

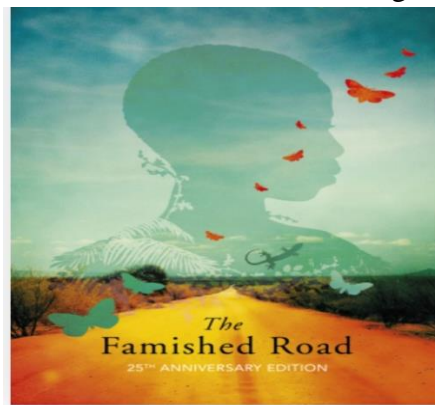
Magic Realism as the Third Eye: A Postcolonial Re-reading of Ben Okri's *the Famished Road*

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Abstract

The *Famished Road*, a novel published in 1991 by Okri which won the Booker Prize. The novel can be interpreted as political allegory, a type of literature in which the characters and events in the text "represent, or 'allegorize,' historical personages and events," enabling narrative to serve as a model for political discourse. This article introduces postcolonial studies, focusing particularly on African postcolonial literature. And it also deals with Hybridizing Political Criticism in *The Famished Road: A Study of the Abiku Life*, deals with one of the most important postcolonial aspects called hybridity and how it is reflected in the very nature of its abiku protagonist, Azaro and the rest of the characters. The third chapter titled "Recreating Fragmented Histories of Post colonial Societies", discusses how the resources of language that have been used to establish the themes of the supernatural and the colonial power. The concluding chapter comes up with a closure where the ideas discussed in the previous chapters are consolidated and establishes Okri's affirmation of Nigeria's complex identity.



Keywords: Magic Realism, Hybridity, Post colonialism, Abiku Myth.

Introduction

The Nigerian writer, Ben Okri, hails from an ethnically mixed background. Okri's childhood was divided between England and time in his native Nigeria. He is one of the most important African writers in the postcolonial traditions. His fiction is surely a critique of postcolonial discourse. Between 1980 and 1995 Ben Okri published eight works: five novels, two collections of short stories, and a volume of poetry. In each of these works, he returns, to a consistent repertoire of common postcolonial themes. His young experience greatly informed his future writing: his first, highly acclaimed novels *Flowers and Shadows* (1980) and *The Landscapes Within* (1981) were reflections on the devastation of the Nigerian civil war which Okri himself observed firsthand. The rest of Okri's

novels combine aspects from his two previous literary phases to produce a unique and complex narrative strategy .

Like Okri's previous novels , these later novels also explore the consciousness of a child protagonist as he progresses toward maturity . The dualistic spiritual - physical nature of Okri's abiku hero , however , completely alters the trajectory of the Bildungsroman . Since Azaro has a dual nature , he must progress through both earthly and mythical realms so he can mature metaphysically as well as socially , Consequently , Okri greatly extends the narrative action of his later fiction to include mythical journeys , intense dreams , and other African rituals or rites of passage . By extending the scope of the novel to include mythical dimensions , Okri participates in another direction that is characteristic of contemporary postcolonial literature : he effectively redirects his narrative strategy to minimize the significance of the colonial master and maximize the experiences of the postcolonial subject . Instead of focusing on the colonial destruction of traditional African societies and cultures , he draws attention to their survival , albeit a precarious survival often lived on the threshold between life and death . Even though Okri remains keenly aware of the tragic destruction that colonialism continues to impose on traditional African societies , he refuses to let his characters admit defeat . He rejects the claim that colonialism has conquered , is conquering , or ever will conquer the deeper mysteries of the African spirit . By making his protagonist an abiku spirit - child who chooses to live , Okri suggests that the African spirit can survive the seemingly endless cycles of colonial and neocolonial violence by choosing to reconcile its spiritual and physical dimensions .

In *The Famished Road* , Okri displays his own mastery of realism , modernism , and African mythical traditions , thereby demonstrating that these diverse cultural traditions can coexist within new hybrid forms . *The Famished Road* is clearly a literary tour de force that will soon become a classic of twentieth - century fiction . Thus Okri extends his engagement of postcolonial issues to the realm of aesthetics by demonstrating that African aesthetic sensibilities , cultural traditions , and narrative strategies will not allow themselves to be colonized by the literary norms of the colonial center .

