



POWER DYNAMICS AND THE POLITICS OF SURVIVAL IN TESS ONWUEME'S *THE DESERT ENCROACHES*

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Abstract

This paper examines the themes of power, oppression, and the politics of survival in Tess Onwueme's *The Desert Encroaches*. The study explores how the playwright employs allegory, symbolism, satire, and animal characterization to expose systems of domination, exploitation, and ecological destruction in postcolonial African society. Although scholarship on environmental issues in African literature has expanded in recent time, there remains limited critical attention specifically devoted to the interconnectedness of power, oppression, and the politics of survival in *The Desert Encroaches*. Most existing studies focus either on feminist concerns, ecological issues, or general socio-political criticism without thoroughly interrogating how structures of power shape survival strategies among oppressed groups. Addressing this gap, this study undertakes a critical analysis of *The Desert Encroaches* by examining how Onwueme constructs survival as both a political and existential struggle within oppressive socio-economic systems. Drawing on the Marxist and sociological approaches as theoretical frameworks, the paper argues that the play reflects the socio-political realities of inequality, authoritarian leadership, neo-imperialism, and the suffering of marginalized groups. The study further reveals that survival in the play transcends physical existence to include political resistance, collective solidarity, and revolutionary consciousness. Through the metaphor of the encroaching desert, Onwueme dramatizes the gradual destruction of human dignity and societal stability caused by greed and abuse of power. The paper concludes that *The Desert Encroaches* remains a significant socio-political drama that advocates resistance against oppression and calls for justice, unity, and social transformation in contemporary African society.

Keywords: *Power, oppression, survival, politics, allegory, Tess Onwueme, African drama.*

Introduction

African drama has consistently served as a medium for socio-political criticism and cultural interrogation. Nigerian dramatists, in particular, deploy drama as an instrument for exposing the contradictions of power, oppression, inequality, and survival in postcolonial African societies. Among these dramatists, Tess Onwueme occupies a remarkable position because of her revolutionary dramaturgy and commitment to social justice. Her play, *The Desert Encroaches*, presents a biting allegory of exploitation, domination, environmental destruction, and the struggle



for survival among oppressed peoples. The play dramatizes a world divided between powerful and powerless forces, using animal imagery and symbolism to expose global and local systems of oppression.

Published in 1985 and winner of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) Award for Drama, *The Desert Encroaches* reflects the anxieties of postcolonial Africa within the context of neo-imperialism, militarism, ecological destruction, and economic exploitation. Through satire and allegory, Onwueme interrogates the politics of domination where the weak are systematically silenced and exploited by the powerful. The play equally explores how oppressed communities negotiate survival amidst violence, hunger, environmental collapse, and political intimidation. This paper examines the themes of power, oppression, and the politics of survival in *The Desert Encroaches*. Using sociological and Marxist critical frameworks, the study argues that Onwueme exposes the exploitative structures of global capitalism and authoritarian politics while simultaneously advocating collective resistance and social transformation.

Power has remained one of the most contested concepts in literary and cultural studies because it determines access to resources, shapes social relations, and influences the conditions under which individuals and communities negotiate existence. In contemporary African literature, power is rarely represented as a neutral force; rather, it is portrayed as an ideological mechanism through which political elites, multinational corporations, traditional authorities, and global capitalist structures sustain domination over vulnerable populations. The unequal distribution of power often generates social exclusion, environmental degradation, economic deprivation, gender inequality, and violent conflicts, compelling marginalized communities to devise various strategies of survival. African dramatists have consistently explored these realities by presenting theatre as a medium for interrogating oppressive systems while advocating justice, equity, and sustainable human existence.

