

## CHAPTER I

### Okri: A Promising African Novelist

#### Okri's Life and His Works

The dramatic events that have taken place in South Africa during the past few years make it easy to forget that Africa is not a country but a continent. The literature of South Africa holds a similarly special place in the western mind, for example, the fictions of J. M. Coetzee, Andre Brink, and Nadine Gordimer, recently received the Nobel Prize for Literature. With the publication of *The Famished Road* (1991), Ben Okri has contributed for Africa what Gabriel Garcia Marquez did for South America and Salman Rushdie for the Indian subcontinent. Okri was born in Nigeria in 1959 and is currently living in England. He was unknown in the United States until the publication of his fourth book, *The Stars of the New Curfew* (1989). His much acclaimed novel *The Famished Road* won the Booker Prize for fiction in 1991.

Okri began writing poetry and news articles as a teenager but quickly switched to fiction, publishing two novels while still a student in England. His first short story collection *Incidents at a Shrine* (1986) is impressive both in the stories' spare and incisive language, and in their disciplined ironic development. Like most of his work, the stories deal with social malaise and Nigeria's violent political culture. Another collection, *The Stars of the New Curfew* (1989) brought Okri's first attention in the U.S. Two lengthy novels, *The Famished Road* (1991), winner of the Booker Prize, and its sequel *Songs of Enchantment* (1993), are florid, serpentine folktales conveying a vision of social and political dysfunction through the eyes of Azaro, a clairvoyant "spirit child."

The opening words of *The Famished Road*, "in the beginning there was a river" (Okri 3) trace the genesis of all life to riverine sources. It comes, then as no

surprise that throughout the novel, the semantic boundaries between the words *road* and *river* are consistently and intentionally blurred: monsoon rains turn the road into a river. Azaro, the protagonist, recalls his utopian or “aquamarine” (Okri 4) beginnings. He lives in a world where precise delineations between the physical and phenomenal only fleetingly exist. The way of Okri’s world has many important implications both for the readers’ understanding of the nature of human life on earth, and for traditional issues of character development, plot construction and action in the novel.

Ben Okri’s 1991 novel *The Famished Road* opens with an announcement of the birth of an abiku, a spirit-child. This abiku child, Azaro, becomes the narrator of the novel; he announces immediately that he is reluctant to remain in the world of the living because of the rigors of existence, the unfulfilled longings, the enshrined injustice of the world and the amazing indifference of the living in the midst of the simple “beauties of the universe”(3). Yet, he persists and the novel becomes the story of his persistence and accommodation – making a place for himself in the ghetto community of an unnamed tropical town while fighting off spirit forces that lure him back to the relative safety of the spirit world apart from human suffering.

In many ways, the child is the subject, not the author, of many events of the novel. Though he wills his return to his parents, he does not will the visions that in many cases disturb and frighten him. The child is irrevocably tied up in the events of the world. He is drawn as if he were a part of larger forces of which he is a subject and an observer. At the same time, the novel may be considered not Azaro’s, but Dad’s story by recording his arrival with the indignity of poverty and maturation as a member of community people.

#### Review of Literature

After the publication of the novel, *The Famished Road*, myriads of critics read

the book from different perspectives. Some of them lauded it as very artistic, and others criticized it severely for its escape from reality.

Africans' incurable religious pillars constructed the current knowledge of Africa and the Africans. However, the accuracy of the claim is questionable on a number of fronts. According to some critics it raises the issue of cultural determinism and indetermination. Taking this cue from the postmodern and post colonial criticism, critic Mabilia Justin Robert Kenzo opines:

Cultures are transmitted through processes that can be described in terms of interactivity, negotiability, indeterminacy, fragmentation and conflict. More importantly, humans are active participants in these processes. Based on this view of culture, the paper argues that the religious identity of Africans is a matter of constructed hybridity. Okri's *The Famished Road* further demonstrates that Africans are neither incurably religious nor incurably irreligious. Instead, they skillfully and creatively construct their identity borrowing insights from resources that are both endogeneous and exogeneous to Africa and their own tribal contexts. (244)

In *The Famished Road*, Okri opts for a strategy that is best described as hybridization. Although hybridity can mean many things, its most accepted use carries with it the idea of intellectual and political cross-fertilization. Hybridization of this kind is seen as an imperative of the postcolonial condition. To be more explicit, culture is man's creation. So, every man is the actor of his/her culture. However, no culture is pure. Exchange of culture occurs in each society. This kind of acculturation causes hybridization. Because of colonial activities, African culture is also hybridized. Okri's novel tries to point out this fact particularly in African religion.

Regarding the postcolonial issues in the novel, Bendra Cooper compares *The Famished Road* with *The Swimming – Pool Library*, both written in London, published within three years of each other and both incorporating fictional photographers. Cooper states:

Both Okri and Hollinghurst are writing within the context of the aftermath of Empire and consider the consequences of colonialism on their respective societies. Both novels share a timing device of hindsight and are set in a period earlier than they were written, both anticipating the catastrophes they know are in store. Okri's is set at the moment of Nigerian independence from Britain and in the shadow of the corruption, violence, bloodshed and civil war that will plague his country over the ensuing twenty five years. Hollinghurst is writing in the interregnum between the past of empire and the future of AIDS.

(65)

Both of these writers oppose the colonialism and the racism that accompanied it and both are privileged, educated inhabitants of London's circles of literati, artists and intellectuals. Writers and intellectuals from Africa are privileged world travelers, who have homes and families in Lagos or Accra, but visiting fellowships in New York or London, and are recipients of the most famous Western honors like Booker or Nobel prizes. According to Bendra Cooper:

Their writing is, like that of writers everywhere, a mongrel mixture of influences and inheritances, which they mould and which in turn manipulate and determine them. They use the landscapes and stories of where they were born, they borrow from other African places and people, from the cultures of India and Latin America, where they

identify with those who have also been colonized, albeit in different ways and at different times. (66)

Both of them express themselves in European languages and inherit European traditions. Out of this patchwork, they construct visions that are uniquely linked to their own lives, their privileged perch, their talents and idiosyncrasies.

