"THEY ARE DEMONSTRATING AGAINST SAP" – ABBREVIATIONS AND SOCIAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN SELECT NIGERIAN NOVELS

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Abstract

Scholarship on the Nigerian novel has shown the exquisite interplay between linguistic choices and social reality. Although extant studies on the use of language in the Nigerian novel, critics have paid negligible attention to how abbreviations are employed by Nigerian novelists to explore social reality in their writings. In attempt to fill this gap, we explain the mutually reinforcing medley between language and social reality with the aim of accounting for how Nigerian novelists employ abbreviations to construct and reconstruct social identities. Employing the analytical methods of critical discourse analysis (CDA), this paper studies the use of abbreviations in four purposively selected novels, namely, *Waiting for an Angel, Love My Planet, Under the Brown Rusted Roofs and Arrow of Rain* in order to show how abbreviations are deployed as linguistic techniques in the expression of social identity. Through critical textual analysis, this study contributes to extant scholarship on the interface between language and literature and between language use and meaning-figuration.

Keywords: social identity, CDA, social reality, abbreviations, language and literature

Introduction

Language and literature are coterminous; this fact has long been established. What this means is that the study of a people's literature is also a study of their language practices. This is not unconnected with the fact that the writer, in our case, the Nigerian novelist, is a "witness bearer" (Griswold 13). And in bearing witness to the realities of their society, the writer does so through the instrumentality of language. In fact, Roger Fowler has drawn attention to how a novel "gives an interpretation of the world it represents" (130). Sociopolitical changes prior to the 21st-century have significantly shaped literary output in terms of theme and use of language in Nigeria. This is why Charles Nnolim's writes, "Art is of little significance in the midst of suffering. It seems that the devastations of the economic order…have taken their toll in the area of literary production" (2). Corroborating Nnilim's position, Niyi Osundare argues "…in many ways, the existence of temporary and spiritual oppression which manifests itself in socio-economic and cultural subjugation does not only make the writer's mission necessary, it makes it inevitable (7). Bearing the social function of the writer in mind, Osundare opines that "a real writer has no alternative to being in constant conflict with oppression" (7). This is an apt description of Nigerian literature. The Nigerian writer has continued to use their works to interrogate the dehumanization of the majority by a selected few. Corroborating the foregoing view, Romanus Aboh argues that "the [Nigerian] novel can be studied from various disciplines within the humanities because it challenges issues of subjectivity and experiences in ways that are yet to be explored in academic-oriented exercises" (*Language and the Construction* 1). This does not, in any way, imply reducing literature to polemics. Definitely, one is not implying that the Nigerian writer is some sociologist or politician. To assume, even in a passing, that every Nigerian writer is a closeted sociologist or politician in the ontological term is to fundamentally disrespect the infinite resourcefulness of the Nigerian writer. However, the sociopolitical watershed in Nigerian writing is quite visible. This is the concern of this article: to explore how the Nigerians use language to express their angst against social inequality and oppression (Okpalaeke and Aboh 4).

An abbreviation is a shortened version of a word or a phrase. Though there are about four ways in which abbreviation can be formed,

alphabetism and acronym are of interest to us in this paper because they are more prominent in the sampled texts. Alphabetism, also known as initialism, is a group of letters, each pronounced separately, used as an abbreviation for a name or an expression; examples of alphabetism include UN (United Nations), AU (African Union), EU (European Union), IBB (Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida) and DPO (Deputy Police Officer). An acronym, as a form of abbreviation, is formed by using the initial parts or letters of a name, word, institution, etc. for example OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) and NEPA (National Electricity Power Authority) are acronyms; when formed, they can function as words. The novelists' use of abbreviations correlates with the people's justifying negation to the system of oppression. It is from this perspective that abbreviations are approached in the framing of social identity in the sampled novel. Identity, seen as "essentially dynamic, multiple, malleable, fragmented" (Roberio 294, Aboh and Igwenyi 126), infinitely affects how people use language in the expression of social reality. Put differently, abbreviations can be examined from a magnified context of the tussle between opposing groups. This paper studies this intersection by examining Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* (henceforth *WA*), Abimbola Adelakun's *Under the Brown Rusted Roofs* (henceforth *UBRR*), Okey Ndibe's *Arrow of Rain* (henceforth *AR*) and Vincent Egboson's *Love My Planet* (henceforth *LP*) are selected as representative texts.

