

Beyond Environmental Determinism: Ethical Praxis and Human Agency in the Contemporary Lagos Novel

Clement Oshogwe Mamudu

Department of English and Literary Studies
Igbinedion University, Okada, Nigeria

E-Mail: mamudu.clement@iuokada.edu.ng

ORCID ID: 0009-0006-2359-2194

Abstract

This article interrogates the dialectical tension between environmental determinism and human agency in four contemporary Lagos novels, namely Chris Abani's *Graceland* (2004), Teju Cole's *Every Day Is for the Thief* (2007/2014), Chibundu Onuzo's *Welcome to Lagos* (2017), and Leye Adenle's *Easy Motion Tourist* (2016). Reading these texts at the confluence of postcolonial urban theory, African literary philosophy, and the ethics of development, the article argues that while the Lagos cityscape is represented as a structurally coercive environment marked by poverty, institutional dysfunction, spatial violence, and moral corrosion, the novels collectively resist deterministic closure by foregrounding what this article terms ethical praxis, that is, the capacity of socially situated, historically conditioned subjects to deliberate, choose, and act in morally meaningful ways within and against the constraints of their environment. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's spatial theory, AbdouMaliq Simone's theorisation of African urban life, Achille Mbembe's postcolonial critique, and the African moral philosophies of Kwasi Wiredu and Thaddeus Metz, the article demonstrates how these novelists construct Lagos not merely as a deterministic trap but as an ethical laboratory in which agency, solidarity, and moral survival are continuously negotiated. The article contributes to ongoing debates in African literary studies, urban humanities, and postcolonial ethics by proposing a critical vocabulary adequate to the moral complexity of postcolonial megacity fiction.

Keywords. *Lagos novel; Environmental determinism; Human agency; Ethical praxis; Postcolonial urbanism; African literary philosophy*

Introduction

Few cities in contemporary world literature carry as much symbolic weight as Lagos. Sprawling, cacophonous, and teeming with more than twenty million inhabitants, Lagos has become a synecdoche for the postcolonial African city in its most extreme register, a city simultaneously of extraordinary vitality and systemic dysfunction, of creative improvisation and brutal structural exclusion. The contemporary Lagos novel, emerging with renewed force in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, inherits this representational burden. Its novelists must navigate a persistent critical and ideological tension between rendering Lagos as a totalising environment that shapes, determines, and ultimately defeats its inhabitants, and constructing a fictional world in which moral agency, ethical commitment, and human freedom remain possible against the grain of

material circumstance.

This tension is not merely aesthetic but deeply political. Environmental determinism, the philosophical and literary position that human character and moral possibility are primarily if not entirely products of material, spatial, and social environment, has a long and contested history in both Western literary naturalism and in Africanist discourse. In the African context, deterministic representations of urban life risk reproducing colonial and neo-colonial ideologies that deny African subjects the capacity for self-determination, moral reasoning, and political agency. Yet a naive voluntarism that ignores the structural violence of poverty, infrastructural collapse, and institutional corruption would be equally dishonest. The most sophisticated contemporary Lagos novels occupy the difficult but necessary space between these poles, constructing characters who are conditioned but not determined, constrained but not imprisoned, broken but not wholly defeated.

The four novels selected for this study span generic registers including Bildungsroman, autofiction, social realism, and crime fiction. They reflect varied authorial positionalities, both Nigerian-resident and diasporic, both male and female. Despite their differences, all four stage Lagos as a morally urgent environment and all four position their central characters as ethical subjects whose decisions carry genuine moral weight. Reading them together reveals not a single answer to the determinism problem but a rich field of ethical experimentation. The article establishes its theoretical framework in the section that follows, then offers close readings of each novel, develops the concept of ethical praxis as a critical instrument, and concludes with reflections on the implications of this reading for African literary studies and urban humanities more broadly.