The concept of power dynamics refers to the shifting relationships of authority, influence, domination, negotiation, and resistance among individuals, institutions, and social groups. Rather than existing as a fixed possession, power continually circulates through social, political, economic, cultural, and ideological structures. Michel Foucault argues that power is diffused throughout society and operates through institutions, discourses, and everyday practices rather than solely through coercive political authority (Foucault 92). Similarly, Steven Lukes conceptualizes power as operating on three interconnected levels: overt decision-making, agenda control, and ideological manipulation, where dominant groups shape people's perceptions to secure consent without physical force (Lukes 24–27). Antonio Gramsci further explains this phenomenon through the concept of cultural hegemony, arguing that ruling classes maintain dominance by securing the consent of subordinate groups through ideology and cultural institutions rather than through violence alone (Gramsci 12). These perspectives reveal that power extends beyond governmental authority to include economic control, environmental policies, and cultural practices that influence everyday life. Closely related to power dynamics is the politics of survival, a concept that examines how individuals and communities negotiate existence under conditions of oppression, ecological crisis, poverty, displacement, and political marginalization. Survival is not merely biological endurance but also involves resistance, adaptation, resilience, and the struggle to preserve dignity amidst systemic inequalities. Achille Mbembe contends that postcolonial African societies are characterized by political structures that determine who may flourish and who must exist under conditions of perpetual precarity (Mbembe 24). Likewise, Frantz Fanon argues that colonial and neo-colonial systems create social realities in which the oppressed must constantly negotiate their humanity within structures designed to sustain exploitation (Fanon 30). Consequently, the politics of survival becomes a struggle against both material deprivation and ideological domination.



Environmental degradation has emerged as one of the defining challenges confronting many African communities. Climate change, desertification, deforestation, oil exploration, pollution, and unsustainable resource extraction have intensified poverty, food insecurity, migration, and violent competition over diminishing natural resources. While environmental crises are often explained as natural phenomena, African Eco critics argue that they are largely products of unequal political and economic power relations. Rob Nixon describes this condition as "slow violence," referring to environmental destruction whose devastating effects accumulate gradually but disproportionately affect poor and marginalized populations (Nixon 2). This understanding shifts environmental discourse beyond ecology to encompass questions of justice, governance, and human survival.

African literature has consistently responded to these environmental realities by examining the intersection of ecology, politics, and social justice. Writers such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Niyi Osundare, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Tanure Ojaide, Helon Habila, and Tess Onwueme expose the consequences of environmental exploitation while emphasizing the resilience of local communities. Their works challenge exploitative systems that privilege economic profit over ecological sustainability and human welfare. Through literary representation, these writers transform environmental crises into ethical and political questions requiring collective action.

Among contemporary African dramatists, Tess Onwueme occupies a distinctive position because of her sustained engagement with gender, environmental justice, indigenous knowledge systems, and community resistance. Her dramatic oeuvre interrogates the interconnectedness of patriarchy, capitalism, ecological destruction, and political oppression while foregrounding marginalized voices as agents of transformation. Rather than portraying environmental degradation solely as an ecological problem, Onwueme demonstrates that environmental crises are fundamentally linked to unequal power relations that determine access to land, water, food, and other essential resources.

In *The Desert Encroaches*, Onwueme dramatizes the devastating effects of desertification on rural communities whose livelihoods depend on the land. The encroaching desert functions not merely as a geographical phenomenon but as a metaphor for political neglect, economic exploitation, and environmental injustice. As fertile land disappears, the struggle for survival intensifies, exposing unequal relations between governing authorities, local communities, and the forces responsible for environmental degradation. The play illustrates how ecological collapse transforms social relations, intensifies poverty, destabilizes communal life, and compels ordinary people to negotiate increasingly hostile conditions of existence.

The struggle for survival represented in the play also reveals the gendered dimensions of environmental crises. Women bear disproportionate responsibility for securing food, water, and domestic stability while simultaneously confronting patriarchal structures that limit their participation in decision-making processes. Consequently, environmental degradation intersects with gender inequality, making survival both an ecological and political struggle. Onwueme's representation of these realities challenges conventional understandings of environmental discourse by demonstrating that sustainable development cannot be achieved without addressing questions of social justice, equitable governance, and inclusive participation.

Although considerable scholarship has examined Tess Onwueme's dramatic works from feminist, postcolonial, eco-critical, and Marxist perspectives, relatively limited attention has been devoted to the intersection of power dynamics and the politics of survival as complementary analytical frameworks in *The Desert Encroaches*. Existing studies often privilege environmental degradation or gender politics independently, without sufficiently examining how relations of power shape the strategies through which marginalized communities negotiate ecological and socio-economic crises. This study addresses that gap by investigating how the distribution and exercise of power determine survival within the play's ecological landscape.



Accordingly, this study argues that *The Desert Encroaches* presents environmental degradation as a manifestation of unequal power relations while portraying survival as a continuous process of resistance, adaptation, and communal resilience. By situating the play within contemporary debates on power, environmental justice, and sustainable development, the study contributes to African literary criticism by demonstrating that ecological crises cannot be separated from the political structures that produce and sustain them. Ultimately, the paper establishes that Onwueme's drama is both a critique of oppressive systems and a compelling vision of collective survival founded on justice, environmental stewardship, and human dignity.

