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HOME, SPACE AND THE ENVIRONMENT: GEO-SPATIAL REPRESENTATION OF THE YORUBA PEOPLE IN NIGERIAN LITERATURE

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Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of the home space, environment, and identity in the representation of Yoruba geography within Nigerian literature. It examines how writers construct spatial homes that are both physical and symbolic, reflecting the people's cosmology, social organization, and ecological consciousness. Drawing on selected works by Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan, and T.M. Aluko, the study investigates how geography, ranging from the sacred forest to the urban landscape, shapes narrative forms, character identity, and cultural memory. The descriptive research design was used through close textual analysis and geocritical reading as works of three Nigerian of Yoruba extraction were purposively selected for this study. The study finds that Yoruba literary geography is a site of negotiation between tradition and modernity, spirituality and materialism, rootedness and displacement. The study concludes that the representation of home and environment in Yoruba literature is central to the articulation of cultural identity, serving as a dynamic space through which Yoruba writers preserve indigenous worldviews while critically engaging the challenges of social change and contemporary realities.

Keywords: *Spatial Homes, Nigerian Literature, Cultural Identity, Ecocriticism.*

Introduction

Home, space, and environment are integral to the formation of cultural identity and narrative imagination. In Nigerian literature, particularly within Yoruba traditions, geography transcends mere setting; it becomes a repository of memory, spirituality, and social structure. The Yoruba people, located predominantly in southwestern Nigeria, possess a rich environmental consciousness embedded in myths, rituals, and language. Their perception of space is holistic—interconnecting human, natural, and spiritual realms.

The concept of home in literature transcends its architectural or domestic connotation to embody a rich nexus of identity, memory, and belonging. Within African literature, and particularly in Nigerian writing, home is often intertwined with the physical environment—land, village, forest, and river that shapes communal consciousness and cosmological imagination. The Yoruba worldview, grounded in the interdependence between the human and the ecological, constructs home not merely as a private enclosure but as an extension of a sacred geography, where environment, ancestry, and spirituality intersect. In this sense, the Yoruba home and environment form a Yoruba geography, geo- spatial continuum that anchors identity, cosmology, and social order.

Recent critical studies in literary geography (Tuan, 1977; Massey, 1994; Bachelard, 1994) and eco- criticism (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996) have highlighted the spatial and environmental dimensions of narrative, suggesting that space and place are not passive backdrops but active participants in the making of cultural meaning. In Nigerian literature, this framework has

acquired particular urgency in the wake of postcolonial displacement, urbanisation, and environmental degradation. Writers such as Wole Soyinka, T. M. Aluko, and D.O. Fagunwa deploy spatial and ecological symbolism to represent Yoruba experiences of continuity, rupture, and adaptation. Their depictions of the forest, village, and compound reveal the ways in which geography, ecology, and spirituality shape human relationships and collective identity.

This paper explores how the idea of home and the environment operates within Yoruba literary imagination as spatial constructs that preserve cultural continuity while mediating the tensions of modernity. It investigates the geo-spatial representation of the Yoruba people in selected Nigerian literary texts, focusing on how landscapes—from the sacred forest of Soyinka’s tragic imagination to the communal village of T. M. Aluko’s fiction—encode social memory, ecological ethics, and the negotiation of modern transformation. Through a geo-critical lens that draws on theories of space and place (Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 1996) and indigenous Yoruba spatial philosophies, the study argues that the Yoruba literary landscape is not simply descriptive but ideologically charged, serving as a symbolic map of identity, history, and resilience.

Ultimately, the paper situates Yoruba literature within a broader discourse of spatial representation and environmental consciousness. By reading “home” as both a cultural metaphor and an ecological reality, it demonstrates how Nigerian writers transform geography into narrative, and how the Yoruba environment—forest, village, and homestead—becomes a living archive of memory, myth, and modernity.

This paper investigates how Yoruba geography is represented in Nigerian literature, emphasizing how writers transform environmental spaces into sites of identity formation. The argument proceeds from the premise that “spatial homes” are not only physical dwellings but also cultural, linguistic, and metaphysical constructs that articulate belonging and displacement.

