



Searching for an Alternative World: A Study of Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*

Nasih Ul Wadud Alam

Abstract

Many critics of *The Famished Road* have discussed the text from a postcolonial/postmodernist perspective. In doing so, they have ignored Ben Okri's plea to zero in on African aestheticism, which he tries to inculcate in his novel, *The Famished Road*. Because of politicizing the text into colonial/postcolonial binaries, critics have failed to interpret the rhetorical device of the text and highlight the diversity of African culture and identity. This paper fills up the missing gap of earlier critics by scrutinizing Okri's depiction of uncharted Africa, which has seen its fair share of struggles and recriminations but has been able to hold on to its unique way of mythification and imagination of mind. The paper shows that politicization of narratives reduces in-depth understanding of alternative narratives of *The Famished Road*. By going into the rhetorical interpretation of the inner voices of the text's characters, the paper sides with Okri's dream to promote human-spirits, which with or without nefarious political upheavals, know how to enrich cultural diversity and promote peace and solidarity.

Keywords: Aestheticism, Diversity, Mythification, Imagination, Human-Spirits

Introduction

Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991) won the Booker Prize in the very year of its publication. In the novel, the narrator is Azaro, an abiku speaker, who attempts to discover the meaning of the world from his surroundings. The representation of the abiku community represents Okri's willingness to highlight African aestheticism and "look at the world in more than three dimensions" (cited in Hawley 31) comprising the wide range of diversity encompassing Africa. Okri's propensity to introduce readers to acknowledge the heterogeneity of thoughts is seen

from the lines of Azaro's father: "many people reside in us...many past lives, many future" (*Famished* 499) to "have that sublime mood of eternity". Although Azaro's father ruminates on the dystopian image of the world, yet he urges Azaro to stay hungry for changing the world and "make it better, sweeter" (498).

Okri does not deny that violence affects the structure of the African world, but the novelist tries to go beyond African tribalism to discover the "air of laughter" (499) that is ubiquitous in his settings of the novel. According to Judy Wilkinson, Okri uses his imaginative mind to avoid focusing too much on colonial/postcolonial rifts, but instead, delves into "the resilience of spirit, the elasticity of aesthetics, and the capacity of dreaming" (qtd. in Ying 112). Zhu Ying rightly asserts that *The Famished Road* depicts the mythical world of Africa as important as "historical events in shaping the sense of the world and reality" (113).

The Famished Road dissolves the dominant ideology and brings to the fore "competing and contradictory interests" (Mathuray 1100) without over reliance on Lyotard's meta narratives (Mathuray 1100). Okri's postmodernism vision is reflected in Azaro's father's statement, "that no way is ever definitive, no truth ever final" and "there are many riddles amongst us that neither the living nor the dead can answer" (*Famished* 488). In Azaro, readers see that he wants to "live the earth's life and contradictions" (487), while his friend Ade is striving to live uninhibitedly by craving freedom. Both share the postmodernist vision of living life as per their own will. However, Anjali Roy disagrees with the notion of viewing *The Famished Road* as a postmodern text, which, in her opinion, is "to let post-colonial texts once again service European categories" (qtd. in James 168).

In his article "*The Famished Road* was written to Give Myself Reasons to Live" published in the *The Guardian*, Okri reiterates that *The Famished Road* is a "perpetual story into which flowed the great seas of African dreams, myths and

fables of the world, known and unknown". But, in a homogenous tone, he writes, "an artist's function is to enrich the oral tradition with stories of our own, inventions of our own, inspired by the tales we heard in the moonlight, sitting in a circle. But even in that the tone is the thing". Okri's dictum of using orature in literature goes contradictory to authors who do not believe in enacting folktales with their own words. And Okri's totalitarian mindset of using orature in narration negates his past interviews of accepting heterogeneity without subversivism to hem in the idea of reality.

