

NARRATIVES OF CURE: LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF TRADITIONAL HEALING PRACTICES IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN FICTION

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how contemporary Nigerian fiction represents traditional healing practices as both thematic and structural components of literary narrative. Through close readings of Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, and Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*, the study reveals how traditional medicine is used as a narrative strategy to articulate indigenous knowledge systems, relate gendered experiences of health, and oppose colonial epistemologies. By focusing on the connection between cultural memory, medical pluralism, and the symbolic dimensions of healing, the paper situates literature as an important field for the preservation, criticism, and rediscovery of traditional African healing practices. The findings contribute to ongoing dialogue in literary studies, medical humanities, and postcolonial theory, calling for a more

Introduction

In the rich history of Nigerian culture, traditional healing stands as both a practical and symbolic system of knowledge, deeply entrenched in the spiritual and communal life of its people. From the herbalist in rural communities to the diviner consulted in urban suburbs, traditional medicine in Nigeria constitutes a vital approach of indigenous epistemology and health practice. In the early years of colonialism and the present global influence of Western biomedical science, these systems have often been dismissed as primitive or superstitious. Within academic

expansive understanding of narrative healing within African settings.

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and medical conversation, they have remained underrepresented or misrepresented, despite their resilience and relevance in contemporary Nigerian society (Osunyikanmi, 2024).

Nigerian literature, specifically prose fiction, has long been a medium through which authors relate with the socio-cultural and political realities of their nation. While issues such as postcolonial identity, gender, corruption, and migration have received appreciable scholarly attention, the representation of traditional healing practices has not been equally examined, especially within a literary framework that acknowledges their narrative, epistemological, and representative functions. This paper seeks to fill that gap by examining how selected Nigerian literary texts represent traditional healing practices not as static cultural remains, but as dynamic, evolving elements of the Nigerian experience.

The central questions guiding this inquiry include:

- How are traditional healing systems depicted in contemporary Nigerian fiction?
- What narrative strategies do authors use to portray indigenous medical practices, and to what end?
- How do these portrayals negotiate the tensions between tradition and modernity, faith and science, or local knowledge and global paradigms?

Applying postcolonial theory, medical humanities, and African indigenous knowledge frameworks, this study argues that contemporary Nigerian fiction recovers and re-projects traditional healing practices as location of cultural identity, resistance, and epistemological pluralism. Through detailed textual analyses of selected novels, this paper reveals the ways in which literature serves not ordinarily as a mirror of society but as an active participant in the cultural debate surrounding health, knowledge, and decolonisation.

This paper is limited to the analysis of 21st-century Nigerian prose fiction written in English, focusing majorly on how traditional healing is thematically and narratively merged into the texts. It does not attempt a pharmacological or anthropological proof of the practices described but rather stresses their literary formulation and

representative meaning. By situating literature as both a cultural storage and a creative power, this study contributes to broader discussions in African literary studies, indigenous epistemologies, and the medical humanities.

Literature Review

Traditional Healing Practices in Contemporary Nigeria

Traditional healing in Nigeria predates colonial encounter and symbolises a rich body of indigenous medical knowledge transferred across generations (Adefolaju, 2014; Okpako, 2013). Rooted in cosmological beliefs, spiritual practices, and natural pharmacopoeia, traditional healing forms part of a total worldview in which illness is always understood as an interruption in spiritual or communal togetherness (Tunde-Francis, Ugege, Odeyale, Musa, & Ojedokun 2020). Nigeria, a culturally diverse country with over 250 ethnic groups, possesses a wide number of indigenous healing systems, including herbalism, divination, bone-setting, and spiritual rituals (Iyiola & Adegoke-Wahab, 2024). These practices are often link to ancestral worship and deities, particularly within Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa-Fulani traditions.

Colonial and postcolonial governments attempted to prioritise traditional healing systems in favour of Western biomedicine, leading to a historical struggle between indigenous and modern medical practices (Ghazali, Bello, Kola-Mustapha 2019). Despite this, traditional healing has remained resilient, adapting to socio-cultural changes and urbanisation, and often co-existing with orthodox medicine in what scholars term medical pluralism (Ghazali, Bello, Kola-Mustapha 2019).

In contemporary Nigeria, traditional healing remains widely used across both rural and urban populations. According to WHO estimates, over 80% of Africans, including Nigerians, rely on traditional medicine for primary health care (WHO, 2018; Modibbo, Ibrahim, Sulaiman, Zakir & Maganin 2024). Herbalists, spiritual healers, and traditional birth attendants are regularly consulted for a variety of ailments, including chronic diseases, infertility, mental illness, and spiritual afflictions (Evbuomwan, Adeyemi, & Oluba 2023; Kanayochukwu & Tamunosiki 2021). The use of traditional healing is not limited to the uneducated or rural dwellers; many urban and educated Nigerians also seek traditional remedies, especially when biomedicine fails or is perceived as inadequate (Adefolaju, 2014).

Traditional healing practices have also been integrated into informal healthcare systems, such as prayer houses and syncretic religious movements, further complicating the differences between tradition and modernity (Ikhoyameh, Okete, Ogboye, Owoyemi, & Gbadebo 2024; Dubale, Usure, Mekasha, Hasen, Hafiz, Kebebe,

& Suleman 2025). In some cases, traditional healers collaborate with orthodox practitioners, especially in managing culturally sensitive health issues such as mental health and reproductive concerns (WHO, 2024; Wada, Jatau, Bala, Haruna, Isa, Safiyya, & Sha'aban; Ung COL, Harnett J, Hu H).