Although Nigerian literary studies have extensively examined Yoruba cosmology, myth, history, and cultural symbolism, relatively little critical attention has been given to Yoruba geography as a spatial and environmental construct in literary representation. Existing studies often privilege themes of ritual, politics, or character without systematically interrogating how home spaces, landscapes, and ecological settings function as active agents in identity formation and cultural memory. Moreover, while spatial studies and ecocritical approaches have gained prominence globally, their application to Yoruba-authored Nigerian texts remains underexplored. This study addresses this gap by foregrounding geography and home space as central analytical categories through which Yoruba writers negotiate tradition, modernity, and socio-cultural transformation.

The study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design, employing close textual analysis and geocritical reading as its primary methodological tools. Selected literary texts by Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan, and T. M. Aluko writers of Yoruba extraction are purposively selected for their rich spatial and environmental representations. Geocriticism provides the analytical framework for examining how space, place, and environment operate within the texts, while close reading enables a detailed interpretation of language, imagery, and symbolism related to home and geography. This methodological approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the relationship between space, identity, and cultural memory in Yoruba literary expression.

Literature Review

This literature review surveys scholarship on three interlocking areas relevant to the proposed paper: (1) conceptual work on space, place and “home” in African postcolonial literature; (2) ethnographic, architectural and ecological studies of Yoruba domestic and sacred landscapes; and (3) existing literary studies that map how Yoruba writers represent environment, landscape and dwelling as sites of cultural memory and resilience. Together these strands provide a foundation

for a geo- spatial literary analysis that treats “home” as both an embodied domestic locale and a wider cultural landscape encoded in myth, ritual and narrative.

Space, Place and the Literary Home

Gaston Bachelard’s *the Poetics of Space* reframes the house as an imaginative structure: small intimate spaces (nooks, attics, cellars) operate as reservoirs of memory and metaphor that shape subjectivity and narrative voice (Bachelard, 1958/1994). Bachelard’s emphasis on poetic imagery and phenomenology of intimate spaces has been especially influential for literary scholars who read domestic interiors as sites where memory, dreams and language intersect. Where Tuan and Relph provide the language for place-attachment and authenticity at the scale of landscape and town, Bachelard supplies the micro-topography that helps critics read interior spaces as mnemonic devices in narrative.

Recent literary works emphasize that “home” in postcolonial African literature must be treated as a social and symbolic construct rather than a simple physical shelter. Scholarship in spatial theory and literary geography (humanistic geography, spatial narratology, and ecocriticism) argues that places in narratives function as active agents that shape identity, memory and political relations (Tally, 2019). These approaches, according to Conkan & Gardan (2020), encourage reading literary settings not merely as backdrops but as dynamic networks—sites where social relations, power, and cultural memory materialize. Applying these frameworks to Yoruba-centered texts foregrounds questions about how domestic architectures, sacred groves, rivers and marketplaces are narrated as crucibles of community identity, moral order and resistance to change.

The meeting of narratology and geography has produced explicit methodological tools for reading literature spatially. Recent edited collections and essays argue for “spatial narratology” or “literary mapping,” which combine close reading with cartographic and GIS methods to trace how narratives encode movement, routes, and spatial relations (Brasher, 2017). These approaches are particularly apt for studies of the literary home because they allow the critic to link micro-scale interior topographies (rooms, courtyards) to macro-scale landscapes (rivers, town plans) and to show how narrative form (chronology, focalisation, mise-en-scene) structures spatial experience in the text. Using schematic maps alongside textual analysis can therefore make explicit the correspondences (or tensions) between literary space and material space.