Theoretical Framework

This paper neither explores the various models of identity construction nor reviews the diverse directions to critical discourse analysis (henceforth CDA). It simply applies social identity theory as explored in Ruth Wodak's discourse-historical approach to CDA in the analysis of abbreviation as discourse techniques of social identity construction in the Nigerian novel.

Critical discourse analysis sees language as social practice and considers the contexts of language use to be crucial to the interpretation of the multilayered nature of texts. CDA "explores the connection

between the use of language and the social and political contexts in which it occurs" (Paltridge 179). It also interrogates ways in which "language constructs and is constructed by social relationships" (179). A critical analysis requires a detailed textual interpretation in order to uncover hidden meaning and messages as well as possible interpretation. In furthering Paltridge's views, Romanus Aboh aver, "in this approach, the emphasis is on bringing to the surface structure what is ideologically embedded in the deep structure of language" (14). This process involves "tracing underlying ideologies from the linguistic features of a text, unpacking particular biases and ideological presuppositions underlying the text, and relating text to other texts and to people's experiences and beliefs (Paltridge 178).

There are various approaches to CDA, but Ruth Wodak's discourse-historical approach (DHA) is considered germane for the analysis of language and identity in this study. This is because the discourse-historical model provides insights into how language, in context-specific ways, aid identity construction. Wodak's CDA model explores the phenomenon of in-group and out-group; and is based on the view that identities are constituted through the process of difference is defined in a relative or flexible way depending on the activities in which one is engaged. Put differently, the in-group is the one to which an individual belongs and the out-group is treated as "outside" and different from the in-group. Wodak summarizes the strategies for constructing difference in the table below:

Table 1: Strategies of identity construction

Strategy	Objective	Device
Referential/ nomination	Construction of in-groups and out-groups	Membership categoryzation metaphors and metonymics synecdoches (pars pro toto, totum pro pars)
Predication	Lebelling social actors positively or negatively	Stereotypical, evaluative attributions of negative or Positive traits implicit and Explicate predicates
Argumentation	Justification of positive or negative attributions	Topoi fallacies
Perspectivation framing or discourse representation	Expressing involvement positioning speaker's point of view	Reporting, description, narration or quotation of events and utterances
Intensification, mitigation	Modifying the expistemic status of a proposition	Intensifying or mitigating the illocutionary force or (discriminatory) utterances

Empirically, the categories of in-group and out-group are not constant variables; they only depend on who and at what time social identity is constructed. The fact is that people strive to maintain a positive social identity, partly by making favourable comparisons between the in-group and out-group. Social identities are at the same time individual perceptions as well as socially shared and socially constructed conceptions of the defining features and boundaries of the group. This definition implies that, although social identities are represented in individual cognition, they are at the same time properties of social group itself because they depend on some degree of agreement among those who subscribe to this identity. One reason for this consensual nature of social identity is that group membership carries with it the expectation of a common understanding (Aboh and Igwenyi 128). For group

members, the social identity construct provides a common interpretive framework that defines the group in relation to other groups and is rooted in a common perspective of group history and/or a shared sense of future direction.

The process of categorizing people along the lines of social relationships is achieved cognitively by such operations as attribution and the application of existing background information (schemas) relating to the group, and see its operation serving particular social and psychological goals, such as boosting self-esteem. Another issue arising from identity construction is the idea that in-groups reductively categorize out-groups such that in-group identification leads to stronger stereotyping and disaffiliation towards out-groups. In the process of promoting the self, one cannot fail to degrade the other, even when the other is traditionally dominant and hegemonic. This is an argument faced, for instance, by radical feminists, black activists, minority ethnic groups, etc. and in the form of backlash.