Theoretical Framework

Henri Lefebvre's foundational argument in *The Production of Space* (1991), that space is not a neutral container but a socially produced, ideologically saturated field of power relations, provides a crucial starting point. In Lagos, the tension between conceived space, the space of planners and state power, and lived space, the space of inhabitants' practices, memories, and desires, is uniquely acute, producing inhabitants who have developed extraordinarily creative practices of spatial appropriation, informal economy, and communal life despite a historically inadequate and exclusionary urban infrastructure.

AbdouMaliq Simone's theorisation of African urban life, particularly his concept of people as infrastructure developed in *For the City Yet to Come* (2004), extends and Africanises Lefebvre's framework. Simone argues that in African cities where formal infrastructure is absent or dysfunctional, it is human networks, social relations, and collective practices that constitute the material substrate of urban life. This is not a romanticisation of poverty but a recognition that African urban subjects are active producers of social space, not merely its victims. Achille Mbembe's account of the postcolonial city, most fully developed in *On the Postcolony* (2001) and elaborated in *Critique of Black Reason* (2017), introduces a more pessimistic dimension. For Mbembe, the postcolonial African city is characterised by what he calls commandement, the pervasive logic of arbitrary power extracted from colonial rule and reproduced by postcolonial elites. Yet even within this apparatus he identifies practices of conviviality, resistant pleasures, and the capacity to live with difference and oppression without being wholly defined by them. This capacity, located in everyday practice rather than heroic resistance, is deeply relevant to the ethical strategies of the Lagos novels under consideration.

The dominant ethical frameworks in the Western philosophical tradition are not simply

transferable to the moral worlds constructed in contemporary African fiction. African moral philosophy, particularly in its communitarian and Ubuntu-inflected forms, offers more contextually adequate resources. Kwasi Wiredu's concept of consensual democracy and his broader project of conceptual decolonisation, developed in *Cultural Universals and Particulars* (1996), argues that African ethical thought is grounded in the primacy of interpersonal obligation, communal deliberation, and the irreducibility of social relations to individual rights claims. For Wiredu, moral agency is always already social agency. Thaddeus Metz's reconstruction of African ethics in *A Relational Moral Theory* (2022) provides an analytically rigorous extension of this position. Metz argues that the foundational principle of sub-Saharan African ethics is relational in nature. What matters morally is not the maximisation of individual welfare or conformity to universal duty but the quality of one's relationships with others and the extent to which one's actions promote communal solidarity, mutual recognition, and the shared construction of a good life. In the context of the Lagos novel, this framework allows us to read characters' ethical decisions not as isolated individual choices but as relational acts that constitute, damage, or restore moral community within a hostile urban environment.

Amartya Sen's capabilities approach, developed in *Development as Freedom* (1999), provides a macro-structural complement to these micro-ethical frameworks. Sen argues that development must be understood not as GDP growth but as the expansion of human capabilities, the real freedoms that people have to live lives they have reason to value. Applied to the Lagos novel, this framework illuminates how infrastructural failure, poverty, and institutional corruption systematically constrain the capabilities of urban inhabitants, not merely their material welfare but their capacity for moral agency, meaningful choice, and dignified life. Yet Sen's approach is also anti-determinist, insisting that even within constrained environments the expansion of capabilities remains a meaningful goal and that ethical evaluation must proceed from the standpoint of what people are actually able to do and be.

Drawing on these theoretical resources, this article proposes the concept of ethical praxis as the analytical key to understanding the moral architecture of the Lagos novels under consideration. The term is adapted from the Aristotelian concept of praxis, practical wisdom and the capacity to act well in particular circumstances, but inflected by the postcolonial, communitarian, and capabilities-based frameworks outlined above. Ethical praxis denotes the exercise of morally deliberate action by socially situated subjects who are aware of the structural constraints upon their choices, who are embedded in networks of communal obligation and relational responsibility, and who nevertheless maintain the capacity for morally significant decision and commitment. It is neither heroic resistance nor passive accommodation but the difficult, ongoing, often compromised work of living ethically within an environment that systematically obstructs ethical life. It does not promise moral success or the overcoming of structural injustice through individual virtue. Rather, it names the space of moral possibility that remains even within systems of severe constraint, the space in which characters like Elvis Oke in *Graceland*, the unnamed narrator of *Every Day Is for the Thief*, Chike Ameobi in *Welcome to Lagos*, and Amaka in *Easy Motion Tourist* make choices that matter and that collectively construct a counter-narrative to the determinism that the Lagos cityscape seems to enforce.

