

Postcolonial Transfigurations and Postmodern Reworking: The Maze of Fictional Intertextuality in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*

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Abstract: The debate over the possible points of intersection between postmodernism and post-colonialism is by no means settled in literary discourse, and the case of Ben Okri raises interesting questions in this regard. Stephen Slemon notes that postmodernism is variously defined by Fredric Jameson as 'the pastiche energetic of Western society under late capitalism, where a 'new depthlessness' in representation – one grounded in the fetishization of the image as simulacrum – marks off a profoundly a historical drive which seeks to efface the past as 'referent' and leave behind itself nothing but 'texts' ¹, and by Ihab Hassan and others as 'a catalogue of figurative propensities (indeterminacy, multivalence, hybridization, etc.) whose ludic celebrations of representational freedom... are grounded in a 'dubious analogy' between artistic experimentation and social liberation. ²

Like Slemon, Helen Tiffin agrees that there are many elements of post-colonial writing that have postmodern characteristics – '... the move away from realist representation, the refusal of closure, the exposure of the politics of metaphor, the interrogation of forms, the rehabilitation of allegory and the attack on binary structuration of concept and language' ³– but she argues that 'they are energized by different theoretical assumptions and by vastly different political motivations. ⁴Therefore, 'the postmodern label should... be resisted. ⁵Acknowledging these distinctions, I believe it is nonetheless helpfully descriptive to apply the label 'postcolonial postmodernity' to writers who do two things : first, they 'resist the European master narrative of history because they can essentially oppose its incursions with alternative ontological systems ... [especially] within the societies whose own opposing or differing epistemes are still recuperable' (as Tiffin says Chinua Achebe and Raja Rao do ⁶), and, secondly, they are markedly experimental in their narration, carrying into their fiction many of the postmodern stylistic characteristics described above. The latter is indeed appropriate in the context of Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991), a work revealing a multiplicity of narrative dimensions and cultural interdiscursivity. The novel's parodic intertexts arise from its interlocking narrative modes, a distinctive combination of the African and the European which reflects the collective modes of discourse underlying postmodern parody.

Keywords: postmodernity, postcolonialism, Intertextuality, narrative, etc.

Regarding postmodernism, suffice it to say here that postmodernists inscribe literary conventions ranging from liberal humanists to poststructuralist (I use this term in its general sense in areas ranging from deconstruction to discourse analysis) and at the same time strongly contest them in view of a critical (deconstructive) re-evaluation. Arguably, post-modernism has succeeded in highlighting the intricate relationship between formal autonomy and the historic-political context in which it is embedded, though only by offering provisional and contextually determined answers. In any event, postmodernism has been able to 'throw up', as Paul de Man would put it, the observation that the 'master narratives', with their 'desire for a unitary and totalizing truth' ⁷, seek to exert power and control over the cultures by smoothing over cultural differences and distinctions under the guise of universalizing, homogeneous values. In this postmodernist spirit, as it were, postcolonial literature (from Ngugi wa Thiong'o to Okri) has attempted to challenge and debunk the legitimizing narrative archetypes of Western culture and its dominant ideology.

The European novel, emerging so distinctly in the eighteenth century, can be called a 'synthesis of pre-existing narrative traditions.'⁸ And in *The Nature of Narrative*, Scholes and Kellogg describe that synthesis as consisting of the empirical – historical, factual, mimetic – and the fictional – allegory, romance.⁹ In *Towards the Decolonization of African Literature*, Chinweizu et al. write that the synthesis consists of 'the prose and the verse narratives, epics and romances, of the Greco-Roman and medieval eras of Europe.'¹⁰ They argue further that it is 'the rise of bourgeois protagonist' that has led to 'the narrowing of the view of human society – the world of the novel – to exclude ghosts, supernatural, and other fantastic beings.'¹¹ Indeed, in *The Supernatural in Fiction*, Peter Penzoldt perceptively comments:

Modern man disavows the old superstitions: witchcraft, the black arts and the supernatural are derided at least in public by the great majority of the so-called civilized. Yet beneath the thin varnish of modern culture still smoulders the evil fire of ancient creeds. They are ever ready to recapture their ascendancy over the human mind, whenever some momentary illusion upset man's more civilized beliefs. The feeling that the supernatural is ever present, communicating its warning and meting out punishment, persists in us.¹²

It is precisely the slurring over this persistence in us and its rationalization in, or exclusion from, the novel (if it is to be taken genuinely as a universal art-form) that Okri is interrogating. The formalization and structuration of literary realism can be described in terms of conventions, and the real that is represented is not the same as the real itself, for the perception and depiction of the real derive largely from the individual and differing socio-cultural experiences. In his book *In My Fathers' House*, Anthony Appiah explains postmodernism as