Linked to the above view, but with a shortly different emphasis, is the formulation that social identity is an inscription in discourse "and therefore of itself, prescriptive, limiting and unselective, rather than something politically empowering" (Benwell and Stokoe 29). All these views are poststructuralist in orientation, stressing the constructed and oppressive dimension of identity, and thus pose a serious challenge to identity politics. Without some form of politics of difference, it might be argued that we face a toothless and irresponsible dismissal of discrimination. Moreover, a rejection of identity politics is a rejection of the often-passionate identifications people make with existing collectivities, and the extent to which these identifications contribute to their subjective awareness of the self (Aboh *Reflections* 108).

The foregoing provisions of the model have informed the paper's preference for DHA over other CDA approaches. This paper deals with identity construction, and it can be studied from a sociological perspective. Therefore, a model that has a sociolinguistic base should be able to account for the sociological intrusions in identity construction. Besides the fact that DHA is based on sociolinguistics and draws deeply from social constructionism, the distinctive feature of this approach is its attempt to integrate systematically all available background information in the analysis and interpretation of the many layers of a written or spoken text. The view held by theorists of this persuasion is that the

context of the discourse has a significant impact on the structure, function and context of utterances. Looking more broadly at the implications of this line of thinking, it is apposite to note that DHA means taking in-depth socio-historical study of social transformations as central to a work as the one undertaken in this article.

Data Analysis

In treating abbreviations, particularly initialisms and acronyms, as lexical resources for the framing of differences between groups, Ruth Wodak's postulations of how the dominated explores the mechanisms of language to reconceptualize society, invariably exposing the confrontational nature of identity *reconstruction*, is relied on. The data exemplified the use of abbreviations as linguistic techniques which the dominated group employ to *express* its disenchantment with the hegemonic inclinations of the dominating group. Some of these abbreviations are presented in the table below.

Table 2: Strategic Use of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Meaning	Lexical Feature	Novel
NEPA	National Electricity Power Authority	Acronym	UBRR (p. 160)
GRA	Government Reserved Area	Initialism	LP (p.95)
SAP	Structural Adjustment Programme	Acronym	UBRR (p.160)
SUG	Students Union Government	Initialism	WA (p.340)
NADS	National Association of Daglobe Students	Acronym	LP (p.220)
JAMB	Joint Admission and Matriculation Board	Acronym	WA (p.113)

The acronym NEPA, which means National Electricity Power Authority, appear both in Habila's WA and Adelakun's UBRR. NEPA is presented in the following ways:

> NEPA has taken light, in the dark glow of the candle flame the shadows looked even more shadowy, indistinct, merging into the wall behind them (*WA* 121).
>
> Darkness was falling fast because NEPA had not brought power supply to *Labriran* and its environs for a while (*UBRR* 27).

NEPA is government's sole electric power generating and distributing agency. In the context of the novels cited above, NEPA is placed-side-y-side with darkness, critically embedded in the abbreviation, NEPA, is the novelist's dissension with "shadowy" practices that have intensified the misery of the Nigerian people. To many Nigerian people, NEPA translates as "never expect power always". Troubled by the fact that NEPA is noted for its epileptic power supply is no longer an issue in Nigeria. Evidently, the novelists use of acronym to satirize the inability of NEPA to supply electricity in 21st-century Nigeria, whereas in other countries of the world power supply is no longer an issue. Evidently, the novelists assign meaning beyond the ordinary use of acronym, and draw significantly from historical antecedents, to their abbreviations based on Nigeria's energy dilemma. More importantly, by using "darkness" as a synonym of NEPA, the novelists separate themselves from the production process of the texts. Such a discourse technique enables the novelists to acutely incite the masses to actions that would liberate them from shackles of "darkness" mated on them by the establishment.

