

Politics and History in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*

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Abstract

In the post-World War II period, magical realism, as a distinctive mode of fiction, has offered cultural hybridity, transformation and intermingling, and has thus been a significant means of communication for the postcolonial world. It has enabled postcolonial authors to get the chance of observing the world from a different perspective and seeing the truth with a 'third eye'. The Nigerian-British author Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, which was awarded the Booker Prize in 1991, is one of the postcolonial magical realist novels aiming at viewing the world with a third eye. In *The Famished Road*, Okri attempts to investigate sociopolitical and historical realities, to understand and solve the paradoxes and secrets of history in the language of magic and dreams. In the novel he connects politics directly with the concept of history; his conception of 'inviolable' African consciousness becomes the base for his representation of history. The aim of this study is to scrutinize the ways in which Okri encodes African consciousness versus Western epistemology and reevaluates history. The study tries to analyze how Okri redreams postcolonial potentials for his hometown, Nigeria, by extension for the whole African continent, through magical realism functioning as a third eye in *The Famished Road*.

Keywords: Ben Okri, *The Famished Road*, postcolonialism, magical realism, history, politics.

Introduction

Since the 1950s magical realism, a widely-known postmodern narrative mode, has been utilized as an amazing weapon especially by the postcolonial authors to represent the realities of the postcolonial countries of the world. Because of its power of sociopolitical and cultural subversion and reformation, magical realism has been "the literary language of the emergent postcolonial world" (Bhabha, 2000, p. 7). Taking advantage of the hybrid nature of magical realist texts, postcolonial authors have attempted to create a "third space" (Bhabha, 1990, p. 211) of cultural production trespassing the binary opposition between colonizer-colonized, to observe the world through a third eye and thus, to oppose cultural imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism of the West.

In order to reevaluate the realities and possibilities of his native country, the Nigerian born British author Ben Okri effectively uses this "nonmimetic, non-western" (Sangari, 1987, p. 157) narrative mode in *The Famished Road*, which was awarded the Booker Prize in 1991. In *The Famished Road*, Okri fuses African and Western cultures to fight against foreign colonialism and domestic neocolonialism in Nigeria. In his distinct type of magical realism, which serves as a third eye in the novel, Okri observes the realities of neocolonial political struggles and stresses the sociopolitical injustice, corruption and dysfunctionality in his native postcolonial Nigeria. While exploring sociopolitical and historical realities, he represents

the history of his country through his conception of African consciousness. The concept of history is contiguously connected with politics in the novel.

This study aims at examining the ways in which Okri reinterprets African histories altered and misinterpreted by Western colonialism. It tries to analyze how the author redreams postcolonial potentials and remedies not only for his postcolonial country but also for the entire African continent using the language of myths, magic and dreams in *The Famished Road*.

The Representation of Politics and History in *The Famished Road*

In *The Famished Road*, Ben Okri uses the techniques of magical realism interweaving magical elements with real experience in a realistic atmosphere. The magic reality in *The Famished Road* is not something created by imagination; but rather something inherent in West African myths. The magical elements of the novel are in harmony with the Nigerian cultural beliefs and values. Okri, who has provided "the most sophisticated expression of magical realism in African literature today" (Quayson, 2009, p. 172), directly derives his material from the culture of West Africa and provides the amalgamation of Yoruba (a tribe in Nigeria) mythology, West African oral tradition, conventional European realism and Latin American magical realism in his novel. By mingling African, Latin American, and European narrative methods, he attempts to investigate some certain areas of the African consciousness, such as the African power of imagination and creation and spirituality and elasticity of aesthetics in African culture, as a result of which he can produce a counter-colonialist and counter-neocolonialist narrative discourse.