Statement of the Problems

Despite growing scholarly interest in environmental issues in African literature, limited attention has been paid to how African drama links ecological degradation to political oppression and survival politics. Most existing studies focus either on feminist concerns, ecological issues, or general socio-political criticism without thoroughly interrogating how structures of power shape survival strategies among oppressed groups. This paper therefore contributes to existing scholarship by critically examining how Onwueme constructs survival as both a political and existential struggle within oppressive socio-economic systems.

Furthermore, analyses of African drama often prioritize themes of political authoritarianism while neglecting environmental injustice as a central site of human oppression. This gap limits understanding of how environmental violence intersects with patriarchy, poverty, and development failure. This study addresses this gap by examining *The Desert Encroaches* as an eco-social text that connects environmental degradation to human oppression and articulates survival as a political act.

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of this study is to examine the interplay of power dynamics and the politics of survival in Tess Onwueme's *The Desert Encroaches*.

The specific objectives are to:

- Examine the various structures and manifestations of power in *The Desert Encroaches*, with particular emphasis on political, economic, environmental, and ideological forms of domination.
- Investigate how environmental degradation and ecological injustice shape the politics of survival among individuals and communities represented in the play.
- Analyze the strategies of resistance, resilience, and adaptation employed by marginalized characters in negotiating oppressive power relations and environmental crises.
- Evaluate Tess Onwueme's use of dramatic techniques, symbolism, and environmental discourse as instruments for critiquing unequal power structures and advocating ecological justice, sustainable development, and human survival.

Methodology

The research employs the Marxist and sociological approaches as theoretical frameworks. The Marxist approach is used to examine issues of class struggle, exploitation, domination, and inequality represented in the play. It helps in analyzing the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed as dramatized through the stronger and weaker animals in the text. The sociological approach, on the other hand, enables the study to investigate the interaction between literature and society by relating the events and characters in the play to socio-political realities in postcolonial African societies.



Data collected from the primary and secondary sources are subjected to critical content analysis. Relevant scenes, dialogues, symbols, and dramatic actions are carefully examined to identify manifestations of power dynamics, oppression, resistance, and survival strategies within the play. The study also interprets the symbolic significance of the desert, animal imagery, songs, and allegorical representations used by Onwueme to portray socio-political and environmental crises. Through this methodology, the research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Tess Onwueme uses drama as a medium for exposing oppressive systems and advocating collective survival, resistance, and social transformation in contemporary society.

Literature Review

Critical studies on Tess Onwueme's dramatic works have largely focused on feminism, socio-political resistance, environmental consciousness, and postcolonial identity. Scholars have consistently acknowledged Onwueme as one of the most radical voices in contemporary African drama because of her commitment to exposing social injustice and advocating transformation.

Olu Obafemi (1994) examines Onwueme's dramaturgy from a feminist perspective and argues that her plays challenge patriarchal domination and social inequality. According to Obafemi, Onwueme's dramatic vision is rooted in revolutionary aesthetics that seek to liberate marginalized groups from oppressive structures. Although his study concentrates mainly on gender relations, it provides useful insight into Onwueme's broader concern with power and resistance.

Nwoga and Oburumu (2024) analyze *The Desert Encroaches* as a sociological text that reflects class inequality and social exploitation. They argue that the play exposes the tension between oppressors and the oppressed through symbolic characterization and allegorical representation. Their study further notes that the play advocates egalitarianism and social justice as necessary responses to domination and exploitation.

Roy-Omoni (2022) investigates socio-political realities in the selected plays of Tess Onwueme, Femi Osofisan, and Sam Ukala. He contends that Onwueme employs drama as a weapon against corruption, oppression, and political irresponsibility in African societies. The study highlights how her dramatic techniques expose the failures of postcolonial leadership and the suffering of ordinary citizens.

Eco-critical studies have also examined environmental concerns in Onwueme's plays. Uzoji (2023) observes that ecological destruction and environmental crises occupy significant positions in contemporary African literature. According to him, Onwueme portrays environmental degradation as a consequence of greed, exploitation, and irresponsible leadership. This perspective is particularly relevant to *The Desert Encroaches*, where the desert symbolizes ecological collapse and socio-political decay.