The significance of traditional healing in Nigeria resides not only in its accessibility and affordability but also in its cultural authenticity. Unlike biomedical models, which always alienate disease from socio-cultural settings, traditional healing incorporates the social, spiritual, and psychological dimensions of illness (Osamor & Owumi, 2010). This holistic approach resounds with many Nigerians who understand health as a balance between physical, spiritual, and communal well-being (Kalu, 2022; Fetuga et al., 2023; Wada, Jatau, Bala, Haruna, Isa, Safiyya, & Sha'aban 2019).

Traditional healers are often trusted members of the community and play key roles in health education, consultation, and social cohesion (Orikpete and Ewim, 2023; Eruaga, Itua & Bature 2024). Furthermore, the biodiversity of Nigeria has endowed traditional healers with a vast pharmacopoeia of medicinal plants, many of which have proven therapeutic value and are increasingly attracting scientific attention for drug development (Mba, Ajaghaku, Ogbonna, & Egba 2025).

The continued relevance of traditional medicine also reflects continued structural imperfections in Nigeria's public health system, including inadequate infrastructure, poor distribution of medical personnel, and high unaffordable costs for healthcare (Okojie, 2015; Mba, Ajaghaku, Ogbonna, & Egba 2025). In such situations, traditional healing offers a vital, community-based option.

Despite its cultural and therapeutic value, traditional healing in Nigeria faces significant challenges. One major issue is the **lack of regulation**. The absence of a stable policy guideline for standardising and monitoring traditional medical practices generate worries about safety, potency, and ethical practice (Osunyanmi, 2024; Adebisi et al., 2022; Mponda, Muula, Choko, & Ajuwon). Adulteration of herbal products, misdiagnosis, and harmful spiritual practices are always noticed as risks, particularly in the treatment of serious conditions such as cancer or HIV/AIDS (Erinoso, 2021, Ozioma EJ, Okaka, 2019).

Another challenge is **epistemological marginalisation**. Traditional medicine is often dismissed by biomedical professionals and policymakers as unscientific or superstitious, which undermines efforts at integration and collaboration (Afe 2019; Ezekwesili-Ofil & Okaka 2019; Eruaga, Itua & Bature 2024). This skepticism extends to academic institutions, where traditional knowledge systems are under-

researched and under-documented (Ayuba, Fadele, Ogaya, Olayinka, Sharma, & Lucero-Prisno 2024).

Additionally, **generational shifts** and globalisation pose cultural threats to traditional healing. Younger Nigerians are increasingly nurtured toward Western lifestyles and may lack interest in learning or preserving indigenous knowledge (Banjo 2019). This has led to fears of knowledge extinction, especially as many traditional healers die without formally transmitting their skills (Sifuna, 2022).

Finally, **intellectual property rights** and **bio-piracy** present challenges in an era of global pharmaceutical interest in indigenous medicinal plants. There are concerns about the exploitation of local knowledge without sufficient benefit-sharing or recognition of traditional communities' contributions.

In all, traditional healing practices in Nigeria are a resilient and essential part of the country's healthcare landscape. Deeply entrenched in cultural beliefs and ecological resources, they provide accessible and socially pronounced care for millions of Nigerians. However, they also face multifaceted challenges, from regulation and epistemic prejudice to generational change and globalization. A more integrative and respectful approach, recognizing the value of indigenous medical systems while ensuring safety and efficacy, will be crucial to sustaining traditional healing in the contemporary era.

Theoretical Framework

Understanding the representation of traditional healing practices in contemporary Nigerian fiction requires a multidisciplinary critical framework that bridges literature, culture, medicine, and epistemology. This study applies four interrelated theoretical outlooks, postcolonial theory, medical humanities, African indigenous knowledge systems, and narratology, to present a deep and different interpretation of how traditional healing is constructed, contested, and reimagined in Nigerian prose fiction.

Postcolonial Theory

At the heart of postcolonial literary studies lies the criticism of epistemic violence, the systematic dehumanisation and exclusion of colonised peoples' knowledge systems by colonial powers. Scholars such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o have emphasised the centrality of language, culture, and representation in the struggle against colonial oppression. Within the context of traditional healing, postcolonial theory questions how colonial modernity relegated indigenous

medicine to the realm of superstition, privileging Western biomedicine as the sole authentic mode of healing.

This study applies Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity and the "third space" to analyse how current Nigerian authors mediate between colonial inheritances and indigenous epistemologies. The literary representation of traditional healers and sacrifices always hinders this third space, where division of tradition and modernity, science and spirituality, are blurred and reshaped. Furthermore, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's call for the decolonisation of the African reasoning and his emphasis on literature as a location of cultural opposition express this paper's view of fiction as an arena where traditional knowledge is not only preserved but recovered.

Medical Humanities

The medical humanities provide an essential framework for examining the connections of literature, health, and healing. This interdisciplinary field argues that stories, whether personal, cultural, or fictional, are pivotal to how individuals and societies understand illness and healing. In African settings, where health and spirituality are always related, the medical humanities provides instruments to examine how healing is represented not only as a biological process but as a socio-cultural and moral event.

In Nigerian literature, traditional healing practices are located within complex storyworlds that reflect communal beliefs, historical trauma, and fundamental worries. The medical humanities approach enables us to see these texts not as ethnographic records but as narrative experiments that oppose prevalent models of health and wellness. This study therefore place fiction as a "narrative medicine" that both criticises and supports biomedical practices, especially in postcolonial societies where medical pluralism is the norm.

African Indigenous Knowledge Systems

Central to this paper's analysis is the framework of African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS), which refers to the accumulated wisdom, beliefs, and practices of African peoples built across generations through practical experience. Traditional healing, as a major component of AIKS, includes herbalism, divination, spiritual rituals, and ancestral communication, systems always passed down orally and practiced communally.