Although Ben Okri, as "the harbinger of the contemporary Nigerian novel, the link between the old and the new" (Nnolim, 2010, p. 206), follows in the footsteps of the Nigerian authors such as Olorunfemi Fagunwa, Amos Tutuola, Wole Soyinka, and Chinua Achebe, while producing as a postcolonial author, he separates himself from the aims of his literary precursors who spent great effort especially in the 1960s and 1970s to verify the strength and authenticity of African culture over imperialist, colonialist European norms. Okri argues that

[...] there's been too much attribution of power to the effect of colonialism on our consciousness. Too much has been given to it. We've looked too much in that direction and have forgotten about our own aesthetic frames. Even though that was there and took place and invaded the social structure, it's quite possible that it didn't invade our spiritual and aesthetic and mythic internal structures, the way in which we perceive the world. [...] a true invasion takes place not when a society has been taken over by another society in terms of its infrastructure, but in terms of its mind and its dreams and its myths, and its perception of reality. If the perception of reality has not been fundamentally, internally altered, then the experience itself is just transitional. There are certain areas of the African consciousness which will remain inviolate. Because the world-view it is that makes a people survive. (1992, p. 86)

As seen in the quotation, Okri denounces the overemphasis on colonialism in African postcolonial studies. He puts emphasis on certain inviolate, uncaptured, and untouched 'areas of the African consciousness' such as the African world-view and African mythologies, the unlimited dream abilities, the imaginative power, the elasticity of aesthetics, and spirituality in African culture. According to Okri, what should be done in postcolonial studies is not to waste time thinking too much over the damaging effects of Western colonialism, but rather to try to get a better understanding of African local systems of knowledge, to capture the untouched African consciousness and to reflect it through Africa's 'own aesthetic frames'. For him, although Africa has had some failings throughout the history, it has its own marvels. Being aware of their continent's marvels, African people should try to reaffirm their place in the world in the postcolonial period. Pointing out Okri's idea of the unbroken African consciousness, Hobby (2006) proposes that "if ways of perceiving reality in Africa have not been altered by the colonizer and if a way of perceiving reality unites Africans present, past, and future, then Okri's work deals with both the historical and the suprahistorical, the universal". True to Hobby's contention, Okri's main concern in *The Famished Road* becomes the concept of history. Okri himself admits that his novel is "about history. [...] History is actually in the book right from the beginning. But I prefer to say suffering rather than history" (1992, p. 86). For Okri, "the whole of human history is an undiscovered continent deep in our souls" (1991, p. 572). It seems that the expression 'undiscovered continent' in the quotation refers to the inviolate African consciousness. Then, in *The Famished Road*, in which history of Africa is regarded as a "weird delirium" (p. 228), Okri attempts to understand and encode this consciousness in opposition to Western epistemology and to reconstruct history in order to heal the restlessness and confusion of the past.

As mentioned above, Okri's preoccupation with the inviolate African consciousness leads him to the use of mythical, spiritual, and folkloric elements together with sociopolitical, and historical issues. Depicting the history and the mythical viewpoints of rural people living in a slum of an African country, *The Famished Road* is set at the historical moment of Nigeria's Independence from the British colonial rule in 1960. That is, the novel portrays the social, economic, and political situation of Nigeria on the verge of self-government and investigates the post-colonial Nigerian society and the failure of the country as an independent nation state through the Yoruba myths of the road and the *abiku* child – "a child in an unending cycle of births, deaths and rebirths" (Quayson, 1997, pp. 122-23). The *abiku* child Azaro is the protagonist and narrator of the novel. As "a child of miracles" (Okri, 1991, p. 10), he wanders between the realms of the living and the dead never completely belonging to either of these realms. Living with his poor family in a leaky apartment room in a slum of a capital city of an African country, Azaro observes the chaotic life of the people around, their sufferings, poverty and struggle to survive, and social and political violence around them. Moreover, he always keeps in touch with the world of the dead. In this way, he encompasses all his past, his present, and possible future lives within himself. Becoming "a perfect metaphor for postcolonialism's dualistic anomie" (Aizenberg, 1999, p. 465), Azaro's inbetween and ambiguous ontological position represents the traumatic story of an African nation - by implication the Nigerian nation. According to Felicia Oka Moh (2002), Azaro's continuous births and deaths symbolize the political history of Nigeria and the Nigerian nation. For Moh, Azaro is "on his fifth round to the earth; a parallel to the five eras of government in Nigeria: Colonial, first Republic, Military Rule, second Republic, Military Rule" (p. 90). Thus, by the help of Azaro and his experiences Okri scrutinizes the Nigerian nation and its chaotic passage from the colonial period to the years of Nigeria's Independence. Arlene Elder (2009) expands Moh's contention claiming that Azaro functions not only as a symbol of Nigeria, but "even of Africa as a whole" (p. 11).