Textual Readings

***Graceland* and the Ethics of Survival**

Chris Abani's *Graceland* is, on its surface, a novel saturated with deterministic pressure. Its protagonist, sixteen-year-old Elvis Oke, lives in Maroko, a Lagos slum rendered with unflinching

documentary precision. Open sewers, overcrowded shacks, pervasive violence, the casual brutality of the state, and the slow erosion of human dignity that poverty and spatial exclusion impose are the governing conditions of his daily existence. The novel's dual temporal structure, alternating between Elvis's present in Lagos and his Igbo village childhood mediated by his deceased mother's recipe book and cultural wisdom, establishes from the outset that Elvis is a subject shaped by forces far exceeding his individual will, among them colonial history, patriarchal violence, economic marginalisation, and the cultural dislocation of urban migration.

Yet Abani consistently refuses to reduce Elvis to these conditions. The novel's central trope, Elvis's aspiration to become an Elvis Presley impersonator performing American rock and roll in a Lagos slum, is simultaneously a figure of cultural alienation and a figure of ethical self-fashioning. Elvis's performances are acts of imaginative self-creation in Lefebvre's sense of appropriated space, the temporary seizure of public space for the enactment of a self not determined by poverty and abjection. Abani's insight is that even mimicry, one of the most theoretically complex categories in postcolonial studies and most influentially developed by Homi Bhabha (2004), can be a form of ethical agency when deployed consciously and with awareness of its own ambivalence. Elvis's eventual act of refusing further complicity in the organ-harvesting criminal network, his decision to flee and to refuse the role assigned to him by the criminal economy, is a genuine act of ethical praxis, costly and imperfect but morally meaningful. *Graceland* stages a version of Metz's relational ethics in which the quality of one's relationships to others, to Redemption, Aunt Felicia, and the boy Godfrey, constitutes the measure of one's ethical life. Elvis's femininity, his practice of cross-dressing and refusal of hegemonic masculinity, is not merely a marker of marginalisation but an ethical position, the daily work of being a different kind of subject than the environment demands.

Every Day Is for the Thief and the Ethics of Witnessing Teju Cole's *Every Day Is for the Thief* is a generically ambiguous text, part novel, part autofiction, part essay, and its formal hybridity is itself ethically significant. The unnamed Nigerian-American narrator returns to Lagos after fifteen years in New York, and the novel records his observations of the city with a tone that oscillates between affectionate recognition, aesthetic appreciation, ironic detachment, and moral anguish. The generic undecidability of the text mimics the narrator's own ethical undecidability, his uncertainty about his relationship to a city he has left but not escaped, and his ambivalence about the moral implications of his outsider-insider perspective.

Cole is acutely aware that the narrator's diasporic perspective, shaped by access to American infrastructure, institutions, and freedoms that most Lagosians lack, implicates him in a politics of representation that is never innocent. His treatment of the pervasive culture of petty corruption and institutional dysfunction that governs Lagos daily life is remarkable for its refusal of both moral condemnation and exculpatory culturalism. Instead, Cole attempts something harder, seeking to understand corruption as a structural phenomenon produced by specific historical and political conditions, without thereby denying the moral agency of those who participate in it. This is a sophisticated application of what Sen calls positional objectivity, the recognition that one's moral perceptions are shaped by one's social position without collapsing into relativism. The novel's most powerful ethical moment, the scene in the National Museum where the narrator restrains the impulse to correct a factually inaccurate history lesson, demonstrates that the ethics of witnessing includes knowing when not to speak, a recognition that epistemic privilege does not automatically confer moral authority.