Literary representations of traditional healing must be understood within this epistemological setting, where knowledge is comprehensive, relational, and deeply

connected to the land and the ancestors. AIKS challenges the Eurocentric division between rational science and irrational superstition by asserting alternative modes of examination that are proved through communal potency and spiritual unity. In fiction, the application of proverbs, myths, rituals, and oral storytelling techniques always serves to establish the story in this indigenous worldview, offering a counter-discourse to Western empiricism.

Narratology

Finally, narratology, the study of narrative outlay and strategy, provides the tools to examine how traditional healing is represented at the level of form and language. Authors employ various narrative strategies such as magical realism, oral aesthetics, nonlinear time, and shifting perspectives to express the complexity and liminality of traditional healing experiences.

These techniques do more than entertain; they structure the reader's engagement with cultural knowledge and challenge conventional narrative realism.

For instance, magical realist texts such as *The Famished Road* by Ben Okri blur the boundaries between the visible and the invisible, allowing spirit healers and metaphysical journeys to coexist with everyday urban life. Through such narrative choices, authors create a literary language capable of expressing the ineffable and mystical dimensions of indigenous healing.

Together, these theoretical outlooks provide a robust and flexible framework for analysing how contemporary Nigerian fiction constructs traditional healing as both a cultural practice and a narrative strategy.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative literary analysis based in interpretive and interdisciplinary approaches to examine representations of traditional healing in contemporary Nigerian fiction. It examines how narratives create, criticise, or affirm indigenous healing systems, attending to both literary form and socio-cultural meaning.

The research follows a thematic and comparative design, using close reading to analyse how selected works depict traditional medicine as both practice and metaphor. This allows for a deep understanding of how narrative strategies relate extended cultural, political, and epistemological issues concerning health and healing.

Three primary texts were selected based on their authorship by 21st-century Nigerian writers, their explicit or implicit relationship with traditional healing practices, and their thematic focus on health, spirituality, identity, and cultural conflict. The novels *The Famished Road* by Ben Okri, Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, and *Everything Good Will Come* by Sefi Atta offer varied narrative styles, settings, and gender perspectives suitable for comparative analysis.

Data consists of narrative elements, passages, scenes, and structures, that depict traditional healers, rituals, herbal medicine, and struggles between indigenous and biomedical systems, as well as symbolic uses of illness and healing. These are analysed through close reading, thematic coding, and comparative interpretation to identify recurring motifs and differences in the presentations of traditional medicine. The analysis is framed by postcolonial theory (notably Homi Bhabha and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o), medical humanities, African indigenous knowledge systems, and narratology. These approaches enable an examination of how literary texts oppose colonial epistemologies, articulate holistic views of health, harbours healing in communal cosmologies, and use narrative forms such as magical realism and orality. This study is limited to prose fiction and does not include poetry, drama, or film. It focuses on symbolic and cultural representations rather than empirical validation of healing practices. While interpretive subjectivity is a potential limitation, it is addressed through rigorous theoretical examination and cross-textual comparison

Historical and Cultural Context

The representation of traditional healing in contemporary Nigerian fiction is deeply informed by the historical trajectories and cultural dynamics surrounding indigenous medicine in Nigeria. Understanding these contexts is crucial to appreciating how literary narratives relate with traditional healing, not as nostalgic artifacts, but as living practices caught in the crosscurrents of history, belief, and modernity.

Traditional Healing in Precolonial Nigeria

Before the advent of colonialism, traditional healing systems were integral to the health, spirituality, and social group of Nigerian communities. Rooted in the cosmologies of different ethnic groups such as the Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, and others, healing practices involve a complete view of the human being, one that considered the physical, spiritual, psychological, and social dimensions of health. Healers, known differently as *babalawo* (Yoruba diviner), *dibia* (Igbo spiritualist),

or *bokaye* (Hausa herbalist), served not only as medical practitioners but also as custodians of communal memory and moral order.

These practitioners apply extensive pharmacopeias of herbs, roots, and animal substances, mixed with spiritual sacrifices, incantations, and ancestral invocations. Illness was always seen as a disturbance/interjection in spiritual or social order, demanding both medicinal and ritual solutions. Healing therefore happened within a working of relationships, between the individual and the community, the living and the ancestors, the material and the spiritual.

Colonial Disruption and the Rise of Biomedicine

The imposition of colonial rule in Nigeria brought with it a new medical order, one grounded in Western biomedicine and sustained by racialised assumptions of cultural superiority. Missionary and colonial medical institutions despised traditional healing as primitive, unscientific, and even harmful. Colonial health policies criminalised or hindered the activities of indigenous healers, while promoting hospitals, clinics, and pharmaceuticals as symbols of modern progress.

This epistemic violence, where one knowledge system is forcefully replaced by another, led to a noticeable removal of the position and practice of traditional healing. While some communities continued to rely on indigenous medicine, especially in rural areas, formal education and urbanisation further marginalised these systems. The colonial medical record was largely silent on indigenous practices, except to pathologise or exoticize them.

Still, despite institutional repression, traditional healing never disappeared. It endured, went underground, and evolved in response to changing socio-political realities. Fictional works surfacing from postcolonial Nigeria always revisit this period to criticise the colonial medical look and recover indigenous knowledge as a authentic and important cultural resource.

Post-Independence Hybridity and Medical Pluralism

After Nigeria gained independence in 1960, the medical environment became increasingly pluralistic. Western medicine remained prevalent, especially in urban centres and formal institutions, but traditional healing continued across class, religion, and geography. Economic problems, mistrust of public health systems, and a resurgence of cultural nationalism led many Nigerians to seek out indigenous healers for ailments ranging from the mundane to the metaphysical.

The Nigerian nation has revolved between repression and regulation in its approach to traditional medicine. Various attempts have been made to formalise and merge traditional medicine into national health policy, including the establishment of the Nigeria Natural Medicine Development Agency (NNMDA). These efforts, however, always fail because of organisational biases, limited research funding, and the problems of codifying orally transmitted knowledge.