The mode of writing that powerfully captures this situation is magical realism. It is associated with the writers of Latin America but not restricted to them. It is a mode in which some extraordinary West African writings have emerged. “Magical realism thrives on transition, on the process of change, borders and ambiguity” (Cooper 67). Such zones occur where burgeoning Western industrial development mingles with older ways of life in postcolonial societies, and where there is the blending of cultures as creolized communities are created, Cooper opines. The heart of the emergence of magical realism in the Third World is the fact that these countries encountered Western money, technology and education haphazardly and unevenly. Cities grew wildly and families were often divided between members who were Western-educated and those who remained inserted in more rural economies and ways of seeing the world. This social patchwork, dizzying in its cacophony of design, is the cloth from which the fictional magical realist carpet is cut, mapping not the limitless vistas of fantasy, but rather the new historical realities of those patchwork societies. Ben Okri has used such features in his novel *The Famished Road*. He has a sense of the interpenetration of cultures. The West African critic and theorist Ato Quayson puts it:

Brought to London in 1961 at the age of three to join his lawyer father, he started school in one of the mixed race areas of London. He was sent back to Nigeria in 1966 where he continued his education [...]. He

spent [...] his adolescence in Lagos, a city which, like most capitals, is a place of continuing splintering and re-aggregation of identities. (101)

Okri returned to London where he has lived since the early 1980s and attempts to negotiate “a sense of identity in a metropolitan diasporic environment” (Quyson 101).

*The Famished Road* compares favorably with Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* that won the same prestigious award exactly one decade before. Rushdie’s novel put contemporary Indian writing on the postmodern literary map. *The Famished Road* has also been compared with *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) by another postcolonial magic realist, Gabriel García Márquez of Colombia. Robert A. Morace opines:

*The Famished Road* is reminiscent of Rushdie’s novel and its precursor, Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. It is not, however, merely imitative; part of its achievement is the way it combines and transcends the magic realism of these two novels and the very different postcolonial style and sensibility of Achebe, Nigeria’s best-known novelist. Narrated by Azaro, an abuki (spirit child), the novel deftly weaves together two worlds (the spirit and the human), two kinds of time (the eternal and the temporal), and two historical periods (the primitive powerful from politically powerless). (22)

Okri, a different but equally skillful magic realist, proves a bit more allegorical but no less expansive. *The Famished Road* is not merely a Nigerian version of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, however; it is a novel that resembles many but is ultimately unlike any other, one in which two postcolonial styles and sensibilities meet the narrative lushness of García Márquez and the rhythmical simplicity of Chinua Achebe. *The Famished Road* does not so much lack these specifics as avoid them. As in *Midnight’s*

*Children, One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and Jerzy Kosinski's *The Painted Bird* (1965), the novel possesses a dreamlike vagueness in which the primitive and the modern are startlingly juxtaposed, in which the reader's sense of time and place blurs, and in which transformations become the norm (rivers become roads, roads become devouring mouths). A car, a few vans, several trucks, the distribution of powdered milk, the electrification of the local bar-turned-brothel, and the single passing mention of "Independence" (Nigeria's independence from Britain in 1960) are about the only signs that the action takes place in modern times. What is clearly a village setting near the beginning of the novel is just as clearly part of a city, but exactly how this transformation occurs, and when, is never made clear. The way, on the other hand, is clear, for although *The Famished Road* is not at all sociological in approach, it is, at least in part, deeply political.

The novel combines political realities and mythical beliefs in a seamless stunning whole. The greatness, beauty and power of Okri's novel are born of the author's sympathetic understanding of the hardships and difficulties that his characters must face. Perhaps chief among them is, as Azaro's father learns in a dream from his father, the Priest of Roads, that it is easier to die than to love.

Swiss critic Renato Berger enthusiastically declares in *Research in African Literatures*:

The inherent schizophrenia of abiku consciousness is the solution to all world problems. Since all evils, racism, colonialism, capitalism, and oppression of all kinds spring from ontological polarization (Europe vs. Africa, Jew vs. Arab), and since the abiku is precisely one who inhabits and sees through both sides of the polarization, abiku

consciousness holds the promise of social liberation and world harmony. (101-2)

Though Okri might not fully agree with Berger's formulation, there is clearly a sense in which Berger has been shaped by the same trajectories of Western modernity shaping Okri's representation of abiku. *The Famished Road* begins to read like an epic poem that happens to touch down just this side of prose. Okri is incapable of writing philosophical sentences in his novel. Gayle Pemberton states that it has "become a modern classic. It combines brilliant story telling with unforgettable character like Azaro, a spirit child, who, in Nigeria's Yoruba tradition, exists between life and death" (110). At the heart of this hypnotic novel are the mysteries of love and human survival. It is more difficult to live than to die. We can see the instance of African simmering atheism. It has crossed the boundaries of theism. Another critic V. Y. Mudimbe states:

As a postcolonial novel, *The Famished Road* uses such strategies as pastiche, bricolage, mimicry, and hybridity to reclaim marginality. It represents religion as a construct. Human actors take various elements they find from a variety of sources, some endogenous and others exogenous to Africa in order to construct their own religious identity. (121)

The novel shows that human agency is bounded. Ben Okri constructs a religious universe. However, he does so as a historically located actor, and not under conditions of his own choice.

Domique Zahan says, "*The Famished Road* would be seen as giving voice to many Africans who are practical atheists, that is people for whom the god serve no practical purpose in life" (235). Similarly, Sarah Fulford opines that the book



“explores the aesthetic representation of dominant politics in Nigeria in Okri's novel and his aesthetic development as a writer. It also offers passing references of Okri's other novels, essays and poetry” (236).

### Objectives

The aim of this thesis is to analyze the narrative style adopted by Ben Okri in his novel *The Famished Road*. A bizarre kind of narrative is used in the novel which is full of spiritual essence. To underpin the title “A Study of Narrative in Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*,” different aspects of Narratology and New Age Spirituality (Higher Realities) will be discussed. Content is directly interconnected with its form. Co-relation of content and form of the text triggers the meaning. *The Famished Road* is also such a text in which the main idea is closed by its narrative style.

Africa is a postcolonial country. Different kinds of cultures and religions have merged there. This religious syncretism creates intertextuality in the narratives of writers. However, the kernel of any religion is spirituality. The dissertation (especially the third chapter) will try to point out this fact and scrutinize the world of the spirit child, Azaro, in the world of human beings. Finally, the last chapter will be the conclusion of the thesis.