Welcome to Lagos and the Ethics of Community

Of the four novels examined here, Chibundu Onuzo's *Welcome to Lagos* is the most programmatic challenge to environmental determinism. Its premise is strikingly allegorical. A group of social outcasts, a disillusioned soldier, a domestic abuse survivor, a street boy, a radical journalist, and a disgraced politician, find themselves inhabiting an abandoned television studio in Lagos and attempt to construct a functional moral community in this derelict space. The novel's central argument, enacted through its narrative rather than stated as proposition, is that ethical community is possible even in the most unpromising material circumstances, that solidarity, mutual recognition, and collective moral commitment can be created from below, in the interstices of a dysfunctional city.

Simone's concept of invisible urbanisms, the informal and improvised forms of collective life that develop in the gaps of official urban space, provides a useful framework for reading this premise. Yet Onuzo complicates Simone's broadly affirmative account by insisting on the fragility and internal tensions of such communities. What holds the abandoned studio community together is not organic solidarity but the ongoing ethical work of negotiation, compromise, and mutual recognition, what Wiredu would call consensual rather than merely procedural community. The character of Chike Ameobi, the former soldier who becomes the community's de facto leader, is particularly significant. Chike's leadership is constructed as an act of ethical restitution, an attempt to repair through present solidarity the relational damage caused by his past complicity in military violence. This is a sophisticated rendering of what Metz calls the communitarian dimension of African ethics, the recognition that moral repair is always relational, requiring not merely internal contrition but the active reconstruction of damaged social bonds. The novel ultimately argues that the ethical work of community-building and the ethical work of representation, embodied in the journalist Isoken's decision to broadcast the community's story, are continuous. Both are forms of ethical praxis, acts of deliberate moral commitment within a hostile environment.

Easy Motion Tourist and the Ethics of Refusal

Leye Adenle's *Easy Motion Tourist*, the most generically conventional of the four novels and a crime thriller in the tradition of African hardboiled fiction, is in certain respects the most radical in its ethical implications. The novel centres on Amaka, a Lagos-based activist who rescues sex workers from police violence, and Charlie, a British journalist inadvertently drawn into Lagos's criminal underworld. The generic conventions of crime fiction, which typically construct the city as a labyrinth of danger and the protagonist as a lone moral agent navigating systemic corruption, are here subjected to a thoroughgoing gendered and postcolonial revision.

Amaka is the most fully realised ethical agent in the corpus under consideration. Her organisation of sex workers into a network of mutual protection and legal advocacy is a concrete practice of what Metz calls relational ethics, an ethics grounded not in abstract principle but in the daily work of building protective relationships among the most vulnerable members of Lagos society. Adenle is careful not to romanticise this work. Amaka's network is perpetually under threat, her resources are inadequate, her methods are sometimes morally compromised, and the structural conditions that produce both sex work and police violence remain largely unchanged. But the novel insists that Amaka's ethical practice matters, that it saves specific lives, builds specific solidarities, and constitutes a morally meaningful form of resistance to the city's dominant ethical regime. Her activism is an appropriation of Lefebvrian representational space on behalf of women whose spatial presence the city's official codes deny, connecting the novel to a broader tradition of African feminist urban criticism including the work of Nana Akua Anyidoho (2012). The relationship

between Amaka and Charlie also enacts at the level of plot the argument that Sen makes at the level of theory, that the expansion of human capabilities in postcolonial urban contexts requires the recognition and support of indigenous ethical agency, not its substitution by metropolitan expertise or benevolence.

Ethical Praxis and the City

The close readings in the preceding section reveal a number of recurring features that together constitute the ethical architecture of the contemporary Lagos novel. Ethical praxis in these novels is always embodied and situated. It is not the exercise of abstract reason by a disembodied rational subject but the practice of moral deliberation by a subject located in a specific body, a specific social position, and a specific spatial context. Elvis Oke's cross-dressing, Amaka's bodily presence at police cordons, Chike's physical labour in building the community's shelter are not mere illustrations of ethical positions but the medium through which ethical positions are constituted and communicated. This insistence on embodied agency connects the Lagos novel to recent developments in both African philosophy and feminist ethics that emphasise the ineliminably material and social dimensions of moral life (Oyewumi, 2016; Nnaemeka, 2023).

