

# Archetypal Patterns in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*

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## Abstract

This paper attempts to analyse the Booker prize won novel of Ben Okri, *The Famished Road*, based on archetypal criticism. As Okri has set this novel in multiple aspects, this can be taken to any approaches to interpret the text. Here the patterns of archetype are taken and applied in the text to focus the recurring images, motifs, symbols and the characters. This paper deals with the archetypal characters like archetypal hero, the great mother and Lazarus; archetypal images like monsters, and spirits; archetypal symbols like the cross, the great king, and the hungry road, etc... Okri has focused in the narration and the art of storytelling with the uses of the archetypal and fantasy characters and patterns.

**Key words:** *archetype, symbols, images, fantasy, fetish, spirits, the road, the voice, the black cat, rats*

Black African literature in English is known for its more over than thirty years recent literary history and it draws international attention only because of the writings of some African authors like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, J.M. Coetzee, Amos Tutuola, etc... Their writings made such liveliness against colonial and hegemonic groups. They also bear out that the face of postcolonial writings is an European based linguistic model. Octovio Zaya in her article *The Famished Road: Ben Okri's Magic and Reality* writes, "A literature that assumes the differences between African and European languages and attempts to understanding complex and transformations that give shape to language when they meet and conflict" (92).

Zaya also mentions that *The Famished Road* is the novel written by Ben Okri, the winner of the most prestigious award, the Booker Prize for its uniqueness on the myth of aboriginal tradition and its "postmodern narrative of rhetorical complexity and lyrical wealth" (92) that differs from the usual style of black African literature in English. Despite the fact that Okri belongs to Urhobo tradition he used the mythology of Yoruba mainly inspired by the writings of Soyinka and D. O. Fagunwa and his English is assumed as a cultural construct. He has narrated his novels using postmodern characteristics with the art of storytelling. His description of the nature has overtone of lyrics and brings a realistic image to the eyes of the readers.

Among the five approaches to literary criticism suggested by Wilber Scott archetypal approach is the last one but more effective one. Archetypal approach resembles the other approaches because it takes some significant aspects from all the other four aspects. Scott describes this approach in his book *Five Approaches of Literary Criticism*: “a demonstration of some basic cultural patterns of great meaning and appeal to humanity in a work of art” (247). Cultural patterns are deeply rooted with the pre-literary genre such as rituals, myth and folk tales. Rituals in human life cannot be separated but it is a voluntary effort taken by them to reclaim his bond with the natural cycle. Archetypal approach in other names the totemic, mythological or ritualistic approach as told by Wilber Scott, “aims to discover and decode the secret language in literary works so that it may have for us a more rational meaning” (249).

Archetype is known as a renowned character, an action, or an instinct that are found in any work of art to represent universal patterns of human nature. It is also identified as ‘universal symbol’ that may be a character, a theme, a motif or even a setting. Literally the word ‘archetype’ derived from the Greek word *archetypos* means ‘first-molded’. Pattern is a repeated design or a model that is found in various places in any field of study. Here the patterns of archetype are taken and applied in the text to focus the recurring images, symbols and motifs. Frye describes the role of myth and folktales that myth has to ‘instruct’ in the mean time to ‘amuse’, as the function of myth. Mythology is formed of myth but folk tales deals with themes and motifs. Okri does justice to this concept and he is really amusing his readers with his magical words and lyrical narration in every writings. Readers would feel the essence and beauty of his chain of words compiled as a book in their hands.

*The Famished Road* begins with a description about the spirit world and spirit children that how they are chosen to the existing life in any form from the eternal state. The setting of the novel begins with the mythical belief of West Africans and takes its sequences to the birth and sufferings of an abiku, spirit child. The entire story is about how the spirit child namely Azaro comes to the existing world and how he faces the earthly sufferings among the compelling call of his spirit companions to the world of spirits. Barriers in Azaro’s life appear between his native, political parties, the spirit’s world and the earth, society, dream and reality throughout the novel. The novel also speaks about the disparity of the people because of their improper political structure and the intolerable bullies of the rich men party.