A new way of understanding the multiplications of distinctions that flows from the need to clear oneself a space; the need that drives the underlying dynamic of cultural modernity.¹³

It is this realization that has led to the neo-traditional art found in the example of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) and Okri's *The Famished Road*. I would call it 'neo-traditional art' because it is a bold re-writing and re-interpretation of the writers' socio-cultural past. The re-contextualization has taken place only after their colonial experience. What makes *The Famished Road* postcolonial and multicultural both in form and content is precisely what makes it postmodernist, that is, its response to 'the need to clear oneself a space.' By the mythic narration Okri clears a space for the quintessential texture and structure of African folkloric narrative. In the very first edition of *Research in African Literatures* (Spring 1970), Albert Gerard noted that the novel

came to Africa as a new genre, alien to traditional art...[T]he novel as a literary genre is the outcome of a particular form of civilization, the premises of which are entirely at variance with those of African cultures... African cultures are based on values that are fundamentally societal... The modern novel, on the contrary, is the favourite medium of the individualistic society; it focuses on private emotions and motivations and experiences which Africa seldom considered worthy of formal literary treatment.¹⁴

The Famished Road deals primarily with a subject-matter (the *abiku* myth) that has deeply communal socio-cultural implications, yet the novel's main narrative action comes to us through Azaro's mediating perception, his 'private emotions and motivations and experiences' as the protagonist narrator, though all the events are not shown from one, limited point of view, in the manner of Jamesian novel. In a review of *The Famished Road* in *The New York Times Book Review* of 28 June 1992, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., wrote with a half-lamenting and half-exhortatory tone:

...[D]espite the fact that the novel enjoyed the role of primogenitor among the genres of contemporary African literature, few authors have chosen to test the limits of the conventional well-made realistic novel, a form inherited from Europe... [I]n an era of literary innovation – boundaries exist to be trespassed, conventions to be defied. So it should not be surprising that African novelists would eventually seek to combine Western literary antecedents with modes of narration informed by Africa's powerful tradition of oral and mythic narrative.¹⁵

Okri has indeed achieved this combination of distinct western and African literary modes, and in postmodernist fashion. A distinguishing feature of his narrative art in *The Famished Road* is an astonishingly swift shift from the conventional verisimilar description of the world of discrete things in the western manner of narration to the mythopoeic description of the 'other reality'. This shift occurs all the more strikingly within a single paragraph or within a single sentence, and it is as seamless as one finds in, say, Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* or Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1979). For instance, Azaro describes how he is caught between his kindred spirit and his Mum:

ONE MOMENT I was in the room and the next moment I found myself wandering the night roads. I had no idea how I had gotten outside. I walked on the dissolving streets and among the terrestrial bushes. 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... I 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 nebula, promised the ecstasies of a secret homeland, a world of holidays. A rough, familiar hand touched me on the shoulder.

'Where are you going, Azaro?'

It was mum.

'That woman told me to follow her.'

'What woman?' ... There is no one there, 'Mum said.

'Yes there is.'

'I'm taking you home.'

I said nothing. She lifted me on her shoulder. I could still see the head of the woman. I could still hear the voices in passionate gardens... 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.¹⁶

In this passage Okri has skillfully re-worked a well-known African tale meant to caution young people, especially young marriageable women, against heedlessly following strangers just because they appear attractive. This motif is also found in John Pepper Clarke's play *The Masquerade* (1964), which Dan Izevbaye has shown to have been taken from Amos Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard* (1953). More importantly, the narrative becomes increasingly balladic, capturing the repetitive form of the oral tale, while the stark details of the well-made realistic narrative smack of socialist realism. What is most striking of the passage is the inseparable interlocking of the two texts that produces an overt interface of the spirit and mundane worlds. This presentation departs from the orthodox naturalistic tradition, or 'Natural Supernaturalism' – a term taken by M. H. Abrams from Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, which can be said to have been concerned with 'The Mythos of the Christian Religion' during the Romantic period, when Europe was preoccupied with 'humanistic naturalism'. Abrams defines 'Natural Supernaturalism' as 'the general tendency ... in diverse degrees and ways, to naturalize the supernatural and to humanize the divine'¹⁷ in Romantic writings.