Other scholars have examined allegory and symbolism in African drama as tools for political criticism. Researchers note that the use of animal characters and symbolic landscapes enables dramatists to universalize human experiences while avoiding direct political censorship. In *The Desert Encroaches*, Onwueme's use of animal imagery broadens the thematic relevance of the play beyond a specific geographical setting to encompass global systems of oppression.

Indeed, the questions of power, domination, resistance, and survival have occupied a central position in literary scholarship because they illuminate the mechanisms through which social inequalities are produced, maintained, and contested. Across African literature, scholars increasingly acknowledge that political authority, economic exploitation, environmental degradation, and cultural hegemony are interconnected realities that determine the lived experiences of marginalized communities. Consequently, literary criticism has expanded beyond textual aesthetics to examine how literature interrogates unequal power relations and imagines alternative possibilities for justice and human survival.



The theoretical understanding of power has evolved considerably within the humanities. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels argue that every society is fundamentally structured by material relations of production in which the ruling class controls both economic resources and the ideological institutions that sustain its dominance. According to Marxist thought, political power is inseparable from economic ownership, making exploitation an inevitable feature of class society (Marx and Engels 15). Their formulation provides an important framework for understanding how material inequalities generate social conflicts and compel subordinate groups to struggle for liberation. In African literary criticism, Marxist theory has remained influential because it explains how colonialism, neo-colonial capitalism, and indigenous elite domination perpetuate poverty, displacement, and environmental exploitation.

Michel Foucault broadens the understanding of power by rejecting its exclusive association with state authority. Instead, he argues that power circulates through institutions, discourses, social practices, and systems of knowledge, making it productive as well as repressive (Foucault 92). From this perspective, domination occurs not only through coercion but also through the regulation of everyday behaviour and the production of accepted "truths." Foucault's conception is particularly relevant to African literary texts where environmental degradation, bureaucratic governance, and cultural domination operate through complex institutional networks rather than direct political violence alone.

Steven Lukes further develops the discourse by identifying three dimensions of power. Beyond visible decision-making, power also determines which issues are excluded from public debate and shapes the consciousness of subordinate groups so that domination appears natural or inevitable (Lukes 24-30). Antonio Gramsci similarly argues that ruling classes secure hegemony through ideological consent rather than force, employing education, religion, culture, and the media to normalize unequal social arrangements (Gramsci 57). These formulations have significantly influenced African literary criticism because they explain why oppressed communities often internalize structures that perpetuate their own marginalization.

The concept of survival has equally attracted scholarly attention within African postcolonial studies. Frantz Fanon maintains that colonial domination systematically dehumanizes indigenous populations, compelling them to negotiate survival within structures deliberately designed to deny their humanity (Fanon 35). Similarly, Achille Mbembe argues that postcolonial African states frequently exercise power through conditions of precarity in which entire populations struggle merely to survive politically, economically, and socially (Mbembe 66). These arguments extend the discourse from biological existence to encompass dignity, identity, resistance, and social justice. Environmental criticism has further transformed discussions of survival. Lawrence Buell contends that literature plays a crucial role in exposing the relationship between ecological destruction and human suffering by encouraging ethical responsibility toward the natural environment (Buell 2). Greg Garrard similarly argues that ecocriticism examines how literary texts represent ecological crises, environmental justice, and human interactions with nature (Garrard 5). Rob Nixon advances this conversation through his concept of "slow violence," describing environmental devastation as a gradual but destructive process whose effects disproportionately burden impoverished communities (Nixon 2). These perspectives demonstrate that ecological degradation is inseparable from political and economic structures of domination.

Within African literary studies, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o consistently argues that literature must challenge exploitative political and economic systems while restoring indigenous cultural agency (Ngũgĩ 16). Biodun Jeyifo similarly views African drama as a medium of ideological contestation through which playwrights interrogate authoritarian governance, class oppression, and social inequality. Tejumola Olaniyan extends this argument by demonstrating that contemporary African theatre engages critically with globalization, neoliberal capitalism, and the politics of identity. Harry



Garuba further emphasizes that African literary texts frequently integrate indigenous epistemologies with contemporary socio-political concerns, thereby producing alternative visions of development rooted in communal ethics.