Ethnographies and Material Studies of Yoruba Spaces

A strong interdisciplinary body of work documents the formal and symbolic organization of Yoruba towns and houses. Adedeji (2023) notes that architectural and anthropological studies demonstrate that traditional Yoruba domestic morphology (compounds, open courtyards, placement of shrines, and multi-generational spatial arrangements) encodes social relations, ritual practices and cosmological assumptions—what some scholars call a “geomantic” or ecological logic of planning. These studies show how courtyards and open spaces are used for ancestral worship, community ceremonies and transmission of oral histories; they therefore function as living repositories of cultural practice rather than inert settings. Research into home-garden systems, “ecological urbanism,” and the role of green infrastructure in Yoruba cities has also documented indigenous knowledge systems that tie domestic spaces to ecosystem services and cultural continuity. Such empirical work supplies the concrete spatial data that a geo-spatial literary reading requires (i.e., how particular architectural forms and landscape features are experienced and narrated).

Central to Yoruba spatial consciousness is *ilé* (home/house/land), which extends beyond domestic architecture to signify lineage, communal belonging, and historical continuity. The *ilé*—whether manifest as the family compound (*agbó ilè*), village, or ancestral homeland—

anchors identity within both *ayé* and *òrun*, connecting the living to ancestors and deities. Adejunmobi (2020) emphasizes that Yoruba cosmology positions the home as a sacred nexus where ritual, ethics, and social order intersect. In literary representation, disruptions to *ilé*—through exile, urban migration, or colonial intrusion—often signal crises of identity and cultural dislocation.

Balogun (2022) notes that the concept of *orí* (inner head/destiny), further complicates Yoruba notions of space and selfhood. *Orí* embodies personal destiny and moral consciousness, shaping how individuals relate to their environment. In Yoruba literature, characters' movements through forests, cities, or domestic spaces frequently mirror the alignment or conflict between *orí* and communal expectations. Spatial journeys thus become ethical and existential processes rather than mere physical transitions.

The forest (*igbó*) occupies a particularly significant position within Yoruba spatial imagination, functioning as a liminal zone between *ayé* and *òrun*. Traditionally associated with deities, spirits, and transformation, the forest in Yoruba narratives often serves as a site of testing, revelation, and resistance. Similarly, urban spaces in modern Yoruba literature reflect tensions between indigenous spatial values and capitalist modernity, revealing the erosion or reconfiguration of communal *ilé* under contemporary pressures (Lawuyi, 2020).

While this study draws selectively on geocriticism to analyze spatial representation, it does so through a Yoruba epistemological lens, adapting rather than privileging Western spatial theory. African literary scholars such as Biodun Jeyifo and Ato Quayson have noted that African literary spaces function as repositories of cultural memory and ideological struggle. Building on this insight, the present framework foregrounds Yoruba concepts of *ayé*, *òrun*, *ilé*, and *orí* as interpretive tools for understanding how geography operates as home, identity, and cultural archive in Yoruba Nigerian literature.

Okuyade (2021) notes that ecocritical work on Nigerian poetry has increased in the last decade, focusing on how modern writers respond to environmental degradation, urbanization and loss of customary landscapes. Analyses of poets like Niyi Osundare and Tanure Ojaide, and contemporary novelists, show how literary texts register agrarian distress, shifting livelihoods, and the symbolic loss of ancestral places. For Yoruba-centered literary studies, this strand connects ecological crisis to cultural rupture: as sacred groves shrink and urban expansion reconfigures household forms, literature negotiates new meanings of “home” and belonging. These studies often blend textual analysis with ethnographic insight, suggesting that a geo-spatial literary method—one that pairs close reading with landscape history—will be especially productive.

Geo-spatial Approaches in African Literary Studies: Methods and Precedents

A handful of scholars have begun to apply geographic information, mapping, or explicit spatial paradigms to literary corpora. Falola's work on Yoruba spatial history and mappings of diaspora networks provides an example of historicising spatial relations across texts and events; other projects use cultural cartography to visualize the movement of peoples, trade routes and ritual geographies. Methodologically, these precedents recommend combining textual analysis with archival maps, ethnographic descriptions, and where possible GIS or schematic mapping to demonstrate how fictional geographies correspond to real-world spatial practices. For a study of the Yoruba literary home, Ede & Tas (2025) note that adopting a mixed method close reading, spatial description and selective mapping would show how narrative representations both reflect and reshape material landscapes.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs ecocriticism and cultural geography as theoretical frameworks. Ecocriticism, as posited by Glotfelty (1996) and Buell (1995), interrogates the relationship between literature and the environment, focusing on how texts construct ecological awareness and human-nature interdependence. Cultural geography, on the other hand, examines how space and place shape human experience and social meaning (Tuan, 1977; Lefebvre, 1991).