Hybridizing Political Criticism in *The Famished Road* : A Study of the Abiku Life

In its narrative style as well as in its cultural environment , magical realism provides the optimal literary field to respond to the cultural issues and conditions that traverse contemporary postcolonial society . For example , the codification in the magical - realist narrative of both colonial and postcolonial discourses , involved in a dialectical struggle , reflects many of the problematic relations existing between colonizer and colonized in postcolonial culture . This leads to the investigation of hybridity as an important trope in the ongoing process of literary and cultural decolonization . This leads to the investigation of hybridity as an important trope in the ongoing process of literary and cultural decolonization . This chapter explores the function of hybridity in *The Famished Road* by Ben Okri , showing how , through the destabilization of such spaces as the real and the imaginary , the new and the old , and the self and the other , a third space emerges where irreconcilable perspectives and contradictory properties coexist , although problematically .

In this sense , the fictional space , time and characters displace polar oppositions and make it difficult to conceive of any version of reality as having a greater claim to absolute truth or unique referentiality . Okri himself has compared *The Famished Road* , to music , to a noise that resists being read as an ordinary text :

But it's difficult for me at this stage to say anything very coherent about this book , probably because it's not meant to be coherent . It's against the perception of the world as being coherent and therefore readable as a text . The world isn't really a text ... It's more than a text . It's more akin to music . (84)

This view explains the novel's presentation of the most astounding manifestations of living forces in all the dimensions of material life and also within death , discarding , above all , any imposition of a centre - oriented angle of vision . Thus the novel adopt several viewpoints and delight in highlighting the richness and variety of a hybrid world through fixing the gap between the most obvious polarities and foregrounding the syncretism of disparate elements .



Abiku by feintbellt

The Post Colonial theorist Homi Bhaba presents his concept of hybridity in his book *The Location of Culture* (1994) . Hybridity or Syncretism , a leit motif in post colonial criticism , refers to the schizophrenic state of the migrant as he tries to integrate the culture of his origin with that of the host country . Transnational migrations have led to blurring of boundaries and a celebration of multiculturalism and plurality , Hybridity refers to the state of being at the border of two cultures which leads to " Double Consciousness " and " In - betweenness " in the migrants . This leads to liminality of identity . The central theme of Post Colonial diasporic literature is the negotiation of two identities . This often leads to multiple identities and sometimes to split - consciousness and in extreme cases leads to cultural fragmentation . So the cross fertilization of cultures- the assimilation and adaptation of cultural practices from the colonizing and colonized cultures- is positive , enriching , dynamic as well as oppressive . Bhaba points out that the hybrid migrant occupies a " third - space " when the colonial and native identities meet and contest and are simultaneously asserted and subverted . In this " third - space " rootlessness and migrancy are celebrated and purity and homeland become a myth . Technology and magic , modern and ancient , urban and rural , Western and indigenous , are the amphitheatre in which the novel is performed . The interplay of these paradoxical dimensions gives the novel an open form

and , more importantly , reveals the writer's concern with issues of borders , change , and mixing , implied in his famous phrase " many rivers meet in me " , which is Okri's response to the monologic discourse of totalitarian power .

Azaro bears witness to a universe of action located simultaneously within both the earthly world and that of spirits and the dead to the extent that his helplessness in the face of the shifts between the two realms is a conscious state of being . He describes himself as " an unwilling adventurer into chaos and sunlight , into the dreams of the living and the dead " (4) , and later acknowledges that " with no choice ... I began to mutate " (43) . Azaro's only friend , Ade , has a twofold identity , too , since he lingers in the world of humans with half his being remaining always in the spirit world . But whereas Azaro cares much for the mundane affairs of the world , " Ade did not want to live any more , he did not like the weight of the world , the terror of the earth's time " (486) . As the bulk of the narrative gradually unfolds , Azaro's abiku condition becomes increasingly contagious , and so does his liminality . The predisposition of Azaro's people to be contaminated by each other's dreams and consciousnesses is paralleled by the border - position of the ghetto . The latter is located at the margin of the city absorbing the rural migrant population , where the ideas of modernity are rapidly assimilated , " but traditional belief systems are continually activated to make meaning of the ghetto experience and to forge productive alliances " (Quayson 115) . The cacophony of the ghetto , characteristic of the borderline existence of most if not all magical realist contexts , elicits a sense of the closeness of the prehistoric , mythical past to modern life and scientific thought that one witnesses , for instance , in Madame Koto's bar . Here , like in a cultural " third space , " the bush and the road , the spirit world and the world of the living meet together with their residents the spirits , the ghosts , the herbalists , the witches , the new politicians , the thugs , the prostitutes , the animals , and the ghetto's poor inhabitants to negotiate their incommensurable differences . Cooper says that , " As in Bhabha's border interstices , this is the zone of the mutant and the hybrid .. and where Okri , master builder , constructs other ... conflicting meanings " (83) . On one occasion , Azaro realizes that many of the customers are not human beings , but " spirits who had borrowed bits of human beings to partake of human reality . They say spirits do that sometimes . They do it because they get tired of being just spirits " (136) . In the bar , Azaro meets both scheming politicians and " a massive chicken without feathers [which] ... sat next to me and ordered palm wine and pepper soup " (59) . There , he also gets acquainted with other hybrid identities including prostitutes who have legs of goats , women who are chimeras with legs of spiders and birds , innocent - looking men who are satyrs and minotaurs with the cloven hoofs of bulls , and animals who are part - time human beings .