In contrast to 'Natural Supernaturalism', the supernatural and the natural are believed to be combined in an *abiku*, a spirit human being born to die again and again. Okri's novel aims to explore the ontology of the *abiku*, and thus his

narrative technique seeks to give a 'verisimilar' picture of Azaro's innate metaphysical or extraordinary consciousness as he 'often finds himself oscillating between two worlds', since 'one world contains glimpses of others'.¹⁸ As a result, the text avoids the conventional division between the terrestrial reality and the 'other reality', between the 'factual' and the 'mythical', just as postmodernism defies conventions and crosses the boundaries between history and fiction, and, by extension, between life and art. Azaro apprehends both worlds simultaneously and finds them both real. The narrative situation here differs from the one underlying the surrealist ambience in such a work as Camara Laye's *The Radiance of the King* (1956), where most of Clarence's half-conscious and reactions are induced by the alien African atmosphere he finds very strange. Throughout *The Famished Road*, Azaro communicates both with human beings and with spirits, and most times simultaneously:

And because Dad said nothing to me, because he made no attempts to reach me, did not even attempt a smile at me, I listened to what the three-headed spirit was saying.

'Your parents are treating you atrociously,' he said.

'Come with me. Your comrades are desperate to embrace you. There is a truly wonderful feast awaiting your homecoming ...'

Dad got up from his chair and stood over me. His breathing manifested itself as a heavy wind in the world in which I was travelling.

'Don't fly away,' the spirit said. 'If you fly away I don't know where you will land. There are many strange things here that devour the traveler. There are many spirit-eaters and monsters of the interspaces. Keep on the solid ground. Dad coughed and I tripped over a green bump on the road...'¹⁹

This passage is thematically significant for its re-enactment of the eternal bond between the *abiku* and his / her kindred spirit who is always ready to take advantage of any strained relationship between him / her and the parents. What is particularly noteworthy here in terms of Okri's literary experimentation is Azaro's ability to respond simultaneously to both the three-headed spirit and his dad as he bestrides the two realms.

In the two excerpts above, the European novel's convention of realistic detail and the African folkloric tale's mythic narration are played off against each other. Remarkably, there is no simple, unproblematic merging into one single monolithic discourse, as they remain distinct even while intermingling. In other words, there is no assimilation of one narrative mode by the other, or of one genre by the other. In short, no centralized sameness. The narrative technique does not seek any oppositional stance: the intertexts assume parallel status in the parodic re-working of the narrative modes, debunking the mutual exclusivity of center and margin.

This non-assimilationist effect celebrates the 'post' in 'postcolonial' literature, signifying a 'clearing of a new space' for African literature and so re-defining the relationship, in postmodernist fashion. Thus, the parodic intertextuality incorporates and subverts the orthodox adoption - the traditionally unmodified adoption - of the European mode of narration, demanding a re-consideration of the idea of origin and dominance. Arguably, all this translates into a decolonization of African literature without necessarily throwing overboard the European mode of narration. The 'en-centering' of the African folkloric mode of narration the conventionally dominant European mode of narration causes them to collapse into each other. The inescapable intertextuality and the consequent mutual 'rubbing off' underline the interdiscursivity of the novel's textual discourse; there is a relation of mutual interdependence between the dominated and the dominators that must be recognized, since neither the imperial city nor the colony can return to a 'pure' state following colonization. Indeed, the novel's mythic narration takes on considerable descriptive particularity, in the realistic mode.

However, Okri's neo-traditional art is not merely making a nostalgic return to African folktale. It is actually a re-writing of the socio-cultural past in the present in a way that demands critical re-interpretation in anticipation of the future, since the *abiku's* present contains both the past and the future. The re-contextualization recalls the literary past of the African folktale as an oral art up to the point of its textualization, particularly in Yorubaland, the apparent source of Azaro's mythic narrative, even though Okri would not admit this in his interview with Jane Wilkinson in London in December 1990:

My personal experience of reading your book was in fact to recall Fagunwa, Tutuola and Soyinka, but also the vast transnational literature of dream vision and vision generally; forests of the night together with forests of symbols, but also countless forests and labyrinths of literary modern cities.

- I think when reading the novel one should just think of my primary sources as being the invisible books of spirit. My primary sources are those invisible books. And I mean that very seriously.²⁰

In *The Famished Road*, there is a radical point of departure from the conventional rendition of the *abiku* myth, particularly in terms of setting. In the hands of Fagunwa and Tutuola, the folktale events take place in the traditional setting of *abiku* narratives, in 'terra incognita: the evil forest, the bad bush. Here was the home of chaos, where random spirits without name or history of bizarre forms and malignant intent were to be found,'²¹ according to Michael Thelwell. It is considered necessary to separate the extraordinary world of spirits and demons from the mundane world of history, stability, morality, and order where there is a comprehensible interplay of deities and ancestors and humanity; so traditionally there have always been separate settings for these. However, spirits and demons are believed to inhabit our terrestrial realm and to interact with us in our mundane existence, though they are visible only to people who have extraordinary consciousness or the sixth sense. In *The Famished Road*, there is no separation. In fact, the worlds are inextricably interwoven as Azaro bestrides the two worlds, communicating simultaneously with both two worlds.