The alphabetism GRA, which stands for Government Reserved Area, is typically a Nigerian creation. A GRA is a developed estate in the parts of most Nigerian cities reserved exclusively for the political class and the rich. In *LP*, it is used to describe the place a school principal resides:

> 'Eguleh! Eguleh! We are going to GRA now! Wenni went to his room, changed his clothes and came back to the living room. "My daughter, come. We are going to your principal. Let her see how he roughened your blazer and your shirt' (*LP* 95).

In the above instance, a father takes his daughter to her school principal to complain to the school principal about a teacher's attempt to rape his daughter. However, GRA is re-lexicalized in the context of the novel to bring out the depth of corruption. In this way, the novelist projects the idea that A GRA is a symbol of domination and intimidation of the mass majority who barely have roofs over their heads by the extremely rich and immensely powerful few. Put differently, the use of GRA exposes, in a vivid manner, the behavioural pattern of many who dwell in GRAs. That is, they are morally decadent. The novelist's presentation of GRA residents is resistant; he, through dissociating discourse techniques such as *your principal and roughened,* resents the actions of the out-group GRA men who use their position to dominate others. In this sense, abbreviation (language generally) functions as a battle ground for the tendentious activity of making the unknown correspond with the known.

Some of the abbreviations in the sampled novels presuppose certain stock of knowledge and anybody who is not familiar with the field of socio-political discourse may encounter difficulties in decoding the meaning encoded in the acronym. In the example that follows, Adelakun succinctly captures the people's dissonance with SAP in the following words:

> "They are demonstrating against SAP – Structural Adjustment Programme" he replied, and then thought he should explain it to his illiterate father. "It is a kind of programme Babangida is bringing into the country from abroad" (*UBRR* 160).

Jimoh, Alhaji's son, tries to explain to his illiterate father the enormity of an economic programme which Babangida is introducing into the country, and the people's rejection of the programme. Though the people reject SAP, Babangida goes ahead to "bring the programme from abroad". One of the processes of adopting SAP requires the country to borrow from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the conditions of borrowing from IMF are heavy-handed. One of such conditions is the devaluation of a nation's currency. Jimoh foresees that SAP will impoverish the people, and he tells his father that "SAP will even send us to a worst slave farm" (161). Ideologically, the definite nominal referent, *Babangida,* captures, in an explicatory manner, Jimoh's

resentment of an act that will only intensify the people's agony. Moreover, Jomoh's use of the indefinite pronominal, *they*, is quite suggestive. His refusal to specifically mention the demonstrators, works in tandem with one of Wodak's identity construction strategies i.e., it expresses his (Jomoh's) involvement with the protesters as well as his justification of the protest. Analysts of Nigeria's economy have attributed Nigeria's economic underdevelopment to the implementation of SAP by the then Babangida military junta. There is, therefore, a back-and-forth movement through the prism of history, effusively reminding Nigerians of how the dominant identity imposed a rigid economic order on Nigerians.

Writers who draw from their societies are sensitive to structures that infringe on their fundamental human rights. SAP remains a politico-economic enigma that enriched a selected few at the expense of the mass majority. By such mechanic use of language (the use of SAP), the novelists create a communicative discourse which becomes a converging point for the deconstruction of politico-economic programmes that mar the people's development.

