

# MAGICAL REALISM IN BEN OKRI'S THE FAMISHED ROAD

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**ABSTRACT:** Ben Okri is one of the first generation Nigerian poets and novelists. His first hand experiences of civil war in Nigeria influenced many of his works. Okri has risen to an international acclaim, and he is often described as one of Africa's leading writers.

Ben Okri's novels are a beautifully rendered allegory, enriched by its African society. He won Booker prize for fiction, for his novel *The Famished Road* (1991). It has been called the classic magical realist novel of West Africa. This study emphasis the theme of magical realism in *The Famished Road*.

**Keywords:** Magical realism, Yoruba culture, colonialism.

The colonial experience exploited by many writers made them feed the genre of fiction with realistic tenor. Colonialism is also affected with the political interrelationship which is equally affected by the patterns of authority and subjugation. From the post-colonial point of view not only politicians dominate the people, but they are also dominated by the interplay of class, gender, and other hierarchal relationship. Post colonialism is expressed in terms of disquiet. The main purpose of post colonialism is to rebuild upon the "pre-colonial past glories and to point out the need to break free from the contemporary 'colonization of the mind'" (Dhawan 20).

So, the purpose of post colonialism is to comprehend the states of consciousness induced by an experience of physical reality and internal discourse. The postcolonial writers merge fictive and conflict which results from the effect of socio-political change on the individual and their collective sensibilities. The ultimate goal of post colonialism is combating the residual effects of colonialism on culture. It is not simply concerned with the salvaging past worlds, but learning how the world can move beyond this first period together, towards a place of mutual respect.

African literature in the late colonial period increasingly delineated themes of liberation, independence, and negritude. Most of the African countries won their liberation in the mid twentieth century. During that period African literature was written and translated into English and had spread its roots deeper and branched wider. African literature has become a part of the most important and influential works of world literature. Several writers expressed the clash between Africa's past tradition, present modernity, native foreign, individualism, community, socialism, capitalism, self-reliance and humanitarian concerns. African novelists expressed the political realities of their society and interpreted them not only for themselves and their fellow Africans but for the world.

African writing in English language lends itself to a global perspective, which is deeply locked in the sounds of rhythms of their particular language and culture. The African writers have expressed their resentment against corruption and protested against the authoritative forces that are trying to misuse the freedom gained from the colonial powers and the writers recorded their problems such as disintegration of the typical culture and racial discrimination.

Ben Okri was born on 15 March 1959 in Minna; Northern Nigeria to Grace and Silver Okri. He spent his earliest years in Peckham, South London. Okri's childhood was shadowed by the Nigerian civil war. As a child he read widely, and his mother told him many African stories. After finishing his high school Okri worked as a clerk at a point store. He failed to get a place at the university and started to write articles on social and political issues but most of the articles were not published.

At the age of nineteen Okri completed his first novel, *Flowers and Shadows* in 1980. This story was written in the broad tradition of realism. His second novel, *The Landscape Within* (1981) traced the adventures of a young and poor painter in Lagos. This novel was followed by two collections of short stories, *Incident at the Shrine* (1986) and *Stars of the New Curfew* (1988), in which Okri started to experiment with new narrative techniques. His contemporaries are Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Camera Leye, Gabriel Okara, Nadine Gordimer, Buchi Emecheta and Amos Tutuolo.

Okri has experimented with new literary forms, different styles such as mixed realism, modernism and oral literary technical forms. His novel *The Famished Road* is a unique example for employing the concept of magical realism in African fiction. "Magical realism is a term introduced in the 1940s referring to narrative that presents extraordinary occurrences as an ordinary part of everyday reality" (Bowers 131). Ben Okri uses the Yoruba tradition in *The Famished Road*. Azaro is the narrator and protagonist in *The Famished Road*.

The term magical realism becomes highly fashionable in 1980. It has become the popular term referring to a particular narrative mode. The magical and realist together forms a new perspective in literary realism. The unique feature of magical realism is its reliance upon the reader to follow the example of the narrator in accepting both realistic and magical perspectives of reality on the same level. Magical realism differs from pure fantasy primarily because it is set in a normal modern world with authentic descriptions of humans and society.

On the African continent magical realism and post colonialism have gone hand-in-hand, particularly in West and South Africa. The belief of Yoruba myth made Ben Okri employ magical realism to exemplify their rich heritage and culture. Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* is told predominantly from a West African perspective.

The novel shows the struggle of an *abiku* child (a child attached both to the spirit world and the living world, who is born again only to die and return again) and the child attempts to negotiate between the two forces from the living and the dead that seek to dominate him. The

beginning itself the author brings out the spirit world with reality. The cyclic change of the river and the road explain about the land and unborn spirits.