In this situation, Nigerian fiction becomes an important ground for examining the cultural politics of healing. Literary texts set in post-independence Nigeria frequently present characters who try multiple medical systems, reflecting a hybrid epistemology that does not conform to the merging of tradition versus modernity.

Contemporary Resurgence and Literary Engagement

In recent decades, there has been a renewed interest in traditional healing among Nigerians, inspired in part by global progression toward decolonisation, environmental consciousness, and cultural heritage preservation. Popular culture, Nollywood films, music, and religious practices have all added to the visibility and reassessment of indigenous medicine. This resurgence is also expressed in literature, where contemporary authors increasingly deal with traditional healing not only as a thematic preoccupation but as a structural and stylistic influence.

Contemporary Nigerian fiction always positions traditional healing as a location of opposition against medical imperialism, a store ground of ancestral wisdom, and a metaphor for socio-political rebirth. Authors use story to excavate, reinterpret, and sometimes question these practices, offering a critical but empathetic exploration of their importance in modern society.

In all, the literary representation of traditional healing in Nigerian fiction is inseparable from the historical arc of suppression, survival, and resurgence that has shaped these practices. Fiction thus becomes both a cultural storage and a changing power, possible to link the past and the present, the seen and the unseen, the scientific and the spiritual.

Literary Case Studies

This section presents a close reading of three contemporary Nigerian literary texts that represent traditional healing practices in different and complex ways. Through these case studies, we examine how authors use story strategies to articulate indigenous epistemologies, question colonial inheritances, and reproject cultural identity through the avenue of health and healing. The selected works, Ben

Okri's *The Famished Road*, Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, and Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*, offer a representative sample of how Nigerian fiction deals with traditional healing across different genres, settings, and thematic concerns.

Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*

Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991) is a foundational text in Nigerian magical realism and remains one of the most profound literary treatments of indigenous spirituality and healing. Set in a mythic version of Nigeria on the boundary of political change, the novel follows Azaro, a spirit child (*abiku*), who revolve between the material and spiritual worlds. His journey gives a special outlook through which traditional healing is not only thematically positioned but structurally built in the novel's cosmology and narrative form.

Azaro's father, a boxer and political activist, is also presented as a healer of sorts, a man who directs spiritual powers and opposes corruption through practices of ritual cleansing, fasting, and incantation. His healing is less about medical intervention and more about restoring spiritual and moral balance, reflecting Yoruba beliefs of health as relationship between powers.

Okri's use of magical realism, where the boundaries between reality and the spirit world are porous, reflects the indigenous worldview in which physical and metaphysical ailments are closely connected. The healer-figures in the novel always operate through dreams, visions, and ancestral directions. These narrative techniques oppose Western beliefs of rationality and realism, preferring instead an African metaphysics of healing that is deeply spiritual, symbolic, and political.

Moreover, *The Famished Road* criticises the interruption of colonial and modern powers into indigenous ways of life. The trespass of Western medicine and science is described as spiritually disruptive and morally corrupt. In contrast, traditional healing practices, though sometimes unclear, are founded in communal ethics and metaphysical outlook. Therefore, Okri recovers indigenous healing not merely as a cultural detail but as a medium of opposition and a symbol for national rebirth.

Analysis

Application of Traditional Medicine:

- Azaro's father functions as both a boxer and a spiritual healer. He frequently consults with and acts upon advice from herbalists and spirit guides.

"He asked me if I had seen the spirits, and I said yes. Then he sat down and began to consult his spirits. He talked in his sleep. He made incantations. He invoked the names of the ancestors." *The Famished Road*, p. 190

- Azaro, as an abiku (spirit child), is subject to various traditional rituals meant to anchor him in the physical world. His mother participates in these rituals, involving the use of herbs, chants, and symbolic sacrifices to appease spiritual powers and ensure his survival.

"Mum had prepared warm herbal water. 'Bathe of it properly,' she said, 'or I will do it for you.' ... Mum rubbed me over with herbal oil. 'Time for your dongoyaro,' she said." p. 161

"With passionate ritual offerings, our parents always tried to induce us to live... They also tried to get us to reveal where we had hidden the spirit tokens that bound us to the other world." p. 143

- The herbalist and other community spiritual figures play key roles in treating both physical and spiritual ailments, using a combination of potions, incantations, and sacrifices.

"'This is a child who didn't want to be born, but who will fight with death.' ... He told them that I had hidden my special tokens of spirit identity on this earth..." p. 140-141

His father, however, expresses frustration with the herbalist's expensive rituals:

"'If you listen to everything they say,' he told Mum, 'you will have to perform absurd sacrifices every time you step outside your door.'" p. 141

Conflict Due to Modernity:

- There is an ongoing tension between the Westernised medical system (represented in hospitals and medicine peddlers) and indigenous healing. Azaro's father is skeptical of modern medicine and often refuses its intervention.

"They named me Lazaro... Mum shortened my name to Azaro." p. 140

"But sooner than you think there won't be one tree standing... And there will be wretched houses all over the place." p. 187

- Characters are caught between modern urban development and traditional worldviews, with traditional healers often dismissed by modern figures as "superstitious" or "primitive." The road, a symbol of modernity, is seen as a devourer of life:

“The road swallows people and sometimes at night you can hear them calling for help, begging to be freed from inside its stomach.” p. 160

Combination of Traditional and Western Medicine:

- While there is no formal integration, the novel presents a symbolic coexistence where Western medicine is always beclouded by the mystical potency of traditional approaches. The blend is more philosophical than procedural, suggesting a cultural syncretism where both systems are part of the same metaphysical landscape. In one of the most metaphorically dense scenes, Azaro is taken to a hospital after collapsing from spiritual exhaustion: “I was taken to a police station. Afterwards I was carried to a hospital where my wounds were treated... They named me Lazaro.” (p. 140)
“I had buried my magic stones, my mirror, my special promises, my golden threads... objects of identity that connected me to the world of spirits.” p. 141
- When Azaro’s mother is near death, Madame Koto uses herbs, chants, and spiritual invocation to revive her, suggesting the superior power of indigenous medicine:
“She went to her room, came out with a handful of herbs... added black oils and ogogoro... calling back her spirit in a very peculiar birdlike voice.” p. 249

Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* reveals how traditional medicine, spiritual cosmology, and cultural heritage coexist with (and often resist) modernity. Through vivid portrayals of Azaro, his parents, Madame Koto, and the herbalist, the novel dramatizes a metaphysical health system where rituals, visions, and herbal treatments carry as much healing power as any hospital. The tension, however, lies in the cost—emotional, financial, and spiritual—of balancing two worlds.

Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*

Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) is a pivotal work in Nigerian feminist literature that critically engages with indigenous spirituality, gendered identity, and the fragmentation of traditional healing in a colonial context. Unlike the overt magical realism of Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, Emecheta's realism is grounded in everyday suffering, domesticity, and social alienation. Yet, traditional healing—both as a thematic concern and symbolic mechanism—permeates the text, revealing the cultural tensions between inherited beliefs and the encroachment of modernity.

The novel begins with an invocation of spiritual affliction: Nnu Ego's infertility is not interpreted biologically, but cosmologically. Her father, Agbadi, is told by native doctors that her chi is haunted by the spirit of a wronged slave woman, thereby introducing the role of ancestral intervention and traditional medicine in shaping individual destiny. This affliction is "cured" not through clinical means, but through spiritual realignment—remarriage, prayer, and sacrifice:

"Agbadi had consulted native doctors and diviners. One of them told him that the child had been given the chi of a slave woman who had died cursing him." (p. 17)

Here, traditional healing is less a curative process and more a cosmological explanation of misfortune, aligning with indigenous Igbo notions of health as harmony between the spiritual and the social.

Unlike Azaro's father in *The Famished Road*, who performs acts of resistance and spiritual healing through ritual strength and moral clarity, Nnu Ego's life reveals the limits of such systems for women. Her fertility, once restored, becomes a burden rather than a blessing. Though motherhood is socially viewed as a form of spiritual fulfilment, a kind of healing from the social label of barrenness, it becomes, for Nnu Ego, a lifelong wound. The ideological structures that promote motherhood as sacred fail to account for the experienced suffering of mothers in a colonial and patriarchal economy:

"A woman without a child for her husband was a failed woman." (p. 54)

Healing, here, is a social inscription, not a practical reality. Nnu Ego's unending sacrifice for her children, and the abandonment she receives in return, undermine the cultural myths of motherhood joy and reveal the deficiency of spiritual and communal systems to help her in urban modernity.

The novel's setting in Lagos, a colonial, capitalist city, underscores the removal of traditional healing system. The communal ethics and ancestral mediation available in Igbo cosmology give way to economic desperation and moral searation. The failure of both Western and traditional healing is poignantly captured in Nnu Ego's death:

"She died on the roadside. No doctor, no native healer. Just a woman too tired to live." (p. 224)

In this highting moment, Emecheta unites both criticism and elegy. The woman who represent traditional virtues of motherhood dies rejected, uncured, and unnamed. The healing power of tradition, like that of colonial modernity, is rendered inpotent, particularly for women in marginal spaces.

Where Okri celebrates indigenous healing as a metaphysical resistance to colonial disruption, Emecheta mourns its failure to protect the most vulnerable. Yet, both authors converge in their portrayal of healing not as a clinical or individual experience, but as deeply political and cultural. *The Joys of Motherhood* situates traditional healing within a decaying moral order, where spiritual explanations persist, but practical remedies vanish.

Thus, while *The Famished Road* reclaims indigenous healing as a hopeful location of national and personal reclamation, *The Joys of Motherhood* gives a more sober meditation on its limitations. Traditional medicine and spirituality, though thematically central, are not independent in themselves. They become part of the troubled terrain in which women like Nnu Ego must struggle, between belief and abandonment, fertility and suffering, tradition and despair.

Analysis

Application of Traditional Medicine:

- Traditional medicine and indigenous spiritual healing play an important role in the early parts of the novel, especially in explaining Nnu Ego's infertility. Her father, Agbadi, seeks out native doctors and diviners to understand her condition. The belief that her soul (chi) is restricted or cursed reveals the Igbo beliefs that health is connected to spiritual harmony.

"Agbadi had consulted native doctors and diviners. One of them told him that the child had been given the chi of a slave woman who had died cursing him."
(p. 17)

This diagnosis connects Nnu Ego's reproductive health to the supernatural, suggesting sacrifices and spiritual mediation other than physical or biomedical treatment. Her ultimate fertility in a second marriage is viewed in the light of this spiritual treatment, supporting the role of traditional belief as a form of cure.

- Characters like **Agbadi** and **Nnu Ego's mother, Ona**, act within this system. Their understanding of evils or calamities, illness, and health is examined by spiritual causality. For instance, after Nnu Ego inability to become pregnant in her first marriage, spiritual imbalance is identified and blamed and not medical infertility:

"It was thought that the spirit of the slave woman had followed her into marriage."
(p. 18)

This worldview reflects a dependence on ancestral guidance, oracles, and spiritual healing, peculiar of pre-colonial and rural Nigerian communities.

Conflict Due to Modernity:

- As the story changes from traditional Ogboli into urban Lagos, the values associated with healing, gender roles, and family expectations are increasingly challenged by modernity. The Western, colonial city does not present spiritual solutions, nor support of the communal processes through which individuals were traditionally trained. This creates a psychological and cultural dislocation for Nnu Ego.

