their children admitted to hospital to how to get books for their youngsters, that Dad realised he couldn't be a visible or an invisible Head of State just by himself. He began to realise that there were forces in the world that needed many people working together to combat them. (TFR 411)

The therapeutic force of this passage lies in its structural irony, which Okri presents clearly. Dad, in becoming the community's informal resource, has reproduced the patron-client structure he has been fighting. The community treats him as a patron, bringing needs in exchange for assistance, which mirrors precisely the relationship the political patrons exploit. In speech act terms, the community's appeals to Dad are commissive acts (Austin, 1962) and they bind him to obligations he cannot individually fulfil. The recognition of this impossibility is the passage's therapeutic pivot. The phrase "*visible or invisible Head of State*" names both formal political authority and its informal patronage substitute and declares both structurally inadequate. This therapeutic reorientation (from individual heroism to collective agency) reaches its fullest expression at the novel's close, where Dad addresses the community in a speech that transforms the novel's central symbol. The speech follows a long night of political violence, and Dad speaks to a gathered community that has just witnessed another cycle of patron exploitation:

We must look at the world with new eyes. We must look at ourselves differently. We are freer than we think. We can

redream this world and make the dream real. Human beings are gods hidden from themselves. Our hunger can change the world, make it better, sweeter. (TFR 571-572)

The use of the first person plural pronoun "we" shifts the subject of the novel's argument towards resolving clientelism from the individual to the collective sphere. The repetition of "*we must*" is a directive speech act whose illocutionary force is exhortative rather than coercive. It calls for action without threatening the consequences of inaction, positioning collective agency as a possibility rather than an obligation. This is Burke's strategy of exhortation (1973, p. 304) in its most deliberate literary form. The transformation of hunger from a sign of victimhood into a metaphor for collective creative force resolves the novel's central symbol therapeutically: the same hunger that the famished road embodies as a wound is here reimagined as productive energy. In Gricean terms, the speech obeys all four conversational maxims (it is truthful, relevant, clear, and appropriately informative) and generates the implicature that collective reimagination is not merely desirable but rationally available to those who choose it.

Asika's therapeutic mode is deliberately starker and offers no equivalent vision of redemption, because the admonitory strategy Burke (1973, p. 296) identifies operates through the honest confrontation of what it would cost the subject rather than the promise of possibility. Thelma Odiolisa's trajectory is the novel's primary therapeutic instrument: she is not a flawed individual but a structurally produced casualty, and Asika renders the sequence of institutional failures that produces her submission with an accumulative precision that removes the possibility of locating blame in her character. Mr Odiolisa has retired from the civil service after a career of integrity, and the passage that follows maps the systematic closure of every alternative available to his family:

Her husband retired from civil service and for more than one year, his pension was not forthcoming and the kids in school could no longer be catered for. They had no place to call their own and so when the lawyer notified them to pack out of their house for not being able to pay the house rent, they were left with no other option than going to their village. Thelma could not bear the agony and humiliation

of living in the village. The corrupt Commissioner refused to give the contract to Thelma's husband unless he slept with her. (POW71)

Each clause removes one further option from Thelma's situation: pension denied, education impossible, housing lost, village life an unacceptable humiliation. The paratactic syntax (clauses linked by "and" without subordination) enacts the mechanical, impersonal accumulation of institutional failure, producing the pragmatic effect of inevitability rather than drama. By the time the Commissioner's condition is stated, it arrives as the logical terminus of a series of structural closures rather than a shocking aberration. In speech act terms, the Commissioner's conditional offer is a directive speech act with coercive illocutionary force (Searle, 1969), its perlocutionary effect being Thelma's eventual compliance. Asika's therapeutic strategy is synecdoche: Thelma's individual experience stands for every family whose choices have been structurally reduced to compliance or destitution. The counter-force to this entrapment is embodied in Mr Odiolisa's refusal to participate in corruption throughout his career: a refusal that Azubuike names with bitter incomprehension in the novel's most concentrated moral statement. The scene occurs in Azubuike's office after he has been appointed Commissioner, when he confronts Odiolisa about his decision not to collude in the diversion of contract funds:

'You didn't eat them, yet you refused others from looting them.' (POW95)

The verb "eat" connects Azubuike's accusation directly to the imagery of consumption running through both novels (the famished road, the dangling potbellies, the hunger of the masses) and frames Odiolisa's integrity as an act of deviance within a system that has made extraction its primary norm. In Gricean terms, the accusation is maximally implicative: by presenting Odiolisa's refusal to loot as morally equivalent to preventing others from looting, Azubuike generates the implicature that integrity within a clientelist system is a form of social aggression against those who depend on collective corruption for their advancement. This implicature is itself Asika's admonitory strategy (Burke, 1973, p. 304): by making the system's moral inversion legible in Azubuike's own language, the novel equips the reader to see integrity not as passive virtue but as the most structurally threatening response available to an individual within a patronage network. Taken together, Okri's exhortation and Asika's

admonition constitute the full therapeutic range of Burke's equipment for living, with both novels functioning as complementary civic instruments: one equipping the reader with the language of collective possibility, the other with the moral urgency of structural accountability. Both narratives make their therapeutic arguments through the specific linguistic and rhetorical choices that literary pragmatics is positioned to illuminate.

Conclusion

This study applied Kenneth Burke's (1973) concept of literature as equipment for living, alongside the tools of speech act theory and Gricean pragmatics, to examine political clientelism in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* and Ikechukwu Asika's *Pimples on Wrinkles*, analysing how both novels use specific literary and rhetorical strategies to name, disrupt, and propose resistance to patronage networks in postcolonial Nigeria. The analysis was organised around three Burkean dimensions: the proverb function, perspective by incongruity, and the therapeutic function. This tripartite description corresponds directly to the study's stated objectives.

Three principal findings emerge from the dissection of both texts. First, the study demonstrated that both novels perform Burke's proverb function by encoding clientelism's logic within specific, repeatable literary and pragmatic devices that the reader carries from the fictional world into an understanding of the real one. Okri achieves this through the sustained personification of the famished road, the landlord's coercive directive speech acts, and the crowd's expository rebuttals of political slogans, while Asika achieves it through Azubuike's face-threatening rhetoric and his systematic violation of Grice's maxim of quality.

Second, both novels deploy perspective by incongruity through linguistic and literary devices that challenge the notion that clientelism is a natural or inevitable feature of postcolonial Nigerian society. Okri places the crowd's verbal clarity against their physical compulsion to reach the garri van, and stages the mob's assault on the photographer as a face-threatening act performed in the oppressors' own language, while Asika makes the geometric catalogue of official bellies a visual record of public extraction and uses administrative diction to narrate Azubuike's criminal career without tonal disruption.

Third, the study shows how both texts fulfil Burke's therapeutic function through different but complementary literary registers. Okri's exhortatory strategy (operating through the irony of Dad's reproduced patron dependency, the anaphoric 'we must' of collective address, and the metaphorical transformation of hunger into creative energy) exemplifies Burke's (1973, p. 296) strategy of exhortation. Asika's admonitory strategy (typified by the paratactic accumulation of institutional closure around Thelma and Azubuike's implicature-laden accusation of Odilola's integrity) illustrates Burke's strategy of admonition.

The implications of these findings extend beyond the two texts to the broader question of literary fiction as a viable instrument for combating clientelism in public life. Both novels expose the exploitative power dynamics behind patronage practices and promote critical awareness of social injustice through narratives that foreground marginalised voices and contest dominant ideologies. This study contributes to African literary scholarship by providing a literary pragmatic framework for reading postcolonial novels as social mirrors and as rhetorically purposeful civic instruments oriented towards political transformation. Future research could apply this integrated Burke-pragmatics framework comparatively across a wider range of African literary traditions, including female-centred narratives on resistance to patronage networks, or examine how digital and popular culture are extending the equipment-for-living function into new rhetorical spaces in contemporary Nigerian society.

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