Critical scholarship on Tess Onwueme has expanded considerably over the past four decades. Critics generally acknowledge her as one of Africa's foremost playwrights whose dramatic works combine feminism, environmental consciousness, political satire, and social commitment. Olu Obafemi argues that Onwueme's dramaturgy develops a distinctive feminist aesthetic that employs allegory and symbolism to interrogate capitalist exploitation, patriarchal domination, and political injustice. Examining *The Desert Encroaches* alongside *Ban Empty Barn*, Obafemi concludes that allegory enables Onwueme to expose exploitative structures while envisioning liberatory social transformation.

Scholars also recognize *The Desert Encroaches* as one of Onwueme's most overtly political allegories. The play employs animal symbolism to dramatize unequal global power relations in which stronger nations exploit weaker societies through economic, military, and environmental domination. This allegorical strategy extends beyond Nigerian politics to critique international systems of inequality and ecological injustice.

Despite these scholarly contributions, there remains limited critical attention specifically devoted to the interconnectedness of power, oppression, and the politics of survival in *The Desert Encroaches*. Most existing studies focus either on feminist concerns, ecological issues, or general socio-political criticism without thoroughly interrogating how structures of power shape survival strategies among oppressed groups. This paper therefore contributes to existing scholarship by critically examining how Onwueme constructs survival as both a political and existential struggle within oppressive socio-economic systems.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the Marxist and sociological approaches to literary criticism. Marxist criticism examines class relations, economic exploitation, and power dynamics in society. It focuses on how dominant classes oppress subordinate groups through political and economic control. The sociological approach, on the other hand, studies literature as a reflection of social realities and ideological structures.

The relevance of Marxism to *The Desert Encroaches* lies in its representation of class oppression and exploitation. The stronger animals symbolize dominant imperial powers and local ruling elites, while the weaker animals represent oppressed nations, peasants, workers, and marginalized groups. Onwueme uses these symbolic relationships to expose the inequalities inherent in global and African socio-political systems.

The sociological framework equally helps in understanding the relationship between literature and society in the play. Onwueme mirrors the socio-economic crises, political corruption, and environmental degradation affecting many African societies. The play becomes a social document that interrogates injustice while advocating resistance and transformation.

Textual Analysis—*The Desert Encroaches* Power and the Dynamics of Domination

Power constitutes one of the central concerns of Tess Onwueme's *The Desert Encroaches*. The play can be interpreted as Onwueme's artistic commentary on global politics and ideological intrigues which rock the world in present times (Evwierhoma 139). The play presents a society polarized between the dominant and subordinate forces, employing animal symbolism and imagery to reveal both local and global structures of oppression. In the hierarchical world of the play, certain animals dominate others through violence, intimidation, and manipulation. The Lion, Bear, Hawk,



Wolf, and other predatory animals symbolize world superpowers and oppressive ruling classes that monopolize authority and resources. These powerful forces determine the fate of weaker animals and exploit them for selfish interests. Such weaker animals include Goats, Sheep, Dove, Donkey, Cow, Fox, Tortoise, etc.

Onwueme portrays power as destructive and exploitative rather than protective. The dominant animals maintain their authority through fear and military superiority. Their obsession with weapons, territorial expansion, and domination mirrors the realities of imperialism and militarization in contemporary global politics. The references to Hiroshima nuclear experience and arms race in Movement five (*The Desert Encroaches* 54-55) of the play suggest the dangers posed by global superpowers whose struggles for supremacy threaten weaker nations and the environment. Reflecting the history of Hiroshima, Tortoise remarks:

Tortoise: The evidence of history still is before us.

Hiroshima and Baghdad are not far from us at all...

Let us turn back the pages of history and look reality in the face
(Onwueme 175).

The playwright also uses the folklore of Obu and Nza which epitomizes confrontation as a warning against the acts of war. As the one-legged soldier declares:

...the real enemy is the master who declares war.

When a war is won, we are the losers.

All wars are won on tears. (Onwueme 183).

The politics of power in the play also reflects African postcolonial realities where leaders oppress the masses instead of protecting them. The weak animals suffer hunger, displacement, and insecurity while the powerful continue to enrich themselves. Through this depiction, Onwueme criticizes the betrayal of leadership in many African societies where governance has become an instrument of oppression rather than service. Furthermore, the play reveals that power functions through ideological manipulation. The oppressed are often deceived into believing that their suffering is natural or inevitable. This reflects Marxist notions of ideological control where ruling elites sustain oppression by shaping consciousness and suppressing resistance.