J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter stories can be taken as a study of the ‘hero archetype’ in the series of Harry Potter. The hero archetype signifies the barriers that a hero faces and his efforts to overcome them to achieve his goal or for the welfare of the world. Like other classic heroes in literature, Harry struggles a lot and overcomes death and completes his tasks, and never gives up his goodness, even though he faces many hard obstacles. Azaro in *The Famished Road* plays more or like the similar role of Harry. However he is wanted by his spirit companions and they often come invisible to him to call him back with them to the spirit’s world. An Abiku is a child in the womb of a mother whose soul is reborn to the same mother again

and again that is found in African mythology. The entire story is about the adventures faced by Azaro, an Abiku who was born smiling. Newly born babies would normally cry once they step their feet in the world but in the case of Azaro the readers can find that he did not cry when he was born. Father of Azaro tells to Azaro, “And when you were born you had a mysterious smile on your face” (387) and Azaro himself tells, “I was born smiling” (7).

The novel begins with the Biblical style that “IN THE BEGINNING” (3) and the pattern has overtones of the life and trials of Christ. However Azaro is born in a poor family and he is tempted often by his spirit companions as they are in the birth of Christ in an ordinary carpenter’s family and tempted by Satan to surrender him which is described in the Holy Bible. And there are certain Christian symbols such as the use of the name Lazar to Azaro as Lazaro, crucified cross on the wall in *The Famished Road*. The evangelist Matthew in his book in *The New Testament* writes that Satan tempts Christ: “Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; And saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if you wilt fall down and worship me” (4:9-10). The spirit companions speak to Azaro in any form or invisible using ‘voice’ in the novel. The voice of the spirit companions of Azaro tempts him in *The Famished Road*, “Then they showed me images .... ‘Come back to us,’ they said. We miss you by the river. You have deserted us. If you don’t come back we will make your life unbearable” (9). The voices of the spirit companions mesmerize Azaro when he was missed from his parents for the first time: “They were the twilight voices of my spirit companions, luring me to the world of dreams, away from this world ... a world where I would never be lost” (21-22). When Azaro spends his time with his father in the palm-wine bar a ‘voice’ asks Azaro, “Shut your eyes” (342, 347) to avoid the flaming red eyes of the spirit and that leads the spirits to converse with him. Hence it comes to the lime light that the life of Azaro tones with ‘hero archetype’.

The great mother is one of the characters in the archetypal approach and effective one. Azaro is lost in the market place for the second time and fainted aside the streets and he is rescued by the locals. In his half-conscious mind he was about to jump down into a well in which the moon was reflected but rescued by a woman, a motherly figure. “... there was a well. ... the moon at the bottom of the well and I began to climb down into the well because it seemed the best place to lie down and to rest in a deep unmoving whiteness. But then a woman grabbed the back of my shorts and lifted me up and threw me down and shouted: ‘Get away from here!’” (197).

These are three women are appearing in the novel *The Famished Road* when father of Azaro was possessed by seven spirits who “had been sent by Green Leopard’s mother” (464) because father had conquered Green Leopard in the duel. A witch who became an herbalist, Madame Koto and another short woman helps dad to recover from the possession by sacrificing and enchanting words.

Azaro encounters witches and darkness in the novel in various occasions. When he goes for hunting with his father to the forest an antelope and a black cat appears to him after an owl flew over his head. He feels safe when he faced the antelope but when he meets an old witch from the tree and a black snake these make him terrified. It is common that the colour black symbolizes danger; vapor of yellow water means loss of happy life; black snake have a negative meaning of inauspicious development in life; and black cat represents misfortune and death. After the encounter of the old witch and the black snake Azaro faces more trouble in his life. This novel contains many ritualistic practices made with the help soothsayers and witches. Azaro once is taken by a group of women to sacrifice his life to a deity but he escapes from there with a help of a woman in the group. Black cat appears in the novel whenever Azaro is seduced by the voice of his spirit companions. “My spirit companions, their voices seductive beyond endurance ... when I saw a black cat ... came to a well ... I saw the black cat its eyes glowing like luminous stones”(58). Azaro is diverted from death by the black cat and rescued by Madame Koto.