The parodic intertextuality deepens if we relate the title of the novel and its treatment of the whole issue of the ontology and epistemology of African (Yoruba) myths to Wole Soyinka's poem called 'Death in the Dawn', which can be said to be the source of the novel's title. In this poem,

the mother prayed, Child

May you never walk

What the road waits, famished²²

But this prayer and all the propitiatory sacrifices turn out to be a 'futile rite' and there is 'another Wraith' in the person of the apparently charmed traveler. At a party held at the beginnings of *The Famished Road* to celebrate Azaro's escape from kidnappers, Madame Koto, with her supersensory perception, offers a 'wonderful' prayer for him: 'The road will never swallow you. The river of your destiny will overcome evil. May you understand your fate. Suffering will never destroy you, but will make you stronger...'²³. Obviously, both Soyinka and Okri inscribe in these works the Yoruba prayer which translates literally as follows: 'May you never walk / travel when the road is hungry.' But while Soyinka's poem concentrates on a car journey between two places so as to explode the myth underlying rituals meant to prevent road accidents, the novel presents the road motif in the form of a perilous journey of life in all its moral, psychological, and social ramifications, almost in the manner of the picaresque, and so an *abiku* can be regarded as moral villain in some respects. Most significantly, while the road kills the dawn traveler in Soyinka's poem, Azaro survives out of an unflinching determination arising from his deep affection for his parents, though his journey of life is ontologically fraught with grave dangers and uncertainties. It is a triumph of will power, and in ironic contrast to the way Soyinka's *abiku* demonstrates his will power against his / her parents. In short, Okri has

inscribed and contested the literary use of Yoruba myths in a way that calls for a critical re-evaluation of myths and their multiple dimensions.

The parodic intertextuality draws broadly on Nigerian literary canons. When Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* appeared, it was widely acclaimed for its profuse use of the African folktale. But suffice it to say that the folktale is embedded in that novel in such a way that it is subsumed, assimilated, by the dominant realistic mode of narration from Europe. Emmanuel Obiechina's analysis of the function of folktales in the novel only inadvertently demonstrates this ironical situation, considering that the dominant realist narrative mode of the novel is a legitimizing master archetype from the colonial legacy to Africa. Obiechina describes folktales as 'narrative proverbs 'which 'occupy an ancillary status to the mainline narrative ':

Each story is a complete unit, self-contained and adequate within itself but functioning, in an attributive context, as an extension of some essential aspect of the plot of the larger narrative; each functions as a proverb and is thus in an ancillary status to the mainline narrative feeding into it some insight and adding cumulatively to the complexification of the plot. Each narrative proverb is a vital tributary to the mainline flow of the narrative.³⁴

The secondary place of the folktale in *Things Fall Apart* is clearly seen through perspective. It ought to be realized that what is called the mainline narrative here is indeed rendered in the narrative mode of 'the conventional well-made realistic novel 'that came from Europe with colonialism, and in this respect it unwittingly reaffirms the 'master' ideology as it subjugates the folkloric mode to a ' subject ' role in its ' ancillary status ' . This ' ordering of the African experience in a compromise strategy '²⁵ smacks of a presumption to a homogeneous, monolithic culture, whereas the novel itself is concerned with culture fractures. Talking about the concern of Coetzee's fiction with the necessity and the difficulty of the process of genuine structural change in a society like South Africa's, Derek Attridge says:

All canons rest on the exclusion, the voice they give to some can be heard only by virtue of the silence they impose on others. But it is not just a silencing by exclusion; it is a silencing by inclusion as well; any voice we can hear is by that very fact purged of its uniqueness and alterity.²⁶

In the case of *The Famished Road*, the mainline narrative primarily concerns Azaro's experiences, emotions, and motivations as an *abiku* child. Many popular folktales are reworked and seamlessly built up to constitute the novel's central action which is presented in the mythic form. Events like his Dad's boxing practices, and bouts, political campaigns and happenings in the ghetto where Azaro and his parents lives and which actually forms the social (mundane) setting of the novel, are presented mainly in the form of the conventional well-made realistic narrative. But all these aspects are presented through Azaro's mediating consciousness as we follow him in his compulsive wanderlust. Most importantly, they are all interspersed with Azaro's *abiku* sights and escapades, which are of course rendered in the mythic form. Consequently, the web of narrative intertexts is closely-knit. There are, however, a few significant tales that are extemporized, as it were. When his dad or mum tells him a tale apparently fabricated on the spur of the moment, it is narrated to him within the magic-realist framework of the mainline folkloric narrative's historic-cultural context. As a result, two main narrative modes emerge broadly in the text: the African folkloric and mythic mode the 'conventional well-made realistic 'mode. These modes take on parallel status, creating both narrative and cultural interdiscursivity in the text.