According to Ogunsanwo, Okri parodies the postmodern idea of cultivating the European inclusion of white supremacy under the disguise of heterogeneity. He points at the knowledge-power-nexus encompassing "the tenets and practice of 'linal...tight' criticism that Okri criticizes in his interview" (41). Ogunsanwo refers to Chinweizu et al. to elicit his point that the White supremacists' deliberate or *ad lib* mindset of othering the African culture has been riposted by Ben Okri (43) in *The Famished Road*. With his view to celebrating the uniqueness of Africanness, Okri deliberates on the presence of spirits overshadowing Azaro's minds, almost making him a somnambulist. Although Azaro's mother disbelieves her son's stage of inertia, her deafening silence and deliberate rebuttals could be construed as the Western critics' (under the disguise of metanarratives) non-acceptance of the ubiquity and iridicence of the African shamanic presence. Azaro says:

The air was full of riddles.... I was following a beautiful woman with a blue head. She moved in cadenzas of golden light.... She drew my spirit on to fountains of light and lilac music and abiku variations.... heard someone call my name from a heavier world, but I went on walking.... My name sounded heavier. The woman urged me on. Her face, gentle in the light of a dreaming neb-ula, promised the ecstasies of a secret homeland, a world of holidays.... The woman's head turned to give me a last smile before she vanished altogether in a

Milky Way of music.... I heard the last notes of a flute.... Mum took me home over the mud and wreckage of the street, over the mild deluge.... She was silent. I smelt the gutter and the rude plasters of the corroded houses (307-8).

Azaro's spirits own his mind, so much that they continue to dominate his life. The dominatrix spirits lead him to the edge of destruction. At one time, Azaro notices that the spirits are wandering "amongst the fruits of the earth and sea" (16). His father is unable to escape the similar fate. He tells, "I am beginning to see things for the first time. This world is not what it seems. There are mysterious forces everywhere. We are living in a world of riddles" (388). Azaro does not know where he belongs and what identity he carries forward. In one point, Azaro, instigated by the spirits, breaks his old neighbor's window, resulting in the latter's claiming of damage-compensation fee. Also, Azaro's action infuriates his mom who ends up punishing him corporally:

[Mum] turned on me. 'Why did you break their window, eh? Do you want to kill us? Don't you see how poor we are, eh? Have you no pity on your father? Do you know how much glass costs, eh? 'I didn't break it.' 'Who did?' 'The Spirits. 'What spirits?' I began to cry. 'You're lying.' 'I'm not. It was the spirits. They stoned me and so I stoned them back.' 'Do you see what a dangerous son you are? You will kill us, you know. You will kill us with your troubles....' Mum got so worked up in her fear that she came over and grabbed my ears. She held them tight between her fingers and thumbs.... She hit me so hard I went flying across the room. I collapsed against the wall and slid down to the floor. I sat still, eyeing Mum with a vengeful solemnity (321-22).

C.D. Balzer criticizes postcolonial critics for not viewing the history of colonization objectively (Fulford 234). Ogun sanwo's postcolonial framework of *The Famished Road* negates

Okri's censuring of overzealous postcolonial critics. As has been noted, Ogunsanwo becomes overzealous with his criticism of colonialism over the Western colonizers' treatment of Africans. However, Okri, in one of his interviews, laments that postcolonial critics, because of overanalysing the colonists' supremacist attitudes, have disengaged themselves from ignoring the African social system and "our spiritual and aesthetic and mythical internal structures, the way in which we perceive the world" (qtd. in Fulford 233). For example, in *The Famished Road*, Alzaro's father returns to the real world of poverty upon his return from the supernatural world. Mathuray asserts that Alzaro's father's return journey epitomizes the "violation of the colonial space" (1104), which I do not agree with. The more Okri is trying to distance himself from the post-colonization of his novel, the more the postcolonial critics are trying to bring him back to the theoretical paradigm in which he does not want to be associated himself. Balzer agrees with Okri's notion that the postcolonial authors are bent on censuring the colonial agencies for effacing the Africanas from the Africans. That is why Okri focuses on standing for African aestheticism, instead of censuring the European settlers at full throttle. Okri's depoliticization of Euro-African political binaries makes him search for "freedom of the artist" (Fulford 238), which Stephen Dedalus from James Joyce's *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and Paul Morrel from D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* also yearn for. What Fulford shows is whether it is European novelist or African novelist, every country has at least a writer who professes on the aestheticism of art, not the political shenanigans.