In *The Famished Road* the *abiku* children are introduced as those who "lingered in the world, seduced by the annunciation of wonderful events, went through life with beautiful and fated eyes, carrying within us the music of a lovely and tragic mythology. [...] Our minds are invaded by images of the future" (Okri, 1991, pp. 4-5). The expectation and optimism of the *abiku* children for a beautiful future in the quotation seems to represent the hopeful situation in Nigeria on the brink of self-government. When the country became independent in 1960, the Nigerian people, especially the nationalists, were awash with hope for their future and were dreaming to turn Nigeria into a great nation. However, during the years following Independence, many factors such as governmental ineptitude, political and institutionalized corruption, bad leadership, economic backwardness, and social injustice caused a certain disillusionment in the country destroying all the hope for a bright future. Like Azaro, who claims that "being born was a shock from which I never recovered" (p. 8), the national independence created a great shock from which Nigeria could never recover. Entering into a vicious circle, the country was ensnared in its own history never accomplishing to be a self-sufficient, self-governing state.

In the novel, like Azaro, his *abiku* friend Ade functions as a representative of Nigeria / Africa. Ade, the son of a carpenter, leads a poorer and harsher life than Azaro and, unlike Azaro, he is enthusiastic to go back to the world of the Unborn. Comparing himself with his best friend, Azaro says that

I was a spirit-child rebelling against the spirits, wanting to live the earth's life and contradictions. Ade wanted to leave, to become a spirit again, free in the captivity of freedom. I wanted the liberty of limitations, to have to find or create new roads from this one which is so hungry, this road of our refusal to be. I was not necessarily the stronger one; it may be easier to live with the earth's boundaries than to be free in infinity. (pp. 558-59)

As suggested in the quotation above, Azaro and Ade become representatives of two different visions of Nigeria. Ade seems to be the symbol of Nigeria as a neglected, disregarded, frustrated and torn apart country, while Azaro symbolizes Nigeria as a country which still struggles to survive for all misfortunes, difficulties, sufferings, and failures. Through Azaro, Okri offers that "the country can emerge into harmony if people can remember their roots and keep the faith" (Biscaia, 2011, p. 297).

At the end of *The Famished Road*, Okri represents the Nigerian nation directly as an *abiku* nation through Ade's prophecy. When he is about to return to the spirit world, Ade foretells a future which is embedded in sorrow, violence, cruelty, blindness, starvation, coups, wars, and catastrophes. Ade recommends that all these sufferings and disasters should not frighten Azaro or make him feel desperate because he will always find something to struggle for. Ade also encourages Azaro saying that "our country is an *abiku* country. Like the spirit-child, it keeps coming and going. One day it will decide to remain. It will become strong" (Okri, 1991, p. 547). For Ade, if Nigeria can overcome its chaotic history and present

condition and rejects its *abiku* destiny, it will accomplish to survive just like Azaro, who has preferred to remain in the world of the living breaking the pact with the spirit world. For Okri, the job of making the Nigerian nation survive is in the hands of the Nigerian people. He goes on saying that "all nations are children; [...] ours too was an *abiku* nation, a spirit-child nation, one that keeps being reborn and after each birth come blood and betrayals, and the child of our will [the Nigerian nation] refuses to stay till we have made propitious sacrifice and displayed our serious intent to bear the weight of a unique destiny" (p. 567). To keep their country alive, the Nigerian people should make favorable sacrifices for their country. They have to sharpen their awareness toward Africa's marvelous capacities and evaluate their history consciously. They must be aware that only in this way they can break the vicious circle in which Nigeria was kept captured. Okri suggests that optimism for the future should go on despite all misfortunes and sufferings:

Africa has an incredible capacity to not die and not be destroyed. Unlike China that was always unified and had this great wall to prevent invasion, Africa had no great wall, yet it manages to remain unique. It's things like that, the resilience of the spirit, the great dreaming capacities, the imaginative frames that are visible in art, an art that has not remotely been understood. All these things are within the terrain of the book. But they're not different things. It's just one subject I'm addressing: the famished road. (1992, p. 87)

As revealed above, Okri takes advantage of the West African myth of the road along with the myth of *abiku* children. These two myths go hand in hand throughout the novel. Azaro and Ade function as the symbols of Nigeria, by extension the whole African continent, in the throes of becoming and recovering from the effects of a bygone colonialism, while the road stands for Nigerian / West African struggle to survive. Okri uses the myth of the road to reflect several different meanings. In some places, the last two hundred years of African history is symbolized through the metaphor of the road and in some others, the road symbolizes Nigerian history beginning from pre-colonial times until the present day. At the beginning of the novel, the road, originated from a river, is introduced in its pre-colonial condition and becomes a vehicle to demonstrate the value of African traditions and wisdom of African culture. It is always hungry as it has lost its African origin and connection with the spirit world. Towards the end of the novel, the myth of the road starts to represent Nigeria / Africa. In one of his visions, Azaro sees a lovely jeweled road being built. The road has been built for two thousand years, but it is still only two feet long. When a generation destroys the road, a new generation attempts to rebuild it. The reason is explained by the three-headed spirit as follows:

"Because each new generation begins with nothing and with everything. They know all the earlier mistakes. They may not know that they know, but they do. They know the early plans, the original intentions, the earliest dreams. Each generation has to reconnect the origins for themselves. They tend to become a little wiser, but don't go very far. It is possible that they now travel slower, and will make bigger, better mistakes. That is how they are as a people. They have an infinity of hope and an eternity of struggles. Nothing can destroy them except themselves and they will never finish the road that is their soul and they do not know it."

"So why don't you tell them?"

"Because they have the great curse of forgetfulness. They are deaf to the things they need to know the most." (1991, p. 379)

In the quotation, the road being built seems to represent two hundred years of recorded African history. African people struggle in vain to construct their history which has been injured by "enslavement by African notables, colonialism by Western imperialist adventurers and neo-colonialism by the new African oppressors" (Adeniji, 2011, p. 67). Furthermore, as argued by Moh (2002), "long periods of colonization by African notables and the white colonizers have left the citizens with a slave mentality which shuns positive remedial action" (p. 73). Because of the hundred years of enslavement, colonialism, neo-colonialism, and more significantly the African slave mentality, African people could not be successful in the construction of national consciousness, social justice, political equality, and technological and economic development. Okri does not put all the blame on the West for its continuous intrusion, but he also criticizes the African people: "the road was young but its hunger was old. And its hunger had been reopened" (1991, p. 484). Towards the end of the novel, especially the character Dad, Azaro's father, becomes Okri's vehicle to criticize his own people. Dad says that their road is hungry and because "We [Africans] have no desire to change things!" (p. 517). He accuses people of their apathy towards the evil condition around, their laziness, their cowardice and selfishness. Furthermore, Dad reproaches people because of their forgetfulness and lack of historical consciousness. The African people easily forget what they have