In each birth everyone has numerous forms. This shows Okri's belief on Yoruba myth which has the idea about rebirth. As a human being each one has birth and death, and everyone has love, suffering, happiness, longing for something etc. These provide the idea for human reality. "Those of us who made such vows were known among the living an *abiku*, spirit children. Not all the people recognized us. We were the ones who kept coming and going, unwilling to come to terms with life. We had the ability to will our deaths. Our pacts were binding" (FR 4). As a spirit child Azaro has lot of dilemma in his life. He needs parents love in the earthly world than his spirit friends. This feeling only makes him exist in this world.

When Azaro reaches the age of seven, he first realizes the dream of spiritual world and the spiritual brothers ask him to come back to the spiritual world but Azaro refuses their compulsion and started to shouting. Then he comes to the real world when his mother woke him up. After this incident, he often goes to the spiritual world. Once he stays in the spiritual world for a long time. For this reason, his parents thought him dead and kept him in a coffin. Suddenly he got up from the coffin when he comes to the real world. This miraculous activity was acknowledged by his parents. Arnold Harrichand Itwaru says, "Azaro speaks within the wonderment of prescient childhood innocence in which meaning comes about and transforms itself in both the spirit world and existence. He talks to us in a mythopoeic fecundation of the imagination which begins in the "soil and psyche" of his ancestry of memory and paradoxical meaning. (92).

In the early years his mother feels proud of having got the miracle child but later only she realizes its problems. Azaro's life becomes callous because of his future vision. Even though he was born for an earthly mother, he has the bond with spiritual world. His mother tries to make him understand the troubles and losses because of his visionary world. Madame Koto, the proprietor of the local bar also has the influence of spiritual world but it is only recognized by Azaro. Madame Koto's bar and the forest are the most spiritual connection places for Azaro. Because, he often met his spiritual friend and involves in some adventurous activities in the bar.

Azaro has the terrible experience in the spirit world. He goes around the forest, he saw two legged dog, the roads are divided, and they look like the snakes, the tails in their mouths all these make him afraid. "I came to another familiar place; the passionate chants of the muezzin roused the Muslim world to prayer" (FR 134). Even though he is in the spirit world, he has the belief on God and His power. The author uses the religion to expose the community's belief on God. And also, the readers can able to comprehend the new age spirituality here. Because, the people belong to Yoruba community, but they chants of the muezzin. This shows Azaro's future vision of reality through spiritual sight.

One day Azaro returns from school and searches his mother in the market. At that time, there is an old man asks the reason for his searching. After this conversation with the old man Azaro wants to move from that place. Then suddenly, the voices are heard in darkness. "They eat all our money.' 'Our power.' 'They say he is looking for the spirit of Independence.' 'Which he lost when the white man come.' .... 'The moon of Independence.' 'The world is turning upside down.' .... 'And War'" (FR 196).

The spirits are spoken like this within them. This shows his remembrance and he being conscious of spirit world even though he avoids the spirits. The other spirits converse themselves which shows the influence of white people, the change of the African continent, the corruption etc. Through this magical spirits, the readers came to realize the situation of the country and thought of the people. Azaro realizes the changes in Madame Koto's bar through the spirits.

His parents also advised Azaro to neglect Koto because of her unjustified and over greediness. Once Azaro was in the bar, through the spirits he saw the machinery world. "All around, in the future present, a mirage of houses was being built, paths and road crossed.... Up where the forest was thickest" (FR 280-281). The future is going to change as machinery world, the life style of the people all are seen by Azaro in a present world. The vision of Azaro gives some awareness about the future.

Whenever Azaro enters the forest he experienced a duel nature of adventure and magical forces. Magical quality is bejeweled with adventure. One day Azaro had a long dream, suddenly all the secret world of visions are dispatched. "Above the cupboard was the legend, printed in gothic lettering: GOD'S TIME IS THE BEST. High upon the wall was the image of crucified Christ and beneath it another legend. THE EVIL THAT MEN DO" (FR 336).

The dream of God's crucifixion is an indirect message for the second birth of the world. That is the witchcraft, evil things like Madame Koto all are going to pulverize one day. The good thing will come; this is the message from Azaro's dream to the real world. This dream gives the assurance of change of the world. He has the destiny to create a good world which should have peace, without any evil and corruption. "A dream can be the highest point of life" (FR 574). At last, Azaro comprehends the real concept of life as in the present world, the people are changed; all are corrupted by selfishness, addicted for money. All are leading the life in the same world, need the happiness but suffer only lead them to happy. All are trying their level best to reach the destiny but it is like a riddle. Because life is not based on our wish, it is based on our past deeds and our present doings. So, the people have to utilize their life in a smashing thought. The dreams lead us in a proficient way but it should be in a beneficial way. So, in this novel magical realism is used as a skillful technique to mask the abject realism of the society that is embedded in a surrealist atmosphere.

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