Instead of viewing the novel in the colonial versus postcolonial contest, Okri investigates the economic hardships of local Africans. Again, Okri shows, despite financial struggles, the Africans do not give up on familial attachment. Azaro's father says to him, "They say you are an abiku child, that you care nothing for your parents, that you are cold, and that you have eyes for the special spirit who is a beautiful young girl with golden bangles and copper anklets. But I do not

believe them. You have wept for us and watered the tree of love. We have suffered for you. Suffering is our home” (336). However, Okri describes in lurid tales how many floggings and shoulder-barges Azaro’s father receives for not deciding to “vote for that useless party” (203). Azaro’s father’s rebellious nature not only isolates him from the powerful mainstream society, but it turns him more aggressive towards his son and wife. The extreme physical labour that he goes through for doing low-laboured jobs transforms him into a physical abuser at home. Capitalism’s mode of production and its automation processing of human capital puts constant pressure on Azaro’s father to bring bread and butter for his family – as a result, he begins to return home agitated. From a psychological point of view, Dad’s turbulent relationship with his family members does not dysfunction Azaro’s relationship with his father, unlike the Morel brothers’ cold relationships with their industrial worker-father Walter Morel as depicted in D.H. Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers*. But Azaro’s source of solace among the spirits does pontificate towards his romantic ideal of living life to remove his sorrow caused by economic hardships.

Okri’s narration of the novel highlights the tense political atmosphere in his imaginary setting. Notably, Okri’s imaginary society has “thieves. With the Party of the Rich everyone knows they are thieves” (212). Madame Koto, a bar owner, in fear of reprisals, forbids the bar-goers from talking about politics. In *The Famished Road*, the ensuing skirmishes over electoral battles, fight for political upheavals, the cause of general fear among the commoners, and politicians’ greed for money do show, even without colonial hangover, corruption prevails. Which is why Okri does not limit his discussion within colonial expansions of Africa. In the novel, Azaro shares his desire to live in “the eternal dew of the spirit” (5) because he dislikes “the rigours of existence, the unfulfilled longings, the enshrined injustices of the world” and “the heartlessness of human beings, all of whom are born blind, few of whom ever learn to see” (3). Anthony Appiah does not view Okri’s use of myth as transcendental, and to him, “it is more real than the world of the

everyday” (qtd. in Hemminger 67), which McCabe, quoting Derrida, calls “transcendental “signified” (7). For example, in a marketplace, he sees “women who had breasts on their backs, babies strapped to their chests, and beautiful children with three arms” (*Famished* 15). Then, he passes “a tree that had been felled. Red liquid dripped from its stump as if the tree had been a murdered giant whose blood wouldn’t stop flowing” (16). The following words of Martin Heidegger from his book, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, would help us gauge Azaro’s mental situation:

To dwell, to be set at peace, means to remain at peace within the free, the preserve, the free sphere that safeguards each thing in its nature. The fundamental character of dwelling is this sparing and preserving. It pervades dwelling in its whole range. That range reveals itself to us as soon as we reflect that human being consists in dwelling and, indeed, dwelling in the sense of the stay of mortals on the earth. But "on the earth" already means “under the sky.” Both of these also mean "remaining before the divinities" and include a "belonging to men's being with one another." By a primal oneness the four—earth and sky, divinities and mortals—belong together in one. (147)