## CHAPTER II

## An Overview on Narrative Techniques

## Narration/Narrative

“Narration” is a rather slippery term in contemporary narrative theory, and is given different weight by different theorists. Some theorists have used it as a synonym for narrative, while others use it as the act or process whereby a narrative is produced. For Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, narration is both “the *communication* process in which the narrative as message is transmitted and the *verbal* nature of the medium used to transmit the message” (2). According to her, the communication process involved in narration is a double one, both contained in the text as well as involving the text. For Michael J. Toolan, “Narration is the individual or ‘position’ we judge to be the immediate source and authority for whether words are used in the telling” (76).

Narratology is the theory of narratives, narrative texts, images, spectacles, events, cultural artifacts that tell a story. Such a theory helps us to understand, analyze and evaluate narratives. Narrative is a term which is much used but about which there is limited consensus when it comes to defining its meaning. Gerald Prince defines this term as “the recounting of one or more real or fictitious events” but “as the product and process, object and act, structure and structuration”( 58). For Onega and Landa, narrative can be defined in a wider, Aristotelian sense as “a work with a plot” or in a narrower sense as “a work with a narrator” (1). They compare the difference between their wider and narrower senses to the difference between telling and showing and further define the term in a way that impinges on certain definitions of plot:

A narrative is the semiotic representation of a series of events meaningfully connected in a temporal and causal way. Films, plays, comic strips, novels, newsreels, diaries, chronicles and treatises of geological history are all narratives in this wider sense. (3)

Seymour Chatman claims that there is no particular reason why to narrate should mean only to tell, and he suggests that “we decide to define Narrative as the composite of story and discourse (on the basis of its unique double chronology), then *logically*, at least, narratives can be said to be actualizable on the stage or in other iconic media” (114). By double chronology, Chatman means that a narrative contains two time-scales: that of the story and that of the narrating (telling, enacting, displaying) of that story.

Narratives are everywhere, performing countless different functions in human interaction. In most theories of narratives, content (whatness) and form (howness) are clearly identified. The first consists of the basic events or actions in the chronological order in which they are supposed to have happened together with the circumstance in which the actions are performed. This level is referred to as story of fabula narrative. The second level comprises the techniques and devices used for telling the story to the reader. Moreover, the present research analyzes how the narrative technique affects the interpretation or meaning as well. This means, technique is the decisive factor for determining the meaning of the story as Peter Barry says, “How we see is what we see” (61).

#### Construction of Contents

When a character appears for the first time, we do not yet know very much about it. The qualities implied in that first presentation are not all grasped by the reader. In the course of narrative, the relevant characteristics are repeated so often in a

different form; however, they emerge more and more clearly. Repetition is thus an important principle of the construction of the image of a character.

In addition to repetition, the piling up of data also fulfils a function in the construction of an image. The accumulation of characteristics of a character causes odd facts to coalesce, complement each other, and then form a whole image of that character. Mieke Bal exemplifies in his book *Narratology*: “In *The Evenings* we notice not only Frit’s preoccupation with baldness, but his obsession with other signs of decay as well, autumn, illness, old age, death, time” (125). These facts together convey a clear picture of the character in the areas where unconnected data might have been striking but would not have been particularly meaningful.

Similarly, relations with others also help to build the image of a character. The character’s relation to itself in an earlier phase also belongs to this category. These relations tend to be processed into similarities and contrasts. A semantic model to describe these categories is only a reflection of cultural cognitive habits, and one will be presented, along with a skeptical note in the next subsection.

In addition, characters may change. The changes or transformations which a character undergoes sometimes alter the entire configuration of character as it looked during the analysis of mutual relations. According to Bal, “Once a character’s most important characteristics have been selected, it is easier to trace transformations and to describe them clearly” (125). He concludes:

Repetition, accumulation, relations to other characters, and transformations are four different principles which work together to construct the image of a character. Their effect can only be described,

however, when the outline of the character has been roughly filled in.

This is a constant element in narratological analysis: a dialectic

back-and-forth between speculation and verification. (125)

The point is not that meaning can be pinpointed in any simple way, but it is only once we know how a character is constructed that the reader's share and responsibility can be clearly assessed.

### Intertextuality

Intertextuality is the shaping of texts' meanings by other texts. It can refer to an author's borrowing and transformation of a prior text or to a reader's reference of one text in reading another. The term intertextuality has, itself, been borrowed and transformed many times since it was coined by [poststructuralist Julia Kristeva](#) in 1966. As critic [William Irwin](#) says, "the term has come to have almost as many meanings as users, from those faithful to Kristeva's original vision to those who simply use it as a stylish way of talking about [allusion](#) and [influence](#)" (228).

Kristeva's coinage of "intertextuality" represents an attempt to synthesize [Ferdinand de Saussure's structuralist semiotics](#)—his study of how [signs](#) derive their meaning within the structure of a text—with Bakhtin's [dialogism](#)—his examination of the multiple meanings, or "[heteroglossia](#)," in each text and word (Irwin 228). For Kristeva, "the notion of intertextuality replaces the notion of [intersubjectivity](#)" (69) when we realize that meaning is not transferred directly from writer to reader, but instead is mediated through, or filtered by, "codes" imparted to the writer and reader by other texts. For example, when we read [Joyce's Ulysses](#), we decode it as a [modernist](#) literary experiment, or as a response to the epic tradition, or as part of some other convention, or as part of all of these conventions at once.

Explicitly, intertextuality means the text within which other texts reside or echo their presence. What intertextuality refers to is the fact that all texts (films, plays, novels, anecdotes, or whatever) are made out of other texts. Just as a language pre-exists any narrative written in that language, so, all the features of narrative come out of a pre-existing cultural web of expressive forms. Seen in this way, narratives have no borders but are part of an immense unfolding tapestry. To interpret intertextuality is to bring out this complex embeddedness of a narrative's meanings in the culture from which it comes. In some usages the term transtextuality is reserved for more overt relations between specific texts, or between two particular texts, while intertextuality is reserved to indicate a more diffuse penetration of the individual text by memories, echoes, transformations, of other texts. H. Porter Abbot, in his book *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, states about the subversive nature of narrative in a text in this way:

Narratives [...] draw on pre-existing genres and that they imitate or allude to pre-existing genres and that they *imitate* or *allude* to pre-existing narratives. But the terms imitation and allusion shift the emphasis from an inescapable intertextual web that generates the narrative and produces its effects to an individually distinct narrative, shaped by an author through a process of skillful selection. Where intertextuality tends to minimize the author's role and distinctive wholeness of the work, allusion and imitation tend to the reverse: featuring the author's control and the singular wholeness of the work.