In conclusion, the parodic intertexts create a discursive multiculturalism or cross-culturalism that effectively contests and re-formulates the dominant, colonial or Eurocentric perception of, and approach to, different cultural phenomena. In other words, the narrative technique seeks to explode the myth of a centralized sameness that privileges the Eurocentric ideology, while 'silencing by inclusion 'of African culture. In *The Famished Road*, Ben Okri has indeed aimed at a more comprehensive representation of reality than permitted by the stylistic propriety of the

conventional realist novel. Again, within the context of the intra-Nigerian intertextuality, the novel also re-contextualizes and strongly contests the literary use of African myths in the Nigerian 'canons'. Charles Nnolim has commended Okri's departure in his first two novels from the general run of the Nigerian novel by the by means of 'his method, his technique... to create main characters... of sensitivity.'²⁷ Nnolim describes Okri as modern novelist, for he finds him to be primarily interested in the subjectivity and inner actions of his characters. In *The Famished Road*, Okri de-emphasizes the centrality and dominance of the 'conventional well-made realist novel' while enhancing the traditionally off-center, ancillary African folkloric and mythic narration, 'centering 'its functionality and so giving to both narrative modes the same attention. Indeed, Okri's *The Famished Road* has truly sought to achieve a decolonization of colonial education, which, Appiah says, 'produced a generation immersed in the literature of the colonizers, a literature that often reflected and transmitted the imperialist vision '²⁸ and imperialist technique. More precisely, then, *The Famished Road* shows Ben Okri to be a neo-traditionalist, decolonized novelist who is, by the same token, a veritable postmodernist.

Notes

1. Stephen Slemon, 'Modernism's Last Post', in *ARIEL*: 20.4 (1989), pp. 4-5.
2. Ibid., p. 5.
3. Helen Tiffin, 'Post-colonialism, Post-modernism and the Rehabilitation of Post-Colonial History', in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*: 23.1 (1988), p. 172
4. Ibid., p. 172.
5. Ibid., p. 171.
6. Ibid., p. 176.
7. Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, ed. with intro. By Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 12.
8. David Lodge, *The Novelist at the Crossroads* (London and New York: Routledge and Kegan, 1986), pp 4.
9. Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 3 – 81
10. Chinweizu et al, *Towards the Decolonization of African Literature 1* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1980), p. 19.
11. Ibid., p. 19.
12. Peter Penzoldt, *The Supernatural in Fiction* (London: Sanders Philips, 1952), p. 6.
13. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York and Oxford: OUP, 1992), p. 145.
14. Albert Gerard, 'Preservation of Tradition in African Creative Writing', in *Research in African Literatures*: 1.1 (1970), p. 35.
15. Henry Louis Gates (Jr.), 'Between the Living and the Unborn', in *The New York Times Book Review*, 28 June 1992, p. 3.
16. Ben Okri, *The Famished Road* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991), pp. 307-08.
17. M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Realism in Romantic Literature* (New York and London: Norton, 1973), p. 67-68.
18. Ben Okri, *The Famished Road* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991), p. 8.
19. Ibid., pp. 326-27.
20. Jane Wilkinson, *Talking with African Writers: Interviews with African Poets, Playwrights and Novelists* (London: James Currey; Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1992), p. 88
21. Amos Tutuola, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, ed. With intro. b Michael Thelwell (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1984), p. xvii

22. Wole Soyinka, *Idanre and Other Poems* (London : Methuen, 1967), p. 10
23. Ben Okri, *The Famished Road* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991), pp. 46-47.
24. Immanuel Obiechina, 'Narrative Proverbs in the African Novel ', in *Research in African Literatures: 24.1* (1993), p. 126.
25. Ibid., p. 131.
26. Derek Attridge, 'Oppressive Silence: J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* and the Politics of the Canon ', in *Decolonizing Tradition: New Views of Twentieth Century " British " Literary Canons*, ed. By Karen R. Lawrence (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), p. 226.
27. Charles E. Nnolim *Approaches to the African Novel* (London, Lagos, Port Harcourt: Saros, 1992), p. 175.
28. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House : Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York and Oxford : OUP , 1992), p. 55

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