experienced, that is, it is impossible for them to learn from their past experiences. Their forgetfulness is the real cause of their slow improvement and development. Dad urges people “to lift themselves up by their thoughts”, to “THINK DIFFERENTLY” to be able to change the world, to “REMEMBER HOW FREE YOU ARE [they are]” in order to “TRANSFORM YOUR (their) HUNGER INTO POWER” (p. 479). According to Dad, the old ways are the best and must be followed to solve the present problems such as social and political conflicts, neo-imperialist exploitation of the country and dissolution of traditional communities. The African wisdom, traditions, and philosophy will provide the power and knowledge that the African people require to rebuild their road and to open new roads of the future. Through Dad’s oration at the end of *The Famished Road*, Okri presents his socialist optimistic vision of Nigeria / Africa. In his long speech, Dad expresses the urgent need for a new African society constituted by new citizens who have accomplished self-actualization, self-education, self-realization, self-analysis, magical perception, and spiritual insight. For him, African people can change the world and their destiny by redreaming the world: “God is hungry for us to grow. [...] We must look at the world with new eyes. We must look at ourselves differently. We are freer than we think. [...] We can redream this world and make the dream real. Human beings are gods hidden from themselves. [...] our hunger can change the world, make it better, sweeter” (pp. 571-72). Thus, Okri’s idea of ‘redreaming’ stands out as a key concept at the end of the novel. African people have a lot to learn from the power of redreaming in the face of the hazardous effects of colonialism. For Okri, “the real quarrel of the oppressed is not with the oppressors. The real truth they have to face is the truth about themselves. Hope and striving have magic in them. Those who have much to strive for, much to resolve and overcome and redream, may well be luckier than they think” (1997, p. 133). Then, those who gain the power of redreaming are luckier than those who get stuck in the past. Remembering the past histories and redreaming the possibilities for Africa can be the best remedy to re-member African national consciousness.

Conclusion

The Famished Road, as an example of postcolonial magical realist fiction, functions as Ben Okri’s sociopolitical weapon to fight against imperial, colonial and neocolonial forces, as well as social, political, economic and cultural corruption and to provide change and improvement. Taking advantage of the subversive power of magical realism, the novel merges the literary traditions of Africa, Europe and Latin America with a philanthropic and universal vision through the local. The function of Okri’s distinct type of magical realism is the same as the function of Azaro’s third eye, which suddenly opens out of the centre of his forehead and makes him perceive the world brighter and better (1991, p. 266). Through its third eye, *The Famished Road* attempts to free the human mind from all restrictions, to monitor the world from a different perspective, to uncover hidden facts, to highlight social and political reality and to document history.

Reflecting the traumatic condition of Nigeria on the eve of Independence, *The Famished Road* analyzes the chaos disturbing the country and its people. It reveals outrageous experiences such as the failure of Nigeria as an independent nation state, poverty, famine, violence, social and political corruption, militarism, dictatorship and domestic neocolonialism. While carrying his novel from the traumatic atmosphere of postcolonial Nigeria to optimistic dreams of the future, Okri’s main concerns become ‘myth’, ‘history’ and ‘politics’. These three concepts go hand in hand in Okri’s philosophy and function as inseparable organizing principles throughout the novel. If history means suffering of the people in Okri’s understanding, then myth becomes the best remedy for the Nigerian / African people’s sufferings. Refusing the overemphasis on colonialism in postcolonial studies, Okri focuses attention on “inviolate” African consciousness, to which the Western colonialism could not give any damage for centuries. To disentangle the energies hidden in the mythic and spiritual aspects of African history he directly plumps the depths of Yoruba mythology, folktales, legends and beliefs. In *The Famished Road*, the post-colonial Nigerian society is searched through the Yoruba myths of the abiku child and the road: Azaro and Ade, as spirit children, serve as the representatives of Nigeria, and by extension of Africa, and the road becomes the symbol of Nigeria’s (by extension of Africa’s) struggles to survive. Through these myths Okri attempts to investigate Africa’s past histories and to give moral lessons to African people. African people have forgotten their past, lost their African consciousness and thus developed a certain apathy towards their own African essence. It is not only the Western imperialism and colonialism but also the apathy and amnesia of African people that can be blamed for the everlasting “hunger” of Africa. However, it is also the African people who can satisfy this hunger by rediscovering the possibilities of imagination and spirituality buried in the unbroken African consciousness. African people have to think in a different way, overcome their forgetfulness and cowardness, and redream their past to heal their future. For Okri, this is the only way of solving the crises of democracy in Nigeria, Africa and moreover, throughout the modern world.

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