Oppression and Exploitation in the Animal Kingdom

Oppression is vividly dramatized in the relationship between the stronger and weaker animals. The Sheep, Cow, Donkey, and other harmless animals are constantly exploited, beaten, humiliated, and consumed by predators. These animals symbolize the oppressed masses whose labour sustains society yet who remain victims of poverty and violence. Lions for instance, "feed on Goats and Sheep...and even on cows too" (*The Desert Encroaches* 163). The Donkey, represents the suffering proletariat burdened with labour but denied dignity and reward. Similarly, the Cow produces nourishment for society but becomes a victim of exploitation and slaughter. This reflects capitalist systems where workers produce wealth but remain impoverished while elites accumulate power and privilege.

Onwueme's use of allegory intensifies the universality of oppression in the play. The forest becomes a metaphor for the world itself where exploitation transcends geographical boundaries. The suffering of the weak animals mirrors the experiences of colonized nations, impoverished African states, and marginalized communities across the globe. The following conversations explain the feelings of lamentation and internal squabbles among the weaker animals:

Cows: Oh! Oh! My unborn child.

I wish you would come without breast for the world to milk and fight for.



Sheep: That is a bad prayer.

Cow: You're ever ready to provide meat.

Sheep: And if there is no milk?

Tortoise: Ha ha ha!

The world always feeds on itself. Lions feed on goats and sheep...

Sheep: And on cows too. (Onwueme 163-164)

The play also explores environmental oppression. The encroaching desert symbolizes ecological devastation caused by greed, militarization, and irresponsible exploitation of natural resources. Environmental destruction in the play is not accidental but a consequence of oppressive systems driven by selfish interests. This ecological dimension aligns Onwueme's work with eco-critical concerns about environmental justice and human survival. Moreover, oppression in the play operates psychologically. Fear becomes a tool of control. The weaker animals live in perpetual anxiety because they are aware of their vulnerability before the predators. This atmosphere of fear reflects authoritarian societies where citizens are silenced through violence and intimidation.

The Politics of Survival

One of the most profound concerns of *The Desert Encroaches* is survival. The weaker animals struggle to preserve their existence in a hostile environment dominated by violence and exploitation. Survival becomes both physical and political. Physically, the oppressed animals contend with hunger, insecurity, environmental decay, and constant threats of annihilation. The "encroaching desert" symbolizes the gradual destruction of life and hope. The imagery of dryness and barrenness reflects socio-economic hardship in many African societies where poverty and political instability threaten human existence.

Politically, survival requires resistance and solidarity. Onwueme suggests that oppressed communities can only survive through collective action and unity. The play advocates revolutionary consciousness among the weak animals as a means of confronting oppressive structures. The Spider, in particular, emerges as a symbol of resistance and strategic struggle against domination. The politics of survival in the play also reflects postcolonial African realities. African nations often struggle to survive within global systems controlled by economically and militarily powerful nations. The exploitation of African resources, political interference, and economic dependency contribute to the metaphorical "desertification" of the continent.

Onwueme equally emphasizes survival through voice and protest. Songs, choruses, and collective lamentations in the play function as acts of resistance against silence and oppression. The dramatic structure itself becomes a protest performance through which the marginalized reclaim visibility and agency.

Allegory, Symbolism, and Dramatic Technique

Allegory is a literary device in which characters, actions, settings, and events represent broader moral, political, religious, or philosophical ideas beyond their literal meanings. According to M. H. Abrams, allegory is an extended narrative in which virtually every major element possesses both a literal and symbolic significance (Abrams 5). Unlike ordinary symbolism, allegory operates systematically so that the entire dramatic structure conveys an underlying ideological message.

African dramatists frequently employ allegory to criticize oppressive political systems while avoiding direct political confrontation. Allegory enables writers to universalize local experiences by transforming specific events into broader reflections on human society. *The Desert Encroaches* is fundamentally an allegorical drama. The advancing desert symbolizes more than ecological change;



it represents the gradual destruction of justice, hope, and communal well-being through political irresponsibility and environmental exploitation. Likewise, the struggle among the play's characters reflects wider conflicts between the powerful and the powerless, the privileged and the marginalized, and those who exploit nature versus those whose survival depends upon it. Consequently, the play transcends its immediate setting to comment on environmental injustice throughout Africa and the developing world.