Azaro’s lack of adjustment to the natural world points to the fact that he does not believe in being a mortal, and like all other mortals, he does not want to die. Heidegger says, “Only man dies, and indeed continually, as long as he remains on earth, under the sky, before the divinities” (148). Therefore, Azaro’s back and forth travel from the underworld to the earthly world and vice versa shows that he has not territorialized his position in any of the spaces, and if Heidegger’s quoted lines are taken into context here, he is not fully a mortal either. Azaro’s father, who goes through his own phase of confusion between the two worlds, redefines his own understanding of the world, “One human life is deeper than the ocean. Strange fishes and sea-monsters and mighty plants live in the rock-bed of our

spirits. The whole history is an undiscovered continent deep in our souls...The world that we and the world that is there are two different things" (498). As Heidegger says, "Even when we relate ourselves to those things that are not in our immediate reach, we are staying with the things themselves" (154). Therefore, Azaro and his father are physically and mentally present in both worlds. When they are absent from one world, they imagine another world. When they find discontentment in one space, they think of another spatial boundary to find their own *joie de vivre*. In a way, Okri "shows that true development is of a different nature, one that brings humans and environment together and celebrates the simple gifts of daily human interaction and the natural products of a physical world" (Hemminger 81), which Azaro and his father do not always have.

Douglas Macabe does not view *The Famished Road* to be a postmodern text (*Research in African Literatures* 2). To him, it is a novel of "New Age Spiritual Discourse" (3). According to him, viewing the text only from a Western theoretical prognosis takes the gloss away from viewing the theme of spirit ubiquitously present throughout *The Famished Road*. McCabe calls the promulgation of African shaminist culture as New Agism. To prove that the novel is new ageist, McCabe quotes William Bloom, one of the pioneers of the New Age project, extensively. I am not borrowing the full passage from Bloom's definition of New Agism as depicted in Macabe's paper but citing excerpts of that passage is needed to understand what Macabe is trying to postulate. Bloom notes that human souls "are free to choose their own spiritual path" and follow uninhibited souls of "spiritual leaders" navigating their followers with "unconditional love, wisdom and enlightenment", which creates "interconnected energy" in people to find "cosmic love" and go through a significant "fundamental change" individually, consciously and spiritually (qtd. *Research in African Literatures* 6). Macabe opines that the spirit of oneness, monism and new agism is at the heart of Ben

Okri's novel. To understand Macabe, I am shedding light on Okri's *A Time for New Dreams* (2019).

In *Dreams*, Okri stresses that the authors play a vital role towards the development of “a spirit of the nation” (12). For that reason, they need to resist “spiritual despair” and use their imagination to “herald discovery”. He believes in unleashing “the sublime possibilities of human spirit” to begin “the great project of humanity, with humility and a new light” (30). Moreover, he emphasizes the need to reconnect Africa with “greater contact” and “share in the fun and marvel of the creative spirit” (57). Okri laments the major loss of African ritualistic spirits worsened by the juggernaut of European colonization. However, Europeans have not been able to comprehensively glocalize the African shaman practices. But most of the Africans have mostly modulated themselves into the European belief. And Africans, according to Okri, under-represent their own cultures, heritages, and traditions. Adds Okri, “They took their secrets into the depths of their unfathomable African silence” (63). *The Famished Road* says, “God is hungry for us to grow (498). Similarly, Okri writes to students, “Re-fertilize the bliss of the god into the heart and spirit” (101). To add more, Okri values the reclamation of human spirit and universal love which McCabe has not taken due cognizance of.