Okri is an incredible story teller using the supernatural elements such as spirits and monsters not only in *The Famished Road* but also in most of his works like *In Arcadia* and *The Age of Magic* and others. He involves illusion figures and invisible characters like spirit companions, Malaso, the great cat, the voice, etc... These figures play an inevitable role in the journey of the protagonists of Okri. Spirit companions appear often in the story and they provoke Azaro to come back to the world of spirits but he denies because of the love he had on his parents after seeing their sufferings to bring up him. These spirits appears to Azaro’s father when he was on his deathbed but he wars with those spirits and was rescued by the herbalists. He was taken to the dream land and makes war with the spirits who are sent to get back Azaro’s life.

Conquering the monsters is a frequent element in the legends and folktales of mythical heroes like Beowolf, Theseus and Hercules. In the epic of Beowolf monster (Grendel) and dragon that were sent by Grendel’s mother are killed by Beowolf in order to save the life of the inhabitants.

The title of the novel is taken from the poem “Death in the Dawn” written by Wole Soyinka – says Henry Louis Gates Jr., “May you never walk/when the road waits, famished” (92). Road itself here is a motif of deforestation and emptiness – the story of road told by the father of Azaro in the novel reveals the satirical truth that how the geographical changes made by men under the banner of development and the loss of natural resources. Literally the road is not hungry but the river had been ruined where the road is built on. Since Okri had passion on the writings of Soyinka he has taken the title from his poem. He gives life to the road and makes road as a hidden character in this novel. The hungry road takes place in this novel vehemently and this is portrayed as a strong character among all the others. People who live in the ghetto consider the road as their deity and they believe that the road would take their lives unless they fail to give it with sacrifice.

Okri brings out the pathetic life of ghetto people who were cheated by the rich men and the government. The burnt van shows the disorder of the political instability and pathetic life of the ghetto among the rulers and party men. He brings the history to the limelight through his realistic narration, characters and materials. The people are cheated with cunning promises and they suffer after consuming the spoiled milk provided freely by the rich party men. Their illiteracy became a reason behind their sufferings but father of Azaro and the photographer realized the pathetic life of the ghetto and they propagate against the party of rich men by whom they both suffer a lot later.

Okri uses the materials back in his writings in order to emphasis the culture of the people. He describes the changes in the practices of people to another step that the palm wine and the beer, fuel lamp and the electric lamp. These symbolize how the people are easily tackled by the colonizers and adapt the new products. For example the new sale of beer instead of palm wine in the bar of Koto, the first consumer of electricity in the village and her use of electricity lamps and the new car are the evidences that Okri puts in the development of the village in the picture.

The great cat (assumed to be a lion) appears to Azaro whenever he is in chaos and faces riddles in his life. Azaro describes the King of the spirit world as, “a wonderful personage who sometimes appeared in the form of a great cat” (3). He is protected by the King of spirit world in the form of cat whenever he gets in trouble and riddles. Okri emphasizes the concept of the great cat myth in his novel and he portrays the cat as a King.

Using fetish is widespread in South-Asian countries like India, China and few countries in West. It is an inevitable one in the fairy tales and oral literature. Fetish, an inanimate object used in black magic assuming that is inhabited by spirits, is taken in this novel to portray the beliefs of the inhabitants of the ghetto. Though Madame Koto, the bar owner and the adherent of the rich men party and prostitutes is surreptitiously using fetish to drive her bar business successfully, Azaro once finds it and feels unease of the fetish hanging in her bar front. So he ceases that out and is chased by Madame Koto and others and therefore he burry that in the forest.

Rats are considered as a bad omen and they are often killed once they are caught out of fear of disease. In the story of the Pied Piper of Hamelin the entire city is filled with fear of increasing rats and the Piper drives all the rats to kill with the intoxication of music. The photographer in *The Famished Road* tells Azaro, “Egypt rats ate up a whole animal” (223) and also gives rat poison to them. Okri in the novel describes the dead rats as “a Calvary of rats” (273) using terms from the holy Bible.

To conclude, Okri’s *The Famished Road* is instituted with the archetypal elements like possession and overcoming the spirits, ghosts, dragon like figures, supernatural beings and the practices of spiritualism. Characters like mother of Azaro and the wife of the policeman can be taken to categorize under the great

mother concept; Madame Koto and other herbalist women take the role of the witches and wizards; father of Azaro plays the grandstander bully role which is the shadow of hero archetype when he goes for the duel in order to earn money to survive. Azaro becomes the victim of the spirit and living world, real and fantasy life.

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