

Dichotomy and Dissidence in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* Trilogy

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Abstract

Nigerian Writing in English is young but though it is young many great works have been published. Achebe, Soyinka are the celebrated writers of the past. But following them Ben Okri, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie entered the literary scene exploring the reality with myth and magic. Ben Okri, a Booker prize winner treaded in the untrodden way to highlight on reality suppressing the anger and pain. *The Famished Road* Trilogy maps the political, social conditions of the Niger land. Dichotomy, dissidence in Okri enabled him to cloth the reality with Fantasy mode of writing. This paper focuses on the dichotomy and dissidence in Okri in his trilogy.

Key words: dichotomy, dissidence, trilogy, fantasy, spirit, abiku, reality

Human beings live in a world which does not have a singular structure on its own. It is divided. Though outwardly man appears to have single mind and body inwardly he is torn apart. In the olden times, religion ruled human beings putting them in the right path. So the human beings were happy and contented. When religion took the back seat, the life of human beings were filled with trials and tribulations. In the modern times, religion fades away making the human life dual, unhappy, inconsistent, traumatic. Literature echoes life and reality; from myths and spiritual scriptures to social and political works, reality has been predominant. Montaigne in his essay "*Of the Inconsistency of Our Actions*", proves the dual nature of human beings because of inconsistency with many insights from real life. Many writers in their literary arts have created characters with this, for example, Shakespeare's famous character Prince Hamlet expresses, "To be or not to be". This nature has led to many sufferings. The dual nature of human beings is simply because of the world, his environment, his general nature, emotions etc. his duality gets reflected in whatever he sees and divides its unit nature. Yeats's *The Second Coming* describes the postmodern world where the reality is turbulent and traumatic as,

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world...
The best lack all convictions, while the worst,
Are full of passionate intensity. (18, Contemporary Literary Theory)

Colonialism has been the prime reason for the dual structure. Britishers entered as traders into the nations like Africa, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Caribbean countries, India, Malaysia, Malta, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, South Pacific Island and Sri Lanka and gradually became the rulers suppressing the natives. Dichotomy refers to the dual and bipartite structure. In the olden times, a novel had a singular structure developing the story element in it. Industrialization and globalisation have earmarked many changes in the way of life and the writers mirrored it in their works. Writers felt the need for exploiting the psychological, sociological conditions of the people. Many ways of writing helped them to delineate the same. A novel in the recent times has undergone many developments and it emerged with different structures in it. At present writers across the world experiment with many ways of writing for driving home the condition of the state. For example, post colonial environment in various nations made the writers portray the anarchic situation in a different way. Using the bipartite structure they could excavate the reality. The dark reality led to dissidence which means disapproval and the writers resorted to fantasy to express themselves suppressing their anger.

In West Africa, colonialism tossed the people making the postcolonial, modern, postmodern period troublesome. Pen became mightier and many writings were brought out highlighting the reality of Nigeria. Myth, tradition, culture and politics, social condition were found in the writings. Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ben Okri, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and other novelists employed Nigerian myth to highlight on reality. Okri is the contemporary Nigerian, unique in his way of exploring the reality in a mythical way.

Okri is a Nigerian-Londoner born during the euphoria of Nigerian independence which had turned into a state of despondency. After Ben Okri's birth, the Okris moved to London and then when he came back to his land, Nigeria had turned into a land of bloodshed because of civil war. Ben Okri could witness his friends and neighbors dying one by one which had left an indelible mark in young Okri making him explore the human spirit in his works. "The psycho-drama of that bloody conflict witnessed by Okri the man-child left its indelible mark on his consciousness. Between the ages of seven and ten, the author lived the terror and absurdity of civil and military violence in Nigeria at close quarters"(51, O' Conoor). Getting scholarship from Nigerian government Okri went to London for his higher studies where Okri underwent many hardships and literally he was in the streets when the Nigerian government suddenly stopped the scholarship and Okri understood the sufferings of poor and needy. In his developing years he was there both in London and in his native land. Okri lived both in Igbo and Yoruba environs as his father Silver Okri was a Yoruba and his mother Grace Okri reared him in a cultural environment laying a strong foundation with the Igbo tales and myth. Okri's double identity, Igbo, Yoruba background, Nigerian precolonial past and postcolonial present, civil war, myth, magic and reality, tradition and cultural disintegration of the postmodern Nigeria ever pervaded the works and made it dichotomic. The topsy turvy land, intense civil war, political disturbances, regional and ethnic squirmishes made the writer angry polishing his writings with an imaginary world.

Okri's works like *Flowers and Shadows*, *The Landscapes Within* were purely autobiographical. He has written a collection of short stories titled *Incidents at the Shrine* and *Stars of the New Curfew*. His poems *The African Elegy* and *Mental Flight* sum up then native consciousness of the writer. His *The Famished Road* received Booker prize in the year in 1991. *The Famished Road*, *Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches* form the trilogy. From London, he sees the distant homeland and places his works there. Many critics have called *The Famished Road* as postmodern, postcolonial, fantasy, magic realist novel focusing on the reality. It camouflages the reality to a great extent which at the end questions reality. He way of handling fantasy surpasses and the novel emerges as a compendium meant for understanding the true picture of the Nigerland without making it a fairy tale in spite of its tendency of gliding from fact to fiction and viceversa.