This study is anchored in Yoruba indigenous spatial philosophy, which conceives space as relational, sacred, and socially constituted rather than abstract or neutral. In Yoruba cosmology, existence is structured around the interaction between *ayé* (the visible, physical world) and *òrun* (the invisible, spiritual realm). Literary spaces in Yoruba-authored Nigerian texts often dramatize this interpenetration, revealing how home and environment function simultaneously as material locations and metaphysical sites. Geography, therefore, becomes a medium through which spiritual presence, ancestral memory, and cultural values are encoded (Aderinto, 2019).

Within Yoruba cosmology, spatial categories are symbolically organized. The home (*ilé*), the market (*òjà*), the forest (*igbo*), and the shrine (*àgbòn*) are not mere locations but manifestations of social and metaphysical order. Yoruba writers often inscribe these spaces in literature to articulate moral order, resistance, and transformation.

Data Analysis

Yoruba Cosmology and Spatial Perception

The Yoruba worldview conceives of the environment as a living organism inhabited by deities, spirits, and ancestors. The land itself is sacred, often personified as *Ilẹ̀*, the Earth goddess. This sacred relationship with the environment underlies Yoruba notions of home, community, and moral responsibility.

In Yoruba oral narratives, the forest (*igbo*) is a recurring motif symbolizing mystery, transformation, and danger. The town (*ilu*) represents order, civilization, and human community, while the river and mountain are mediating zones between the physical and spiritual worlds. Such symbolic geography provides the spatial template for many Yoruba literary works, where the environment mirrors human emotion, ethical choice, and destiny.

Home, Space and the Environment in Yoruba Authored Literature Works

Yoruba writers like Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan, and T.M. Aluko engage with spatial representations not as background but as active agents in narrative construction.

Wole Soyinka: The Sacred Forest and the Tragic Landscape

Soyinka's writing consistently draws on his Yoruba heritage (he was born in 1934 in Aké, Nigeria) and on the interplay of indigenous cosmology with modern/colonial pressures.

In *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), Soyinka constructs space as a metaphysical field of tension between Yoruba cosmology and colonial modernity. The town of Oyo and the marketplace serve as symbolic nodes of Yoruba social life, while the passage to the afterlife unfolds through the metaphoric geography of transition. The spatial home here extends beyond physical habitation, it encompasses moral duty, ritual continuity, and cosmological order. Elesin's invocation of life and duty, set against Yoruba ritual orders, situates the market and village as extensions of *ilé* that hold communal *ayé-òrun* balance:

“Life is honour. It ends when honour ends.” — Elesin, Act I.

This line unites spatial and ethical orders: the *ilé* and world (*ayé*) are meaningful only when cosmic duties rooted in Yoruba cosmology are upheld. The later exchange between Iyaloja and Elesin further anchors this sense of home and sacred duty:

“Eating the awusa nut is not so difficult as drinking water afterwards.”
Iyaloja, Act I.

Here the proverb stresses the burden of fulfilling spiritual obligations (drinking water after eating a bitter nut) rather than physical death alone, linking *òrun* destiny to care for community—an orientation rooted in indigenous Yoruba spatial ethics.

In his worldview, forest or wilderness is not just backdrop but a liminal zone: a space between human/civilised society and primordial forces; a place of encounter, transformation or rupture. For example, the mythic figure Ogun (Yoruba god of iron, crafts, transition) is described by Soyinka (via McPherson) as dwelling in “the chaotic region of transition ... a condition where opposites collide without resolution”.

These elements make the “forest” and “wilderness” akin to a tragic landscape in his writing: spatialised metaphors for crises of culture, identity, power and the human condition.