The bar has yet other peculiar properties . It seems to confound even one's sense of space because its physical location is never static : " the bar had moved deep into the forest and all the customers were animals and birds " (59-60) . Again , following its customers ' mutations and exchange of bizarre deformations , the bar moves once more : " The mutant customers made the bar feel entirely different . They conferred on everything a dull yellow light . The bar itself gave the impression that it had been transported from its familiar environs of our area to somewhere under the road , under the sea , to a dimly remembered and unwanted landscape " (133) . Madame Koto's place undergoes continual metamorphosis to the extent that " the bar had changed again " becomes a recurrent phrase in the narrative . The sense of this indeterminate realm is evoked even more powerfully when Azaro says : " I felt on the edge of reality . Madame Koto's bar seemed like a strange fairyland in the real world , a fairyland that no one could see " (292) .

The events that happen in the bar are an indicator that it is also a barometer of Westernizing changes : The most extraordinary things were happening in Madame Koto's bar . The first unusual thing was that cables connected to her rooftop now brought electricity . Illiterate crowds gathered in front of the bar to see this new wonder . They saw the cables , the wires , the pylons in the distance , but they did not see the famed electricity . Those who went into the bar , out of curiosity , came out mystified . They couldn't understand how you could have a light brighter than lamps , sealed in glass . They couldn't understand how you couldn't light your cigarette on the glowing bulbs . And worse than all that , it was baffling for them to not be able to see the cause of the illumination . (373)

The bar is where Azaro notices a Coca - Cola poster with " the picture of a half naked white woman with big breasts " (215) , where people first listen to loud music from a record player (373) , and where they first celebrate the ritual washing of Madame Koto's car after being baptized by a " great herbalist " (380) .

Mythology and technology not only coexist in the novel but can also interpenetrate one another positively. In Danoe's words, the Providence of the one may determine the fate of the other . The white man who meets Mum in the market and who suffers a lack of guiding philosophy finds direction in the message of the archetypal tortoise of traditional wisdom that Mum transmits to him via a riddle . Yet the white man is not entirely bankrupt either . He has something of value to exchange for African knowledge and wisdom : his blue sunglasses . These are a product of Western science and give comfort to Mum , whose tough days in the smoldering sun of the market are improved by them . So certain colonial influences enter the Yoruba universe of power relations and instead of displacing it , they widen its horizons .

More importantly , with Mum's story of the white man , Okri infiltrates the dialectical discourses of identity and problematizes them , rejecting all kinds of predefined essentialist notions . The white man Mum meets in the market seems to be anxious to leave Africa after ten years of futile attempts . Quoting a tortoise , Mum informs him that " the only way to get out of Africa is to get Africa out of you " (483) . The white man learns the meaning embedded in Mum's riddle - to get out of Africa , one needs to learn to be an African - and the next time he meets Mum , he is transformed into a black Yoruba man with extraordinary powers .

The character of Mum tell another story about the white people who used to come and learn from them at a time when Africans had already gone to the moon and all the great stars . Africa then is generous enough to welcome the whites and share its knowledge with them . According to Mum , " we taught them how to count . We taught them about the stars . We gave them some of our gods But they forgot ... that we are all brothers and sisters and that black people are the ancestors of the human race . They are not all bad Learn from them , but love the world " (282) . Mum's words would rather be taken as faith on the part of Okri in the positive outcome of openness to the world , both Western and non - Western , a position which seems to agree with Okri's conclusion in his most recent interview that both Nigeria and England have a lot to learn from each other . He is clear with his opinion that he found himself in dialogue with the two poles , Nigeria and England , and has come to the tentative conclusion that both poles need each other.

Conclusion

On the whole , Okri's reader is presented with a narrative that can create a deeper and truer reality than the usual realist method would exemplify . The Famished Road as a magic realist novel has typically , a strong narrative drive in which the recognizably realistic merges with the unexpected and in

which elements of dreams , fairy story , or mythology combine with everyday , often in a or Kaleidoscopic pattern of refraction and recurrence . Okri's *The Famished Road* represents a Nigerian contemporary life that exudes a sense of energy and vitality . The environment promises not only ethereal delight but also an idea about the author's society and cultural inclinations . Okri presents the reader with a more beautiful world of magical artistic imagination .

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