(94-95)

Intertextuality in any narrative has thus to be seen in association with the whole complex issue of the reader's varied expectations as formed by ideological and generic factors. It must also be seen not as something which is just handed to the reader for granted, as it is congealed into the text, but as something which to at least a certain extent the reader can control and change.

#### Religious Syncretism in Text

Religious syncretism exhibits the blending of two or more religious belief systems into a new one, or the incorporation into a religious tradition of beliefs from unrelated traditions. This can occur for many reasons, and the latter scenario happens quite commonly in areas where multiple religious traditions exist in proximity and function actively in the culture, or when a culture is conquered, and the conquerors bring their religious beliefs with them, but do not succeed in entirely eradicating the old beliefs or, especially the practices. This syncretism definitely creates intertextuality in narrative works. In *Dictionary of Philosophy* Peter A. Angeles opines:

Religions may have syncretic elements to their beliefs or history, but adherents of so-labeled systems often frown on applying the label, especially adherents who belong to "revealed" religious systems, such as the [Abrahamic religions](#), or any system that exhibits an [exclusivist](#) approach. (342)

Such adherents sometimes see syncretism as a betrayal of their pure truth. By this reasoning, adding an incompatible belief corrupts the original religion, rendering it no longer true. Indeed, critics of a specific syncretistic trend may sometimes use the word "syncretism" as a disparaging epithet, as a charge implying that those who seek to incorporate a new view, belief or practice into a religious system actually distort

the original faith. Non-exclusivist systems of belief, on the other hand, may feel quite free to incorporate other traditions into their own.

Recently-developed religious systems that exhibit marked syncretism include the [New World](#) religions [Candomble](#), [Vodou](#), and [Santeria](#), which analogize various Yoruba and other [African](#) gods to the [Roman Catholic saints](#). However, the [Catholic Church](#) condemns such syncretism. Some sects of [Candomble](#) have also incorporated [Native American](#) gods, and [Umbanda](#) combined African deities with [Kardecist spiritualism](#).

#### New Age Spirituality in Narration

The New Age (also known as the New Age Movement, New Age spirituality, and Cosmic Humanism) is a decentralized [Western social](#) and [spiritual movement](#) that seeks "[Universal Truth](#)" and the attainment of the highest individual [human potential](#). It combines aspects of [cosmology](#), [astrology](#), [esotericism](#), [alternative medicine](#), [music](#), [collectivism](#), [sustainability](#), and [nature](#). New Age spirituality is characterized by an individual approach to [spiritual practices](#) and philosophies, while rejecting religious [doctrine](#) and [dogma](#). It combines different spiritual aspects and different religions.

The modern New Age Movement emerged as a distinct lifestyle from the late 1960s through the early 1970s although elements can be traced back to the 19th and early 20th centuries. New Age practices are diverse though they continue to draw eclectically on alternative religious traditions from the mystical traditions of Eastern religions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism) to the healing practices, forms of worship and ways of knowing characteristic of more occult spiritualities: shamanism, astrology, Gaia-worship, neo-Hermeticism and ancient-Egyptianism, and so on.

Spiritualism reveals that worldly objects have never accompanied anybody after death, nor will they ever do so. Spirituality is one's character or quality that



makes one transcend the barriers of worldliness, caste, creed and sensuality, and realize one's connection with the Truth. In *The Path*, Radha Soami Satsang Beas writes:

The Lord who created the world is neither white nor black, nor has he any caste or creed. Our soul is of the essence of the Lord; it has come out of the Lord and longs to merge back into him. How can it have any caste, creed or color? If you study the teachings of any Master, you will find that they all teach us to rise above differences of caste, creed and country. They all create in us love for the Lord. When the sun has no caste or creed, how can its rays have any? When the ocean has no caste or creed, how can its waves have any? When fire has no caste or creed, how can its flames have any? (21)

God created man; he did not create any sects or creeds. It is we who divide ourselves into the narrow circles of caste, religion and country, and thus sow the seeds of strife, discord and dissension.

It is our attachment, our ego, which keeps us tied to the wheel of recurring births and deaths. This same truth is referred to by Christ in *Study Bible* (Revised version of *The Holy Bible* by Kenneth L. Baker), when he says: “And again I say unto you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God” (19:24). It is not possible for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, nor can the rich who gives all his attention to the pleasures and possessions of this world ever meet the Lord.

Analysis of spiritual qualities in science faces problems - such as the impression of spiritual concepts, the subjectivity of spiritual experience, and the

amount of work required to translate and map observable components of spiritual system into empirical evidence. Science takes empirical and repeatable observation of the natural world as its basis for explanation. It generally regards ideas that rely on supernatural forces for an explanation as beyond ideas which present themselves as scientific. But the ideas which rely on a supernatural force for an explanation as religious rather than scientific are labeled as pseudo-science. In this context, scientists may oppose spirituality, at least in the scientific sphere.

The New Age movement is still largely confined to Western liberal democracies, and still dominated by middle and upper-middle class Caucasian urbanities seeking release from inner and outer turmoil. It is also found in African-American and other diasporic communities disenchanted with Western religions and hoping to reconnect with their spiritual ancestry. New Age publications and gatherings have also reached some non-Western countries including Nigeria, where alternative spiritual organizations and self-help publications are beginning to proliferate. It is called the “New Age” movement because many New Agers believe we are on the verge of new era in the spiritual development of humanity- the so-called “Age of Aquarius”-in which each person’s inner potential for divine love and wisdom will be fully realized thereby bringing about a state of global peace and justice.