The British intervention ruptures the ritual geography, displacing the symbolic continuum of *ilé* and *òrun*. Iyaloja’s rebuke crystallizes the damage:

“You who play with strangers’ lives... yet believe that the stain of death will not cling to you.” Iyaloja to Pilkings, Act V.

This echoes how intrusion into ritual space collapses meaning and destabilizes community spatial coherence. Based on Soyinka’s preface and thematic framing, the world is described as “adrift in the void” when spatial cosmology collapses.

Similarly, in *The Strong Breed* (1963), the river functions as a liminal space between purity and pollution, life and death. Soyinka’s spatial imagination embodies the Yoruba belief in cyclical regeneration, where environmental space is both sanctuary and sacrificial arena.

Femi Osofisan: The Urban Space and the Politics of Modernity

Femi Osofisan is one of Nigeria’s most influential dramatists and intellectuals. Born in 1946 in Yoruba geography, State, Nigeria, his work is deeply engaged with the social, political and cultural dynamics of post-colonial Nigeria. While much has been written about his critique of power, corruption, tradition vs modernity, what is less often foregrounded is his spatial imagination—how he uses urban space (cities, slums, new developments) and the politics of modernity (development, inequality, migration, modernisation) to interrogate the changing condition of Nigerian society. In short: Osofisan’s dramas provide fertile ground for thinking about the city, modernization, displacement, and home in the Nigerian context.

Osofisan’s writing repeatedly addresses the tension between tradition and modernity, but with a strong emphasis on the environment of modern life—cities, slums, migration from rural to urban, modernization as both promise and site of crisis.

For example, in *Once Upon Four Robbers* (1978) he explicitly links armed robbery to the “callous contradictions of our oil-doomed fantasies of rapid modernisation” and the sprawling slums, congested hospitals, impossible markets of the urban environment. The quote:

Take ... our sprawling slums and ghettos, our congested hospitals ... our impossible markets ... and then another look at the fast proliferation of motorcars ... the callous contradictions of our oil-doomed fantasies of rapid modernisation” (Osofisan 1980: vii).

This points to his interest in urban spatial conditions as symptomatic of political and economic modernity in Nigeria.

Osofisan reconfigures Yoruba geography within postcolonial urban contexts. In plays like *Once Upon Four Robbers* (1980) and *Morountodun* (1982), Lagos becomes a metaphorical battlefield of social contradictions. The city’s geography reflects moral fragmentation and alienation—contrasting sharply with the harmonious communal spaces of traditional Yoruba towns.

Osofisan’s representation of space often critiques environmental degradation and moral decay under capitalism. The Yoruba notion of collective responsibility toward the land is replaced by individual survivalism. Thus, spatial dislocation becomes a metaphor for cultural disorientation.

He also decentralise the colonial-metropolitan model of power: rather than seeing modernity as simply imposed from abroad, he identifies “pockets of power” in multiple spaces urban, rural, institutional, and infrastructural. Thus, his spatial logic is plural, fragmented, urbanised—and often critical of modernity’s promises.

T.M. Aluko: The Village, Home, and Continuity

Timothy Mofolorunso Aluko was born 14 June 1918 in Ilesha, in present-day Osun State, Nigeria. He trained as a civil engineer and town planner, held administrative posts, and later became a lecturer. His novels often satirise or critically examine the clash between tradition and modernity, rural and urban, village communal life and Western-influenced individualism. As a Yorùbá writer, his village settings are often drawn from his heritage and from his professional awareness of development, planning and infrastructure in Nigeria.

Village and home in Aluko’s novels function on multiple levels. They represent traditional community life, the close-knit village, shared values, ancestral lineage, collective labour (especially agricultural) and rural rhythms. For example, in *One Man, One Matchet* (1964) the setting is a cocoa-farming village whose social fabric is stressed by change.

They also become sites of disruption or transformation: when modern institutions (e.g., colonial administration, new-economic schemes, educated returnees) invade or restructure village life, the home and communal space are endangered. Aluko frames this disruption as cultural rather than merely technological.