Onwueme's use of allegory is central to the effectiveness of the play. The animal kingdom serves as a symbolic representation of human society. Through anthropomorphic characters, the playwright universalizes the realities of oppression and power struggle as captured in the following dialogue:

FOREST CRIER: My mother was born when the world's conscience was deep, deep like a well.

As I grew up, the earth's core became shallow. The world's conscience had dried up. The Sahara now threatens the entire kingdom. The green leaves in the world's heart, withering each day...for the desert encroaches. And men, fuelling the sun...to maim the minds...Ambition of the powers like fire ravaging, ravishing the green lands where men plant their hopes. Their seeds...ah...

DOVE: Desire supplants all. The Iroko which should shade lesser plants from the sun's scourge...The Iroko which should give shelter to the little birds of the earth now vomits its own fire, scattering the helpless birds to the seven winds and seas...(Onwueme 145)

The desert is perhaps the most powerful symbol in the play. It signifies destruction, death, environmental crisis, moral decay, and political desolation. The gradual encroachment of the desert suggests the progressive collapse of society under oppressive systems. Music, chants, and choruses also play significant roles in the dramatic structure. These elements drawn from African oral traditions and communal performance aesthetics, reinforce the collective nature of suffering and resistance in the play.

Satire is another important technique employed by Onwueme. Satire is a literary and dramatic mode that employs humour, irony, ridicule, exaggeration, and wit to expose and criticize human vices, social injustice, political corruption, and institutional failures with the aim of provoking reform. Rather than entertaining merely for amusement, satire functions as an instrument of social criticism by drawing attention to the contradictions and moral failures within society.

In African drama, satire has become an important artistic strategy for exposing authoritarianism, corruption, environmental exploitation, and social inequality. Playwrights such as Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan, Ola Rotimi, and Tess Onwueme employ satire to interrogate structures of power that undermine human dignity.

In *The Desert Encroaches*, Onwueme satirizes political leaders, bureaucratic institutions, and powerful interests whose negligence and greed contribute to environmental degradation. The encroaching desert becomes an indictment of governments that neglect environmental protection while ordinary people suffer hunger, displacement, and poverty. Through irony and dramatic contrast, the playwright exposes the absurdity of leaders who pursue selfish interests instead of protecting the environment and ensuring the welfare of their citizens. The satirical dimension of the play therefore transforms environmental decline into a moral and political critique of irresponsible governance. By ridiculing the arrogance and hypocrisy of powerful animals, the playwright exposes the absurdity of oppressive leadership. Satire becomes a weapon of political criticism aimed at provoking social consciousness and reform.

Symbolism

Symbolism refers to the use of objects, characters, places, actions, or events to suggest meanings that extend beyond their literal significance. Symbols enrich literary works by communicating complex ideas indirectly and encouraging multiple levels of interpretation. As



Perrine explains, a symbol simultaneously functions as itself while representing broader abstract concepts (Perrine 219).

In African literature, symbolism often emerges from indigenous cultural beliefs, folklore, ecology, and communal experience. Natural phenomena such as rivers, forests, animals, rain, drought, and deserts frequently symbolize broader social, political, and spiritual realities. Onwueme employs numerous symbols throughout *The Desert Encroaches*. The desert itself constitutes the central symbol of the play. Beyond representing environmental degradation, it symbolizes poverty, political neglect, ecological injustice, economic exploitation, fear, displacement, and the gradual destruction of communal life. As the desert advances, it mirrors the expansion of oppressive systems that deprive communities of their means of survival as “the world feeds on itself. Lions feed on goats and sheep...and on cows too” (Onwueme 163).

The land symbolizes life, identity, productivity, cultural continuity, and communal heritage. Its degradation reflects the erosion of both ecological sustainability and human dignity. Similarly, water functions as a symbol of renewal, hope, fertility, and survival. The scarcity of water illustrates the severe consequences of environmental mismanagement and unequal access to natural resources. The dramatic conflict itself symbolizes the broader struggle between domination and resistance, illustrating that survival depends upon collective action against structures of oppression.

Dramatic Techniques

Dramatic techniques refer to the artistic methods through which playwrights communicate themes, develop characters, organize action, and influence audience response. These include dialogue, characterization, plot, conflict, setting, imagery, symbolism, stage directions, songs, spectacle, irony, suspense, and theatrical language.