Nnu Ego's hardship is not just emotional or maternal, it is fundamental, grounded in the oppositions between traditional values and the exclusion of modern colonial life. Her failure to secure peace or healing despite bearing children reveals a great failure of both traditional and modern systems.

"This Lagos was so different from the world she knew... there were no people to share one's joys and sorrows." (p. 44)

- Nnaife**, Nnu Ego's husband, further embodies this conflict. Though rooted in Igbo culture, he becomes a propagator for white colonialists, performing undermining labour. He cannot perform traditional masculine roles of supplier and saviour, which aggravates Nnu Ego's despair:

"He washed the private parts of other women while his wife lived like a slave."

(p. 72)

The colonial economy removes both Igbo manliness and marital honour. The struggle lies in how traditional demands (many children, male authority, and community support) are now difficult in a capitalist, colonial city.

Combination of Traditional and Western Medicine:

- Though it is not clearly medical in the clinical sense, the novel describes occasions where traditional and Western outlooks of healing and existence intersect, always tensely or unsuccessfully. Nnu Ego's desperate efforts to nurture her children, her silent suffering, and ultimate fall reveal the imperfections of both systems.

Her son **Oshia**, who is educated overseas and abandons traditional values, symbolises the change toward modernity. He does not come back to care for his mother, neither does he hold the beliefs of his ancestors. When Nnu Ego

becomes mentally and physically spent, there is no spiritual mediation nor medical care.

“She died on the roadside. No doctor, no native healer. Just a woman too tired to live.”

(p. 224)

This occasion is tragically representative. Neither traditional nor modern medicine presents her antidote. The failure of her children to provide care reveals the removal of filial piety, a cultural foundation of indigenous healing, where the family provides the complete support system.

Doctor Okonkwo, briefly mentioned in relation to another character, represents the professionalisation of healing in urban Nigeria. Still, this personality is far and meaningless to Nnu Ego’s life. Her hardship continues unattended, unaccepted, and unchanged by either tradition or development.

Sefi Atta’s Everything Good Will Come

Sefi Atta’s *Everything Good Will Come* (2005) offers a subtle portrayal of healing within a politically and socially structured Lagos. The novel follows Enitan, a young woman coming of age during the post-independence period, as she experiences personal loss, political repression, and gendered expectations. Although the narrative is based in realism and middle-class urban life, traditional healing surfaces at key moments, particularly in the time of trauma or illness.

In one scene, a family member consults a traditional healer after a mysterious illness did not respond to Western medical diagnosis. The return to indigenous solution is not termed as superstitious, but as part of a dynamic and dual approach to healing. This period highlights how traditional medicine continues to occupy a legitimate, if often unspoken, position in the lives of even educated, urban Nigerians.

Atta also examines the symbolic dimensions of healing, emotional, psychological, and political. Enitan’s personal healing from childhood trauma, patriarchal control, and political violence is equalled by Nigeria’s own search for postcolonial stability. Traditional healing therefore becomes a metaphor for deeper forms of reconciliation and cultural unity.

Furthermore, Atta’s understated references to indigenous practices serve as silent confirmations of their continued relevance, particularly for those caught in the gaps between public institutions and private suffering. Her narrative respects the agency of characters who seek healing outside general/common approaches, hence, endorsing a vision of medical and cultural pluralism.

Analysis

Application of Traditional Medicine:

- Although Enitan's mother is a devout Christian, she is presented as resulting to indigenous healing in times of desperation, specifically at the periods Enitan's childhood illness and spiritual matters confront her. She consults a priest from a syncretic spiritual church, revealing her indecisive attitude. "My mother's priest was quiet as she explained what had happened... She was to give me holy water to drink, since my father would not allow me to stay for cleansing. Then he produced a bottle of it, green and slimy... I had to drink the water in the churchyard, and make myself sick afterward". This "cleansing" process, consuming and vomiting holy water, points to **ritual healing practices**, with both spiritual and herbal elements.
- Sheri, after her traumatic rape and botched abortion attempt, endures physical and psychological suffering. Though the novel doesn't detail her healing explicitly, her recovery is subtly mapped through communal, spiritual, and implied herbal support. "Taking a hanger to myself, with all the biology I studied. I still thought I had a black hole inside me". Her survival and eventual empowerment suggest she may have undergone alternative healing paths that include community care and possibly traditional methods, which are socially implied and emotionally present in the text.

Conflict Due to Modernity:

- Educated abroad, Enitan initially rejects traditional modes of healing. However, after repeated disillusionments with institutional systems and her own mother's spiritual practices, she slowly softens toward alternative systems of thought. "Niyi, disturbed by my mother's church activities, avoided her as if she were a sorceress". This quote indicates how modern, educated individuals like Enitan and her partner view traditional spirituality with **suspicion or contempt**, a reflection of internalised colonial modernity. "I had watched my mother worship... Faith had not healed her and I hoped that one day, the birth of a grandchild would".

This ironic skepticism shows Enitan's indecisive position: she intellectually doubts faith healing but emotionally desires for its promise.

- The novel also criticises how class influences the acceptance of indigenous medicine. Elites scorn it, while the working poor continue to rely on it. "My father... said I wasn't going back there again" after a scaring spiritual examination by the priest.

This reflects how **elites may reject traditional beliefs publicly**, even as others within their households practice them quietly.

Combination of Traditional and Western Medicine:

- Despite Enitan's father's rejection of traditional systems, her mother continues to use syncretic religious and herbal solutions, reflecting **covert syncretism**.

"In my mother's church they wore white gowns... They believed in spirits; evil ones sent by other people to wreak havoc, and reborn spirits, which would not stay long on earth".

This illustrates a rich interweaving of **Christian, Yoruba spiritual, and traditional healing** practices.