Aluko’s depiction often gestures toward the need to maintain cultural continuity the home as a repository of memory, tradition, values. The village and home thus function as anchors in the face of change. For instance, one line of criticism identifies that in *One Man, One Wife*, the rural Yoruba community is “too far steeped in the worship of streams and trees” and Aluko shows the conflict between that traditional orientation and new religion/values.

The “home” in Aluko’s works is not only domestic (house, compound) but symbolic of by-gone community coherence. When that coherence is lost, the novel often portrays irony or satire (typical of his style) about what replaces it.

In *One Man, One Wife* (1959) and *Kinsman and Foreman* (1966), T.M. Aluko uses village geography to foreground themes of modernization and moral change. The Yoruba homestead (ilé) is central—a symbol of continuity, ancestry, and moral rectitude. Yet, it is constantly threatened by Western education and urban migration.

One representative passage illustrates the blend of tradition and environment in Aluko's work:

“The sky was overcast with thick, grey clouds drifting in the direction of Idasa... Lightning flashes momentarily parted the clouds... Shango, the god of lightening and thunder, was registering his anger...” — (Kinsman and Foreman, 62).

Even in this atmospheric description, Yoruba cosmological forces (*Sango*) are invoked to interpret political and spatial change, reinforcing how *ayé* and sacred referents shape meaning.

Aluko's geography of the village articulates nostalgia for stability and ecological balance. His spatial homes serve as moral compasses where environmental ethics are intertwined with communal responsibility.

The Environment as Cultural Memory

The Yoruba environment is not static; it embodies memory and continuity. Rivers, forests, and mountains retain ancestral presence. For instance, the Òṣun River in Osogbo functions as both a geographical feature and a spiritual symbol of fertility and protection. Literary representations of such spaces bridge myth and history, reinforcing the idea that geography is a living archive of Yoruba civilization.

Through literary mapping, Yoruba writers reassert cultural identity and resist spatial erasure imposed by colonial cartography. The environment therefore, is a site of cultural resilience where myths and memories coalesce.

Spatial Displacement and Modern Challenges

Modern Nigerian literature reflects the tension between rootedness and mobility. Migration, urbanization, and globalization redefine the Yoruba relationship with home and environment. The movement from village to city symbolizes not only economic aspiration but also cultural loss.

Writers such as Sefi Atta (*Everything Good Will Come*, 2005) and Ben Okri (*The Famished Road*, 1991) extend this spatial discourse, where Yoruba metaphysics meets modern chaos. The city becomes a site of existential alienation, while the ancestral village remains a moral ideal.

Environmental degradation, deforestation, pollution, and urban sprawl further complicate the symbolic integrity of Yoruba geography. Contemporary writers thus re-imagine spatial homes as fractured, contested, and hybridized.

Conclusion

The geography of the Yoruba people, as represented in Nigerian literature, embodies a dynamic interplay between environment, culture, and identity. Yoruba writers transform geographical spaces into narrative symbols that articulate spiritual cosmology, moral values, and socio-



political critique. The spatial home, whether rural or urban, traditional or modern, serves as a metaphor for the Yoruba quest for harmony amidst historical disruptions.

Unlike Soyinka's mythic expansiveness or Osofisan's radical reconfigurations, T. M. Aluko focuses on everyday Yoruba domestic and urban spaces, presenting *ilé* as the moral center of social life. In novels such as *Chief the Honourable Minister*, Aluko's portrayal of homes, offices, and town environments reflects the erosion of ethical values under postcolonial modernity. The physical comfort of modern houses contrasts sharply with moral emptiness, suggesting a disjunction between material progress in *ayé* and spiritual grounding in *òrun*.

This study concludes that the environment in Yoruba literature is neither passive nor decorative; it is a living participant in the cultural drama of survival and renewal. The geography of Yoruba life—its forests, markets, rivers, and cities—constitutes a literary cartography of belonging, resistance, and transformation.

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