Though New Age spiritual practices are various and widely dispersed, it is generally agreed that they share common set of underlying beliefs and commitments. William Bloom, one of the foremost prophets and observers of the New Age movement in the United Kingdom, sketches this distinctive spiritual belief-set as follows:

All life - all existence - is the manifestation of Spirit, of the  
Unknowable, of that supreme consciousness known by many different

names in many different cultures. The purpose and dynamic of all existence is to bring Love, Wisdom, Enlightenment [...] into full manifestation. All religions are the expression of this same inner reality. All life, as we perceive it with the five human senses or with scientific instruments, is only the outer veil of an invisible, inner and causal reality. Similarly, human beings are twofold creatures-with: (i) an outer temporary personality; and (ii) multi-dimensional inner being (soul or higher self). The outer personality is limited and tends towards love. The purpose of the incarnation of the inner being is to bring the vibrations of the outer personality into a resonance of love. All souls in incarnation are free to choose their own spiritual path. Our spiritual teachers are those whose souls are liberated from the need to incarnate and who express unconditional love, wisdom and enlightenment. Some of these great beings are well-known and have inspired the world religions. Some are unknown and work invisibly. All life, in all its different forms and states, is interconnected energy- and this included our deeds, feelings and thoughts. We, therefore, work with Spirit and these energies in co-creating our reality. Although held in the dynamic of cosmic love, we are jointly responsible for the state of our selves, of our environment and of all life. During this period of time, the evolution of the planet and humanity has reached a point when we are undergoing a fundamental spiritual change in our individual and mass consciousness. This is why we talk of New Age. This new consciousness is the result of the increasingly successful incarnation of

what some people call the energies of cosmic love. (qtd. in Heelas 225-26)

According to Bloom, then, New Age thinking combines the idea of loving monism (all things are one and therefore interconnected; the One is an energy field of cosmic love), with the ideas of co-creative idealism (we collectively shape reality through the mind-over-matter power of consciousness) and teleological millenarianism (we have inexorably moved toward and are now on the verge of a new age of worldwide peace). These characteristics are fairly self-explanatory, but two further characteristics that Bloom gestures toward “self-actualization and detraditionalizing perennialism” (226) deserve elaboration.

When Bloom talks about bringing the outer personality into a resonance with love he is, according to Paul Heelas, talking about “Self-actualization” (19). In general, New Agers believe that each person is, deep down inside, a Higher Self (Bloom’s “inner being”). This Self is part of—some would say identical to—“God,” “The Goddess,” “The Great Spirit,” etc. It is “the source of [all] authentic vitality, creativity, love, tranquility, wisdom, power” (Heelas 19). The Self is immortal, has extraordinary powers, is infinitely good, and is connected with all things.

The problem, according to New Agers, is that this “Self” is hidden behind “a lower self” or “mind” or “ego.” This ego side of humans is the part constructed by society, and it is the sum total of all the inauthentic directives (for instance, to follow the rules) and ways of knowing (for example, rationalism, empiricism) that society—through parenting, education, work, or institutionalized religion—has foisted upon us and inscribed over our Higher Selves. We are therefore alienated from who we truly are, and it is this alienation that ultimately accounts for everything that is wrong with individual humans (for instance, anxiety, criminal justice, ecological devastation).

The New Age solution to the world's ills is, therefore, to be found neither in "tinkering with what we are by virtue of socialization" or "conventional attempts at social engineering" (Heelas 19). The solution is, rather, to be found in each person's individual "self-transformation," the complete "actualization" or "realization" or "expression" of the divine Self hidden beneath the socialized ego. That is, "by learning to control the lower self or ego or by eliminating it altogether, the Higher Self will be actualized and the world will finally be perfected" (Heelas 20). In short, New Age spirituality is a movement in which salvation and perfection are achieved not by doing good works or obeying divine authority or having faith in a higher power, but by looking inward to the Self and finding ways to free it from the anxieties and hang-ups of the ego. For New Agers, global justice, ecological harmony, and individual self-actualization go hand in hand.

The second point, closely related to this core idea of Self-spirituality, is what Heelas calls the New Age's detraditionalizing perennialism. This is the view that all the world's religions, deep down, carry the same message: we are all "gods and goddesses in exile" whose purpose on earth is, in Bloom's words, to "incarnate [...] the energies of cosmic love" (19). Consequently, there are an endless number of valid spiritual "Paths" or "Ways"-one for each individual- and all lead to the same destination. In this sense, the New Age message is perennial, springing up again and again, and adherents claim-in all forms of spiritual practice from Greek Orthodox Christianity to Yoruba Sango-worship. The problem with traditional religions, however, is that they have been institutionalized. Their authentic spiritual teachings and techniques have been distorted by layers of ceremony, politics, bureaucracy, dogmas, and rules that lead people away from spiritual authenticity. To find the perennial truth within an institutionalized spiritual practice, one must detraditionalize

it rather than following its rules and traditions. One must use one's inner voice to find genuine spiritual insights in it that might lead one further on one's way to enlightenment. As perennialism and detraditionalization are core principles of New Age belief and practice, it is common for many New Agers to mix and match the world's spiritual traditions in order to find their own individually-tailored spiritual paths free from the trappings and distortions of history and the ego.

Though commentators on the New Age generally agree about its central characteristics, they differ on the question of New Age politics. Is the New Age anti-Christian or pro-Christian? Does it embody the values of Western global capitalism (for example, individualism, consumerism and neo-imperialism) or the values of international tolerance, multiculturalism and cultural egalitarianism? Is it postmodern or modern? It is argued that the eclecticism and spiritual relativism of the New Age are clearly postmodern: spirituality is treated as surface rather than depth, something constructed and malleable rather than preordained and fixed, and the emphasis is on randomized consumer choice rather than systemized action guided by a higher all-encompassing vision, aesthetic, moral, or otherwise. As Heelas views, "the New Age movement is the spiritual logic of late capitalism or as embodying the anti-totalitarian and anti-systemizing spirit of radical democrats or libertarian socialist" (21), will thus depend upon one's view of politics of the postmodern.

There is a problem with thinking of New Ageism as postmodern, however, if only because other central characteristics of New Age belief and practice are not reconcilable with most serious accounts of postmodernity. It is generally agreed that the postmodern implies a rejection of ultimate meaning because it lies beyond the vagaries and in-built biases of history and language. Postmodern idea might serve as the solid rock upon which truth and morality, philosophical beliefs and social goals

could be constructed and justified. Such a rejection is compatible, at least theoretically, with New Age eclecticism and spiritual relativism. But how can it be reconciled with the New Age's uncritical jubilant certainty in human beings' divine "inner potential"-a transcendental signifies par excellence? New Agers centrally insist that here is a spiritual world outside of time and change that has a very particular character to which human beings have a very particular relationship and which justifies only certain spiritual goals and spiritual practices. Indeed, what might seem like *laissez-faire*, noncommittal, relativistic and postmodern dallying with a heterogeneous mix of religious ideas from widely dispersed cultures may in fact reflect New Agers' very un-postmodern faith in a transcendental signified that underlies all spiritual traditions, and "serves as the anchor for the pursuit of some social goals and not others" (Heelas 24).