- Later in the novel, Enitan herself participates in her daughter Yimika's naming ceremony, a ritual combining traditional symbols with modern life. "I placed the calabash on an empty stool... honey and salt for sweetness... peppercorns for fruitfulness... palm oil for joy".

This moment marks **Enitan's subtle embrace of her heritage**, reflecting a symbolic return to a more inclusive and pluralistic cultural self.

Summary Table:

Text	Traditional Medicine Applied	Conflict with Modernity	Combination of Systems
<i>The Famished Road</i>	Rituals for Azaro; father as healer	Modern urban society rejects indigenous healers	Symbolic coexistence; spiritual realism blends both
<i>The Joys of Motherhood</i>	Traditional birth attendants; herbal remedies for fertility and illness	Colonial hospitals and Western norms vs. Igbo customs	Nnu Ego and others consult both traditional practitioners and clinics
<i>Everything Good Will Come</i>	Enitan's mother consults healers; Sheri's healing	Upper-class rejection of tradition vs. necessity	Private use of traditional methods alongside hospital

These three texts collectively demonstrate the diverse ways in which Nigerian fiction engages with traditional healing—not as monolithic or nostalgic, but as dynamic and

contextually embedded practices. Whether through the mystical visions of *The Famished Road*, the gendered tensions in *The Joys of Motherhood*, or the pragmatic pluralism of *Everything Good Will Come*, literature emerges as a potent site for reimagining what it means to heal, to remember, and to belong.

Key Themes and Narrative Strategies

The literary representations of traditional healing in contemporary Nigerian fiction are not only culturally resonant but also narratively complex. Drawing from the case studies discussed earlier, this section identifies and examines key thematic concerns and narrative strategies that recur across texts. These patterns reveal how authors use the literary form to interrogate, reaffirm, or reinvent indigenous medical practices within broader socio-political and epistemological frameworks.

Healing as Cultural Memory and Resistance

One of the most prominent themes is the use of traditional healing as a form of cultural memory and resistance. In novels like *The Famished Road*, traditional healing practices function as a repository of ancestral wisdom, offering continuity amidst the disruptive forces of colonialism, capitalism, and political instability. By placing these practices at the center of narrative action, authors resist the colonial erasure of indigenous knowledge and assert the legitimacy of African epistemologies.

This resistance is both symbolic and narrative. Traditional healers in these texts are not marginal characters but central figures whose knowledge and presence disrupt dominant paradigms of health and reason. Their inclusion signifies a refusal to let go of cultural identity and a reclamation of indigenous ways of knowing as valid and necessary for healing not just the body, but the nation and its fractured histories.

Medical Pluralism and Epistemological Hybridity

Another major theme is the co-existence and tension between different medical systems, Western biomedicine and traditional healing, within the same narrative space. Characters often move between hospitals and herbalists, between diagnoses grounded in science and those rooted in spirituality. This pluralism reflects the experienced reality of many Nigerians, who navigate a hybrid medical environment where no single system is entirely sufficient.

Literature mirrors this hybridity through narrative choices. Authors frequently combine clinical language with ritual speech, or alternate between realist and

magical realist modes. This fusion of styles and content suggest an epistemological freedom where different kinds of healing are not only possible but necessary. Rather than resolving the conflict between science and tradition, these texts dramatise them, giving readers a chance to contemplate their coexistence.

The Gendered Body and Healing

Healing in Nigerian fiction is often gendered, with women presented both as healers and as the primary subjects of healing. In Buchi Emecheta's stories, for example, women's bodies become battlegrounds where cultural expectations, medical interventions, and spiritual beliefs merge. Infertility, sexual trauma, and emotional pain are frequently addressed through traditional remedies that are either embraced or contested by the protagonists.

This gendered dynamic underscores the intersection between healing and power. Traditional healing can be both a source of empowerment and coercion, depending on who applies it and in what circumstance. Some texts establish the authority of female healers and midwives, while others highlight the ways in which traditional practices can support patriarchal practices. The body becomes a site where cultural scripts are inscribed and opposed.

Spirituality, Ritual, and the Invisible

A defining feature of traditional healing in literature is its invocation of the spiritual and the unseen. Illness is often presented as having metaphysical causes, disruption of ancestral connections, spiritual possession, or cosmic imbalance. Healing, in turn, involves rituals, sacrifices, incantations, and communication with the spirit world. Authors use narrative devices such as dreams, visions, and magical realism to make these obscure approaches visible. Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* exemplifies this through its spirit-child protagonist and his travels between worlds. Such techniques are not merely stylistic; they reveal an indigenous metaphysics that does not separate the physical from the spiritual, the real from the imagined. The narrative becomes a ritual space in itself, capable of enacting the healing it describes.

Healing as Social and Political Metaphor

Finally, traditional healing in Nigerian fiction often serves as a metaphor for broader social and political processes. Illness may symbolize national decay, and healing may signify political renewal or cultural resurgence. In *Everything Good Will Come*, Enitan's personal healing parallels the quest for democratic reform in postcolonial

Nigeria. This metaphorical use of healing allows literature to comment on the condition of the nation without resorting to overt didacticism.

Through this metaphorical lens, traditional healers become symbolic figures, custodians of truth, agents of justice, or even revolutionaries in disguise. Their knowledge, though marginalised by official systems, becomes a source of potential change, both personal and collective. In this way, literature reimagines healing not just as recovery, but as resistance, reconciliation, and rebirth.

These themes and strategies demonstrate the sophistication with which Nigerian authors relate traditional healing as both subject and structure. They reveal a literary imagination that honours indigenous wisdom while critically engaging with its complexities, contradictions, and potentials. Through the fusion of content and form, contemporary Nigerian fiction transforms traditional healing into a dynamic narrative resource, one that speaks to history, identity, and the unending desire for wholeness.