Ben Okri himself claims that it is impossible to see life from “one perspective” (qtd. in Vazq 1154). Instead, he speaks of the use of imagination to see life from heterogenous lenses, which is what I have found in Mary Helen Specht’s essay, “At the Crossroads, In Search of the Nigerian Abiku.” Specht, a graduate student, out of her passion for gleaning out more information about the Abiku culture, goes to Nigeria on a research grant. While she was having a conversation with two Nigerian students, one a Christian man, and the other one a Muslim woman, Specht discovers that the mystery surrounding the abiku tradition has not yet diminished. Therefore, Specht sees that the Western meta-narratives of showing ignorance

towards the indigenous African cultures have swayed many African away from their traditional belief, which is also kept alive by some of the hardcore African traditionalists. Her university-going African friends could not wholeheartedly deny the presence of abiku. She anecdotes:

During my first weeks in the country, I met a handsome linguistics graduate student named Agaiye. Nibbling on a bitter kola nut outside the Faculty of Arts building, he gave me a full rundown on the abiku concept: “The child might have gotten a scar through a fall or accident, and when it’s reborn, you know it’s the abiku because it’s born with that scar still in place.” “Do you believe abikus really exist?” I asked him. “No,” said Agaiye, pausing. “And yes. It’s like a lot of our traditions here—Western science makes them difficult to believe but some part of you still believes anyway. (35)

According to Venessa Guignery, Okri depicts the “misguided ways of contemporary societies” but dreams of the world with “alternative sets of realities” (*Callaloo* 997). Okri’s life imparts the theme of his coming and going that we see in Azaro’s life, too. Okri was born in Nigeria in 1959, and then went to London with his father, a law student, in 1961. After returning from London in 1965, Okri saw a different vision of life. He currently lives in London and does feel at home there. He recounts, “With India, I feel I’ve been there before, I’ve lived there. I know the place in me, in some really strange way. There are a few other places I’ve felt that about as well, but rarely as strongly as with India. The idea of home, for me, is definitely transterrestrial” (qtd. in “An Interview with Ben Okri, 1055). Again, Okri allowed his multidimensional approach to pervade his characters in *The Famished Road* to have polyphonous voices, because of which, readers find Azaro and his dad are always becoming, and not settled anywhere. At the same time, both these characters enjoy facing challenges on both sides of the world – like what Okri experienced after his

return to Lagos in 1965. Like his fictional characters, Okri found “There was no one world-view, but as many worlds as there are ways of seeing” (qtd. in Guignery 997). In Okri’s world, aestheticism is more encouraged than political discussions. In Darek Wright’s opinion, Okri’s *modus operandi* is to go deep into his characters’ psychology and put “emphasis on the redemptive energies of dream, myth and the imagination” (qtd. in Guignery 1001), because “A dream can be the highest point of a life” (*Famished* 500):

There are many reasons why babies cry when they are born, and one of them is the sudden separation of this world from pure dreams, where all things are made of enchantment, and where there is no suffering"... Those of us who made such vows were known among the living as *abiku*, spirit-children.We had the ability to will our deaths. Our pacts were binding. Those who broke their pacts were assailed by hallucinations and haunted by their companions.

..Those of us who lingered in the world, seduced by the annunciation of wonderful events, went through life with beautiful and fated eyes, carrying with us the music of a lovely and tragic mythology. ...We are the strange ones, with half of our beings always in the spirit world. (4)

In conclusion, it is notable here to mention that Azaro’s “world of the living and the world of the spirits” (James 171) is interconnected. Okri says, “If to dream is to inhabit a world with its own logic, a world as apparently real as the one we are living in, to re-dream is to take that capacity to a more conscious level (quoted in Guignery 1057). By putting an equal importance on the world of the spirits, Okri questions the feelings of nationalism and socio-political bifurcation. Okri’s equally complex and conflicting fantasy world emphasizes that regardless of the location of the world; the world will be at loggerheads, but it is the idea of universal peace and solidarity of humanity that makes the world still a breathable place.

Instead of creating a world of individualism, a fabric of European consciousness, Okri foresees the happiness of the world rooted in “communal perception” that is reflective of the African identity (1057). Hence, he harbours the dream of a utopic world in communalism, internationalism, and African aestheticism.

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