SUG, an alphabetism for Student Union Government, is a body of student which operates in each higher institution of learning in the country which is known for its own formidable and ferocious approach in pressing its demands both from school authorities and the government. During Nigeria's military era, it was one of the weapons that were employed by anti-military crusaders to question the military's continuous stay in power. This can be inferred from Habila's *WA*:

> '…I say we are tired
> of being tired!'
> 'Yes! Tell them
> Sanke!'
> 'G-R-E-A-T!'
> (*WA* 40)

It is Sankara, the SUG president of an unnamed university, who is addressing his fellow students. In the next page, Habila tells his readers why the students are gathered:

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> His strong voice carried easily to where I stood: 'We are tired of phantom transition programmmes that are nothing but grand designs to embezzle our money!'
> 'Down with the junta' (*WA* 41)

"His" in the above example anaphorically refers to Sankara, the SUG president of an unnamed university. The students, the in-group, express their unconcealed dissent to a military junta's failure to transit the country from military rule to civilian rule. The speaker's recourse to the possessive-inclusive pronoun, *our*, shows the students' conscientious and collective will to oust a government that has embezzled *our money* through its feigned transition programmes. Moreover, the use of the referential term, *them*, a known discourse referent, shows a high degree of division between the dominated, *our*, and the dominating identity, *them*, whose continued stay in power infuriates the dominated. Interestingly, the use of *them* functions as a derisive linguistic marker which the dominated deploy to construct a negative identity for the out-group group. Also, there is the label, "the junta", a discourse strategy which discursively antagonizes as well as describes the military, the out-group, in awful manner. This discourse technique works effectively, as it makes it easier for the students to hear the reason why the *junta* has to go. Ironically, the emergence of democratic rule in 1999 saw the paralysis of students' union across higher institutions in the country. Working from his background knowledge of military rule and the power student unions wielded, the first president of the country's Fourth Republic did all he could to clip the wings of student unions. Students' unions are no longer forces to reckon with in the country's political firmament.

In a similar expression of resentment to the out-group, in *LP*, the reference to SUG is to show the students' revolt against increase in school fees:

> The National Association of Daglobe Students (NADS) had requested activist and human rights group to join them in their public protest against increase in school fees… (*LP* 220).

It is a common practice in most Nigerian higher institutions for students to protest any increase in school fees. At times, such protest not only compel the school authorities to revert to the old school fees, but also has the tendency to lead to the death of many, as most of the time the protests become indescribably violent. In some cases, the volatility of the protest often leads to the closure of schools. The tussle that exists between the school authority – the out-group and the students – the in-group. This kind of expression of difference, as in the preceding examples, agrees with Simon Clarke's views that "the question of difference is emotive; we start to hear ideas about 'us' and 'them', friend and foe, belonging and not belonging, in-groups and out-groups, which define 'us' in relation to others, or the other" (510).

Another example of how difference is expressed is seen in JAMB, an acronym for Joint Admission and Matriculation Board, and a distinct Nigerian acronym, is an agency that administers university entrance examinations to Nigerian universities. In the context of Habila's *WA*, Kela leaves the north for Lagos where he is certain of making good grades that will guarantee his entrance into the university. The nightmarish posture of JAMB is revealed in the novel as many Nigerian university candidates' hopes of gaining admission into the university are dissuaded by JAMB's handling of its examinations. Most have argued that JAMB has rather strayed from an examination body that facilitates university entrance examination to a business venture that is interested in milking unsuspecting Nigerians. There have been calls by the Nigerian people to scrap JAMB because they no longer have confidence in its practices.

Conclusion
The meanings of these abbreviations are proffered based on how they are used in the novels. Suffice it to say their meaning may alter with their altering contexts. However, an interesting indication is how language and society are ultimately bond up together. These abbreviations represent, mirror and evaluate what society is going through; the people's identity becomes meaningfully expressed through the facility of language. These abbreviations do not only reveal Nigeria's social predicament, they also function as the people's rejection of situations that put their existence as Nigerians in question. It is also observed that abbreviations are linguistic techniques which language

users deploy in expressing dissonance with the out-group. Abbreviations such as alphabetisms and acronyms, which have been investigated in this study, have unique ways of constructing an in-group's difference with the out-group. Invariably, abbreviations can be used in analysing power, identity and as an entry point to the ideological undertones of their users. The use of abbreviations shows the emotional involvement of the novelists to the identities they frame.

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