It is, precisely, the view of some scholars, who argue that the New Age is a manifestation of Western modernity. Preeminent among these is the political philosopher Charles Taylor. For Taylor, "the modern identity, the self characteristic of the modern West" (115) is the person who feels instinctively committed to a diversity of very specific goods: to the value of ordinary life. In addition, the pursuit of individual self-fulfillment and self-expression, of saying what we really feel and being who we really are rather than saying and being what tradition, society, or even reason tell us to say and be. Taylor shows that this self is an invention which is articulated and defined slowly over time through innumerable historically contingent intellectual debates, social upheavals, and cultural movements unique to the West. For instance, the value we now place on rational objectivity and self-reflexive introspection was bequeathed to us from Plato via Augustine and Descartes, who in turn shaped the language and goals of modern science, sociology, psychology, and the like.

According to Taylor, the New Age or “human potential movement is the contemporary inheritor of Romantic expressivism and the values - individual self-fulfillment and self-expression” (368). Expressivism contributed to Western modernity looking inside oneself for truth and guidance while at the same time reconnecting with other selves and the natural world. As such, New Ageism is profoundly modern rather than postmodern. Its rebellion against tradition and dogma, and rejection of the search for objective certainty resonate with certain features of cultural postmodernism disregarding its laid-back religious pluralism and eclecticism. They are solidly rooted in modernity, issuing from a commitment to the life-goods of self-fulfillment and the search for authenticity that peculiarly and centrally characterize the modern identity.

For this reason, the New Age has come under criticism for some of the very same reasons that Western modernity has come under criticism. It reflects and promotes what Robert N. Bellah has called “the culture of narcissism, where self-centred consumerism is celebrated and sanctified as a path toward enlightenment or authentic being” (335). The vast majority of those who attend New Age personal transformation courses, training seminars, healing retreats, and shamanic workshops are well-to-do urban professionals and corporate managers. Many of them see personal transformation and self-actualization as giving them a competitive advantage in their work. Moreover, there is a significant similarity between the New Age’s rejection of institutionalized social structures and the political right’s rejection of government interference in the lives of lawful citizens.

New Agers and free market pundits alike believe that human society will flourish when the stage and its sclerotic institutions, regulations, and traditions have



withered away. In short, the New Age movement believes in social transformation that is affected only through narcissistic spiritual self-pampering. It reflects and contributes to the capitalist and individualist features of modernity that are widely held to perpetuate social and political inequality and oppression. This is one important ideological contradiction of New Age spirituality because New Agers, as Heelas points out, “remain largely unconscious of the way in which their activities contribute to maintaining capitalism’s sociopolitical injustices” (201). A second criticism leveled at the New Age is that it is neo-imperialistic.

There are those who object to the way in which New Agers treat the fruits of the past, Zen or Native American Indian teachings—for example-[...] being trivialized and commercialized. New Agers are seen as engaging in cultural imperialism or theft, raiding long-standing spiritual teachings and practices [...]. (202)

In other words, the perennialists and detraditionalizing facets of New Age eclecticism work to commodify the spiritualities of other cultures. They are erasing the rich histories and complex present circumstances in which those spiritualities are embedded and, thereby, reducing them to something more amenable to the Western consumer. It is surely no accident that the New Age first gained popularity in Western culture at the end of the nineteenth century, largely as a result of the influx of new spiritual ideas from French, German, and British imperial activities overseas. The appropriation of these exotic ideas for Westerner’s private spiritual pursuits is of a piece with what Said has called orientalism, westerner’s practice of talking about other cultures. All spiritual traditions offer the same message of cosmic love and spiritual self-actualization. Any religious practices and structures which contravene or

break this message are inauthentic or invalid. The New Age is not only purveying central values of Western modernity in the guise of innocuous ecumenicity and universalist internationalism, but is also working to accommodate, uncritically, the surge of capitalist globalization. This contribution to the negative side of globalizations and neo-imperialism contradicts the New Age dictum that social utopia is achievable only through a perennialist, detraditionalizing spiritual practice. Again, this contradiction is ideological insofar as it is generally unacknowledged by New Agers themselves.

Thus, New Age Spirituality is all about getting your power back. Not that you ever lost it. Sometimes you gave your power away, misplaced it, or forgot you had power in the first place. New Age Spirituality asks that each person takes responsibility for everything that happens in life because everything in life is connected. We must learn to love ourselves; for out of love for one's self comes love for others. When we confront our feelings of hatred and anger, and understand the causes, we can change the feelings, or even let them go. To use a New Age term, we are raising our consciousness about our unconscious perceptions of who we are, a child of God. Peace for the world begins with peace and balance within ourselves.

One of the New Agers is Ben Okri. Not only do his interviews, essays and verse clearly promote the core principles of New Age spirituality, but the language he uses to promote his views on politics and poetics is in the very idiom of the New Age. It is therefore not surprising to find these Aquarian principles reflected in his fiction, including *The Famished Road* and its representation of abiku heaven. To see this is to see the spirituality shaping Okri's portrayal of abiku is not postmodern-postcolonial,

but quintessentially modern- and, therefore, at odds with the postmodern-postcolonial label with which he has come to be mainly associated.

Sociocosmic millenarianism, co-creative idealism, loving monism, self-actualization, and detraditionalizing perennialism are at the heart of Okri's nonfiction. Perhaps, Okri's most succinct statement of his New Age spiritual commitments is the following extract from a 1994 radio interview, in which he also explicitly describes the goal of his fiction.

It's a new wind that is spreading across the world [...]. It's a new yearning and a new discovery that is slowly occupying the old tyranny of the mean description of reality. We are now becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the linear, scientific, imprisoned, tight, mean-spirited, and unsatisfactory description of reality and human beings. We want more because we sense there is more in us. We need ritual, initiation, transcendence of consciousness. [...] It's time that we started healing the human spirit by giving back to it its full, rich, hidden dimensions. And that is all that I am trying to do in my fiction-to restore the kingdom [...]. (qtd. in Ogunsanwo 40)

What Okri calls the linear, scientific and mean-spirited description of human beings is the description offered by those who prioritize disengaged, instrumental reason, and those creatures of modernity who disenchant the world in an attempt to understand and explain its workings in purely mechanical and physical terms. What he calls the kingdom, the new wind, and the transcendence of consciousness are our inner depths, the hidden dimensions of the human spirit, the semi-divine sides of our nature that we need to actualize and express and reconnect with in order to be truly free. This is New Ageism par excellence, and belongs squarely within the Romantic as well as

expressivist tradition of modernity. Okri's view of his artistic project - to restore the kingdom - is similarly both New Age and Romantic.