Azaro the protagonist of the trilogy has a double identity like Okri. He populates both the ethereal land and the spirit world. He is an abiku. The term abiku is borrowed from Yoruba myth which means a child which is born to die. In the words of Maurice O' Connor an abiku is, "It refers to the phenomenon of a child who is caught up in an unending cycle of births, deaths and rebirths, the term being literally translated as 'one who is born, dies'"(69). Okri begins his novel by unearthing the myth behind the birth of a spirit child.

There was not one amongst us who looked forward to being born. We disliked the rigours of existence, the unfulfilled longings, the enshrined injustices of the world, the labyrinths of love, the ignorance of parents, the fact of dying, and the amazing indifference of thee Living in the midst of the simple beauties of the universe. (3, *The Famished Road*)

No spirit child is ready to be born in this world of trials and tribulations. Okri comments as, "We feared the heartlessness of human beings, all of whom are born blind, few of whom ever learn to see"(3). Being born in this terrestrial world Azaro feels the pains and pangs of his Mother and though he had entered into a pact with the spirit children that he would use the first opportunity to die and enter the spirit world and unite with his spirit companions, he was not ready to die in spite of the pressure laid on him by the spirits in the form of fire, an accident, kidnap etc. Azaro is being helped by the King of spirits to remain in the earth who takes many forms like cat, dog, midget to warn Azaro of the forthcoming danger. Azaro with his twin identity feels a lot of discomfort created by the sprits and by the natural environment putting a double fold pressure on Azaro, so he tries to retire and starts walking towards the thick overgrowths and also explores the busy market place, forest, bars, politics, skirmishes, regional clash, anarchic situations, political power play, ethnic differences, thugs, rich and poor, load-carriers, Madam Koto and Jeremiah. Okri doesn't try to glorify the spirit world or despise the earthly world. He creates awareness in the readers with his delineation.

Azaro describes the political situation when the Party of the Rich and friend of the poor and the Party of the Poor appear in their street for getting support from the people. The Party of the Rich in their van tried to convince the people with a lot of false promises. They promised to feed the children of the poor, bring good roads, bring electricity, build schools and hospitals and make everybody rich. They also distributed

milk to all the people to get their votes. People in the street came with containers and filled it with milk. The rotten milk caused pain and disease in the people. The Party of the Poor came in another van with thugs talking high about themselves and their leader. But the people were resentful and talked ill of them. The thugs started whipping the people around. The people were angry and they burnt the van. Okri tries to explore the double identity of the leaders and the party men. Azaro shifts himself to the ideal spirit world which is free of woes and sufferings, and it is a place of merriment and happiness.

Madam Koto is portrayed as a human and also as a colossal figure with unhuman powers. The bar she owns is there on the earth and it is also transported to a mythical land and the spirits come to the bar and refresh themselves with the palmwine. Madam Koto extends her helping hand when Azaro and his family is in trouble but she gradually develops her and her hand in the politics makes her rich. The two sides of people are picturised by Okri. Photographer Jeremiah tries to capture the reality, the true colour of politicians, thugs and their manhandling public, the poor sufferers etc. But his good nature brings more amount of sufferings.

Mum and Dad are portrayed as poor undergoing the pressure of poverty and their troubles are multiplied by the people in power who never show a sort of sympathy and helping hand. Their sufferings are added up by the spirit companions who always try to take Azaro away. The offerings, libations given by the herbalists make them spend away money by borrowing. The home-coming of Azaro was done in a way which puts them in debt. Unable to earn for their livelihood Azaro's father work with a minimum wages and his mother hawks the whole day and brings a meager amount. Mum and Dad are the symbols of poor people of Nigeria . They are tossed by the power play of politics, social condition.

Through the of the people and environment Okri relies on reality. The reality does more create awareness than projecting the real happenings and with the unreal expanded to the spirit world he does not confine himself to supernatural but he aims at penetrating, transgressing and transcending the both in his delineation which projects different images in words. His real wakes up the readers to the crude realities of life and at the same time his unreal enables a trip of the spirit world enabling the readers to experience the anarchic world of today and the disgusting, illegal situations prevailing in the postcolonial environment. The road is a symbol which shows movement from one level to another. "Despite the myth and magic, *The Famished Road* is not a fable set in a never, never world of fantastic trivia , but a grim socio-economic tale of poverty and politics of a neo-colonial state".(82, quoted from Garuba)

Achebe in his *Trouble with Nigeria* comments that the white masters of Nigeria are replaced with black rulers without any change in their attitude. So the independence never laid a positive road for the natives, but their troubles multiplied with the entry of new western culture, religion. O' Connor quotes Ayittey as,

True freedom never came to much of Africa after independence. Despite the rhetoric and vituperations against colonialism, very little changed in the years following independence. For many countries independence meant only a change in

the colour of the administrators from white to black. The new leaders began to act in the same manner as the colonialists. In fact in many places they were worse than the colonialists. (83, O'Connoor)

This postcolonial environment of Nigeria led to discontentment among the general public. This was further aggravated by the civil war which had taken away the lives of many people. The frequent political rallies worsened Nigeria. Okri had delineated this true picture in the pages of *The Famished Road* trilogy. People and Azaro's discontentment made him an antagonist. No writer can picturise Nigeria without violence. *The Famished Road* trilogy is a true account of real Nigeria with its anarchy, political disturbances etc. The writer hides his anger by taking us to a fantasy land. The tone of subversion is all pervading. . The spirit world, the supernatural world and the Nigerian world are synthesized hiding the dichotomy and dissidence in the writer which lie beneath and is subtly managed by the fantastic narrative.

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