Implications for Literary and Cultural Studies

The literary representations of traditional healing in contemporary Nigerian fiction are not merely aesthetic choices or cultural references, they are mediation into current scholarly dialogues about knowledge, identity, and power in African situations. This section considers the extensive implications of the study for literary and cultural studies, stressing how the analysis of healing practices in fiction adds to the decolonisation of African literary criticism, the theorisation of medical pluralism, and the reassessment of indigenous epistemologies.

Decolonizing the Literary Canon and Epistemic Authority

By focusing traditional healing, contemporary Nigerian writers question the prevalence of Western approach in literature and medicine. Their narratives oppose the colonial inheritance that opportune Western biomedicine and reasoning as the sole approach for understanding illness and health. In so doing, these texts contribute in the decolonisation of knowledge, reaffirming indigenous modes of understanding as authentic and important.

For literary studies, this shift demands a reassessment of critical frameworks. Conventional literary criticism always excludes or exoticises African metaphysics and healing sacrifices as superstitions. However, these practices, as reveal in the works of Okri, Emechata, and Atta, are sophisticated, historically positioned, and contextually meaningful systems of knowledge. Scholars must examine these texts

on their own terms, recognising the ontological and epistemological roots that undergird them.

In this light, the inclusion of traditional healing in literary analysis is not merely thematic, it is methodological. It demands scholars to embrace more expansive and interdisciplinary approaches that accept seriously, the intellectual labour included in indigenous practices and cosmologies.

Expanding the Scope of Medical Humanities in African Contexts

The growing field of medical humanities has largely centered on Western contexts, always overlooking the cultural peculiarities of health and healing in non-Western societies. Nigerian fiction that engages traditional medicine, broadens the scope of medical humanities by demonstrating how literature serves as a location for bargaining complex medical pluralisms.

These narratives give insight into how individuals and communities experience competing health dimensions, make meaning of suffering, and articulate resilience. They present healing not just as clinical recovery, but as a culturally inclusive and socially mediated process. By attending to these dimensions, literary studies can contribute to a more inclusive and culturally sensitive medical humanities, one that honours the connections between narrative, belief, and care.

Furthermore, such fiction queries static difference between “scientific” and “spiritual” medicine. It compels scholars to recognise the coexistence of multiple logics of healing and to theorise how literature establishes and reveals these logics.

Reimagining the Role of Literature in Cultural Preservation and Innovation

The use of traditional healing in fiction also positions literature as a vital medium for cultural preservation and innovation. Through narrative, authors preserve oral traditions, ritual knowledge, and indigenous philosophies that are always absent from institutional histories or state-approved curricula. At the same time, these representations are not static or nostalgic. Writers frequently reinterpret traditional practices to suit contemporary realities, highlighting their adaptability and relevance.

In this sense, literature becomes a dynamic space of cultural work, preserving while also critically engaging and evolving traditional knowledge systems. This has implications for cultural studies, particularly in the context of globalisation and the erosion of indigenous heritage. The literary text becomes both a location of opposition to cultural loss and a laboratory for projecting new avenues of being, healing, and knowing.

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Contributions to Postcolonial and African Feminist Discourse

Finally, the merging of healing, gender, and narrative raises important questions for postcolonial and African feminist scholarship. As shown in texts like *The Joys of Motherhood*, traditional healing is deeply gendered, often reflecting and reinforcing patriarchal practices. Yet, it can also be a space of female agency, solidarity, and knowledge transmission.

Literary depictions of women as healers, midwives, or spiritual custodians open up feminist avenues for examining the relationship between embodiment, power, and opposition. These narratives highlight how women experience and sometimes undermine the constraints of both tradition and modernity. By analysing these presentation, scholars can enrich feminist discussions on the politics of care, the ethics of relationality, and the epistemologies of the body in African societies.

In sum, the literary treatment of traditional healing in Nigerian fiction extends far beyond ethnographic interest. It restructures how we understand literature's role in knowledge production, cultural politics, and intellectual decolonisation. These narratives ask us to read differently, to listen for the wisdom of herbs and oracles, to honour the medicine in metaphor, and to accept the many ways in which fiction can heal.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the literary representations of traditional healing practices in contemporary Nigerian fiction, demonstrating how writers use these practices not ordinarily as cultural motifs but as powerful narrative tools and epistemological mediations. Through close readings of Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, and Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*, we have shown how traditional medicine operates as both a thematic concern and a structural element that reforms narrative form, character development, and symbolic resonance.

Several key insights surface from this study. First, traditional healing is continually represented as a changing and culturally inclusive practice that presents options to the biomedical model forced through colonialism. These literary portrayals questions the epistemological exclusion of indigenous knowledge systems and affirm their relevance in postcolonial and contemporary African societies.

Second, the narratives reveal an experience reality of medical pluralism in Nigeria, where individuals bargain between struggling dimensions of health and healing. This pluralism is not only a social occurrence but a literary strategy, manifesting in

the hybrid narrative styles and polyvalent meanings that characterise much of Nigerian fiction.

Third, traditional healing is often gendered, with women's bodies becoming major place of bargaining, coercion, and empowerment. Literary representations question the connection of healing with patriarchy, spirituality, and resistance, thereby contributing to African feminist and postcolonial discourses.

Finally, the inclusion of traditional healing in literary texts has far-reaching implications for literary and cultural studies. It necessitates a decolonisation of critical methodologies, a rethinking of what constitutes knowledge and authority, and a broader, more inclusive guideline for understanding health, history, and identity in African literature.

In treating traditional healing as both symbol and substance, these narratives call readers and scholars alike to reimagine the boundaries of literature, medicine, and culture. They affirm that to heal, whether a body, a community, or a nation, demands listening to the stories, rituals, and wisdoms that have long sustained African life.

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