Ethical praxis in these novels is also irreducibly relational. The moral unit is never the isolated individual but always the dyad, the network, the community, what Metz identifies as the characteristic ethical emphasis of African moral philosophy. Characters are constituted as ethical subjects through their relationships, Elvis through Redemption and the memory of his mother, Chike through the members of the Lagos community, Amaka through the women she protects. Most importantly, this relational ethical agency is explicitly counter-deterministic without being naively voluntarist. The novelists are fully aware of structural constraints including poverty, patriarchy, corruption, and colonial history. What they insist upon, and what distinguishes them from both determinist naturalism and liberal individualism, is that the capacity for morally meaningful choice persists within structural constraint and that its exercise, however limited, constitutes a form of dignity and resistance that demands critical recognition.

The concept of ethical praxis also illuminates the formal strategies of these novels. The generic diversity of the corpus, encompassing Bildungsroman, autofiction, social realism, and crime thriller, reflects different strategies for representing the moral life of the city. Abani's Bildungsroman structure maps the formation of an ethical subject over time. Cole's autofictional mode raises the stakes of the ethics of representation by implicating the narrator's own subjectivity. Onuzo's social realism constructs the ethical community as a collective protagonist. Adenle's crime fiction mobilises generic conventions of urban moral danger in order to subvert them. Each formal choice is also an ethical choice, a decision about how to render the moral complexity of the city honestly, without either sensationalising its violence or falsifying its possibilities.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the contemporary Lagos novel, as represented by *Graceland*, *Every Day Is for the Thief*, *Welcome to Lagos*, and *Easy Motion Tourist*, constitutes a significant and distinctive contribution to the literary and philosophical project of thinking through the ethics of postcolonial urban life. Against readings that emphasise the deterministic character of Lagos fiction, this article has proposed the concept of ethical praxis as a more adequate critical tool, one that captures both the structural constraints these novels unflinchingly represent and the moral agency they collectively insist upon. The theoretical framework developed here, drawing on Lefebvre, Simone, Mbembe, Wiredu, Metz, and Sen, provides a genuinely interdisciplinary basis for this reading, one that refuses both a purely aesthetic literary criticism that ignores material

conditions and a purely sociological approach that reduces fiction to symptom.

The implications of this argument extend beyond the Lagos novel to the broader field of postcolonial urban fiction and urban humanities. As the world's urban population continues to grow, and as the majority of that growth occurs in cities of the Global South characterised by extreme inequality, infrastructural inadequacy, and political dysfunction, the question of how ethical life is possible under such conditions becomes increasingly urgent. The Lagos novelists examined here do not offer solutions to these structural problems. What they offer, which is perhaps more valuable, is a series of imaginative and moral experiments in living with, against, and beyond the constraints of the postcolonial city. To read these novels carefully, with the theoretical and critical resources appropriate to their complexity, is to take seriously the ethical intelligence they embody, an intelligence that African literary studies and urban humanities have much to gain from engaging more fully.

It remains, finally, to note a question that the article has raised but not resolved, namely the relationship between individual ethical praxis and collective political transformation. The ethical agency celebrated in these novels is, by and large, the agency of individuals and small communities navigating an unjust social order. The novels do not, in the main, imagine the transformation of that order through collective political action, a limitation that some critics drawing on traditions of socialist realism or political fiction might find significant. What the Lagos novel does demonstrate, with considerable analytical and imaginative force, is that the absence of structural transformation does not entail the impossibility of ethical life, that between the determinism of the system and the freedom of the utopian imagination, there is a space of ethical praxis that is worth mapping, defending, and celebrating.

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