## CHAPTER III

Spiritual Narrative in *The Famished Road*

## Azaro: Abiku Child in the Human World

Although the main narrative of the novel is primarily a dramatization of the growth experiences, emotions and motivations of Azaro, a young, male, *abiku* (spirit) child who is endowed with youthful powers of observation, it is also the story of modern Nigeria's growth pains as it makes the transition from colonialism to an Africanized democracy full of violence and corruption. Intertwined with the nation's political upheaval is Azaro's own recognition of the cynical reality of the oppressive political situation that typifies the everyday life of the citizenry: the failed political promises, the grinding poverty of the rank and file, and the relentless thuggery against the powerless.

Through his powers of observation, Azaro, the protagonist and narrator himself, presents a comprehensible and credible world of gods, spirits, ancestors and humans simultaneously. Through his mediating perception, the natural and spirit worlds are inextricably linked without boundaries. *Abiku* child that he is, Azaro straddles both worlds, "between the spirit world and Living" (5) sometimes simultaneously journeying through them, both spatially and temporally. For all the seeming freedom that straddling both worlds entails, however, Azaro constantly is trapped by his extraordinary metaphysical consciousness. As an *abiku* child—one who is born to die and return again and again—he is faced with the difficult choice of answering the call of his spirit companions to return to the spirit world where he will be bathed in the ecstasy of an everlasting love, or instead remaining and fulfilling his filial responsibility to make his parents happy.

His compulsive wanderlust plunges him deeper and deeper into different physical worlds and spirit realms where his consciousness is shaped by powerful spirit companions and many human characters. His constant wanderings into the forest make him appear mischievous, and the constant other voices of his kindred spirits luring him back to the bliss of the *abiku* realm make him appear a renegade. After several close calls and numerous propitiatory rituals, and elaborate “homecoming” celebrations, he relents choosing to extricate himself from the metaphysical force of the *abiku* spirit realm: “I did everything I could to drive the spirit out of me. I kicked and thrashed and screamed” (20).

Centered on the journeying motif, the novel tells a story of the triumph of will. Through sheer willpower, the key players survive the grave dangers and uncertainties of their growth journeys, the grinding poverty of their impoverished physical world and oppressive political corruption as well as the abuse of power.

*Abiku*, a Yoruba term for a child believed to have been born several times through a birth-death cycle, connotes a spirit-child one endowed with metaphysical or extraordinary consciousness that defies conventions. The *abiku*'s apprehension of the world encompasses several levels of reality and consciousness that are incomprehensible to ordinary people. In many respects, the *abiku*'s metaphysical consciousness is considered a mixed blessing: its superhuman insights are the very gifts that make such a spirit-child a monster to its parents.

Shaped by a non-Western mythology, Azaro's world reflects an African ontology, one inhabited by people who still believe in mysteries and for whom personal relationships with spirits and ancestors are a daily reality because there is no differentiation between the worlds of the living and of the dead. The dead, considered “the living dead” (550), are not really dead, and ancestors feature prominently in the

community's daily life. Consequently, as various levels of reality merge and dissolve in dreams, Azaro often finds himself oscillating between two worlds, one world providing him glimpses of others—the terrestrial and the spiritual, the factual and the mythical, the ordinary and the extraordinary. All forms are necessarily mutable in these multiple worlds as new spaces are created by ever changing constellations of energies and alignments.

As a social commentary that reads like apocalyptic prediction, the novel captures a seemingly disordered world of bizarre political and social upheaval. Because “all things exchange their identities and realities” (236) in the multiple worlds, waves of transformation must necessarily take place. This explains the transformation of Azaro's father from load carrier to boxer extraordinaire to self-schooled, aspiring politician, social reformer, and visionary leader of the poor and downtrodden. Gripped by a new consciousness that was boxed into his brain during several death-defying matches with spirit opponents, Azaro's father comprehends the *abiku* nature of the country. He is initiated into a deeper way of seeing the world as he enters the world of myth, half-consciously proclaiming, “KEEP THE ROAD OPEN” (484).

The road metaphor intertwines with that of the *abiku*. Traveling on the “road [which] was once a river” (1) parallels the coming and going, the birth and death cycle, of the *abiku* child, as well as the making and remaking of history. Even the structure of the novel (divisions into sections, books and chapters) reflects the central theme of recurrence. Although the theme of human suffering and pain is pervasive, the novel's greatest strength is perhaps its redemptive yet paradoxical theme of joy, embodied by Azaro's father. His desires for education, housing and social services for the beggars are mirrored in the infinite potential of the unfinished road. The characters

of the novel may be famished like the road, but they are by no means vanquished because “a road that is open is never hungry” (426).

The central motif which contributes to the novel’s New Age inertia is hunger. As the novel’s title suggests, hunger and eating pervade Azaro’s narration, and they are clearly meant to iconize the hard-edged material suffering and deprivation that we encounter throughout Azaro’s ghetto. But Azaro’s and the other characters’ hunger is also a spiritual hunger as Dad makes clear when he proclaims that “God is hungry for us to grow [and that] hunger can change the world, make it better, sweeter” (498). This positive hunger is a longing to actualize the Self and, thereby, to remedy the world’s ills. Similarly, each time Azaro escapes his abductors and becomes delirious with hunger. A material hunger signifies a biological need for food whereas spiritual one leads him into the ecstasy of everlasting love:

[A man “covered in sores”] dogged my shadow. I felt him as a terrible presence from whom I couldn’t escape. In desperation I shot across another road. The hooting of a monster hulk of a lorry scared me and I dropped the loaf of bread and dashed over, my heart wildly fluttering in my chest. When I was safely across I looked back and saw the man in the middle of the road. He had snatched up my loaf of bread and was eating it [...]. I felt myself breaking out into another space. Everywhere I looked the spirits invaded me with their manifestations. [...] Seared with the agony of their melodies, I stumbled across a road and I suddenly saw them all, spirits in full bloom on a field of rainbows, bathing in ecstasy of everlasting love. (17-18)



Here, material hunger is seen to bring Azaro closer to his heavenly spirit-companions, to reunite him with the enchantment and plenitude of being and love that constitute abiku heaven and represent the spiritual potential hidden within the mundane world of suffering, roads and lorries. This brings us back to Okri's representation of abiku heaven. If much of *The Famished Road* is centrally shaped by New Age spiritual discourse reflecting Okri's express commitment in his interviews and nonfiction to an Aquarian programme of self-actualization of the kind described earlier in this essay, then the same also seems true of Azaro's spiritual home. Love, transformation, enchantment and higher realities, these central values of Okri's abiku heaven so at odds with the spiritual issues and concerns embedded in most indigenous Nigerian representations of abiku today, are the central values of New Ageism.