Tess Onwueme combines both indigenous African performance aesthetics and modern theatrical conventions in *The Desert Encroaches*. One of her most significant techniques is animal allegory, through which animal characters represent human societies and political actors. This technique universalizes the play's message while enabling the playwright to criticize political and environmental injustices indirectly.

Dialogue is another important dramatic technique. Characters engage in debates that reveal competing interests, ideological conflicts, and unequal power relations. Through these conversations, audiences witness how environmental crises intensify struggles over authority, resources, and survival. Onwueme also employs dramatic irony, whereby audiences recognize the consequences of environmental destruction even when certain characters underestimate its seriousness. This irony heightens dramatic tension and reinforces the urgency of ecological responsibility.

Another important technique is the extensive use of symbolic setting. The threatened landscape is not merely a physical location but a dramatic space reflecting social decay, political failure, and ecological crisis. The environment itself becomes an active participant in the dramatic conflict. Conflict functions as the structural foundation of the play. The interaction between powerful and vulnerable groups dramatizes unequal access to resources, while environmental decline intensifies existing social inequalities. Through carefully constructed conflict, Onwueme demonstrates that ecological crises are inseparable from political and economic power relations. Finally, Onwueme's integration of symbolism, satire, and allegory creates a multidimensional dramatic structure in which environmental degradation simultaneously functions as ecological reality, political criticism, and moral warning. These dramatic techniques enable the play to transcend local concerns and speak to universal questions of environmental justice, sustainable development, and the politics of survival.



Conclusion

This study has examined the intricate relationship between power dynamics and the politics of survival in Tess Onwueme's *The Desert Encroaches*, demonstrating that the play presents environmental degradation not merely as an ecological crisis but as the consequence of unequal political, economic, and ideological power relations. Through its compelling dramatic structure, the play reveals how the exercise of power determines access to environmental resources, shapes patterns of marginalization, and ultimately influences the survival of vulnerable communities. Onwueme thus situates ecological devastation within broader discourses of governance, social justice, and sustainable development.

The analysis has shown that power in *The Desert Encroaches* is multidimensional, operating through political authority, economic exploitation, environmental neglect, and ideological domination. These forms of power sustain systems that privilege the interests of the powerful while exposing ordinary people to hunger, displacement, poverty, and ecological insecurity. Consequently, survival in the play extends beyond physical existence to encompass the struggle for dignity, identity, environmental justice, and communal resilience. The politics of survival therefore emerges as a continuous negotiation between oppression and resistance, where marginalized communities employ solidarity, perseverance, and collective action to confront systemic inequalities.

The study has further established that Onwueme's artistic craftsmanship significantly strengthens the play's ideological vision. Through the effective use of satire, allegory, symbolism, dramatic irony, conflict, and vivid environmental imagery, she transforms the encroaching desert into a powerful metaphor for political irresponsibility, ecological destruction, and the gradual erosion of human values. These dramatic techniques enable the play to transcend its immediate geographical setting and engage universal concerns about environmental sustainability, social equity, and responsible leadership.

Moreover, the study demonstrates that *The Desert Encroaches* contributes meaningfully to African ecocritical discourse by foregrounding the interconnectedness of environmental protection, political accountability, and human survival. The play challenges exploitative systems that prioritize economic and political interests above ecological preservation and communal welfare, while advocating a development paradigm rooted in justice, inclusivity, and environmental stewardship. In this regard, Onwueme affirms that sustainable development cannot be achieved where power remains concentrated in the hands of a privileged few and where the voices of marginalized communities are ignored.

Ultimately, *The Desert Encroaches* stands as a profound dramatic interrogation of the structures that produce ecological and social vulnerability in contemporary Africa. By exposing the nexus between power, environmental degradation, and human survival, Tess Onwueme demonstrates that literature is not merely a reflection of reality but a transformative instrument for raising ecological consciousness, questioning oppressive systems, and inspiring social change. This study therefore contributes to African literary scholarship by establishing that the politics of survival in the play is fundamentally a struggle for environmental justice, equitable power relations, and the preservation of both human dignity and the natural environment. The continued relevance of *The Desert Encroaches* lies in its compelling reminder that the survival of humanity is inseparable from the ethical exercise of power and the responsible stewardship of the environment.



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