In *The Famished Road*, New Ageism is a central and predominating force behind Okri's representation of abiku. This research tries to clarify how Okri consciously embraces New Ageism as his personal philosophy and how he adopts/develops African narrative modes and ways of seeing the world. The narrative's main motifs and prose mechanisms are all importantly determined, and submitted within New Age spiritual discourse and its attendant politics. So much so that the novel verges on being a New Age allegory.

Okri's description of abiku heaven in *The Famished Road*'s opening pages is important for several reasons. It helps to set the mood and narrative style upon which Okri's book relies. To be more explicit, it exemplifies the obsession with ideal worlds that marks his fiction, nonfiction, and poetry in the latter 1990s and early 2000s (most recently his 2002 novel *In Arcadia*). Most important, Okri's opening passage is earnestly spiritual both eschewing any hint of postmodern irony and meticulously rooting the abiku in an order beyond time and change:

Our king was a wonderful personage who sometimes appeared in the form of a great cat. He had red beard and eyes of greenish sapphire. He had been born uncountable times and was a legend in all worlds, known by a hundred different names [...]. If there is anything common to all of his lives, the essence of his genius, it might well be the love of transformation, and the transformation of love into higher realities. With our spirit companions, the ones with whom we had a special affinity, we were happy most of the time because we floated on the aquamarine air of love [...]. There are many reasons why babies cry when they are born, and one of them is the sudden separation from the world of pure dreams, where all things are made of enchantment, and where there is no suffering. The happier we were, the closer was our birth. As we approached another incarnation we made pacts that we would return to the spirit world at the first opportunity. We made these vows in fields of intense flowers and in the sweet-tasting moonlight of that world. Those of us who made such vows were known among the Living as abiku, spirit-children. (3-4)

This picture of abiku heaven and its heavenly king is carefully reiterated throughout the novel. It ensures that in the midst of the gnawing poverty and hallucinogenic miasma of Azaro's life, we never forget the pristine vision of eternal love, beauty and friendship with which the novel begins.

The novel makes it clear to us that Azaro rebels against utopian serenity, beauty, playfulness and brotherly love where there is no suffering. He wills himself to stay in the labyrinthine world of suffering and bewilderment. Azaro is positively contrasted to Ade, the novel's other abiku character, who loses interest in the human

world and longs again for the beatitude of his spirit home. Azaro's determination to stay in the world is somehow heroic while Ade's death-wish is mere capitulation. Finally, the three-headed spirit shows Azaro people who have been building a beautiful gem-studded road. They never intend to finish because the challenge of building a road to paradise is more important and fulfilling to them than to road's destination. In such a way, *The Famished Road's* representation of abiku heaven does not cultivate a postmodern incredulity toward metanarratives, but rather cultivates our complex allegiance to a certain metanarrative whose core values are beauty, serenity, transformation, dreams and love.

To represent abiku heaven as an idyll of serenity and love for which innocent children long is to contest indigenous precursor. Okri's texts and indigenous texts contradict the forms of religion and views about human spirituality. They ignore a theory of the afterlife and of human beings' relationship to the divine in which the highest values are love and transformation. The theory of spirituality centrally shaping Okri's abiku heaven is New Ageism whose roots lie neither in African traditions nor in postmodern pluralism, but in Western modernity.

If Okri's fiction is meant to help people actualize their inner selves and to bring about a New Age, then it should come as no surprise that his best and most important work, *The Famished Road*, is replete with New Age teachings. The novel is the ultimate self-help book, packed with insights and answers to the mysteries of life and a guide for those who have lost touch with the realm where souls reside before (and between) incarnations. Toward the end of the novel, for instance, Dad relates a mystical revolutionary dream-vision to Mum. Azaro's Dad proclaims that a New Age is coming. This reveals the vast spiritual potential of human beings and their interconnectedness with the universe:

We have emerged a new age. [...] The man whose light has come on in his head, in his dormant sun, can never be kept down or defeated. We can redream the world and make the dream real. Human beings are gods hidden from themselves. [...] It is not death the human beings are most afraid of, it is love. The heart is bigger than a mountain. One human life is deeper than the ocean. Strange fishes and sea-monsters and mighty plants live in the rock-bed of our spirits. The whole of human history is an undiscovered continent deep in our souls. There are dolphins, plants that dream, magic birds inside us. The sky is inside us. The earth is in us. (498)

Dad's revelation contains every item on the New Age shopping list: promulgates spiritual evolutionism ("we are entering a new age"); loving monism (we should not be afraid of "love" because we are interconnected to all things: "The sky is inside us"); co-creative idealism ("We can redream the world and make the dream real"); self-actualization ("Human beings are gods hidden from themselves"); and finally, the sense that an individual's inner voice can help him rise above the sclerosis of institutionalized traditions and material conditions of existence. The kind of self-realization celebrated in Okri's texts is thus at odds with at least one indigenous form of self-realization, associated with the accumulation of money and material things.

Other passionate declarations and speeches with which the novel concludes also have a didactic quality not dissimilar to New Age teachings about the cosmos and the human self. Here are some of the celebrated lines:

[The abiku child, Ade, foretold:] 'There will be changes. Coups. Soldiers everywhere. Ugliness. Blindness. And then were people least expect it a great transformation is going to take place in the world.

Suffering people will know justice and beauty. A wonderful change is coming from far away and people will realize the great meaning of struggle and hope. There will be peace. Then people will forget. Then it will all start again, getting worse, getting better. [...] Our country is an abiku country. Like the spirit-child, it keeps coming and going. One day it will decide to remain.' (478)

The passage shows Okri's attempt to delineate the latent allegory of his book, namely, that Azaro's journey through poverty, hunger, beatings and riots represents the troubled journey of African countries before and after colonization. The similar spirit is underpinned in the excerpt below:

The spirit-child is an unwilling adventurer into chaos and sunlight, into the dreams of the living and the dead. Things that are not ready, not willing to be born or to become, [...] things bound up with failure and with fear of being, they all keep recurring, keep coming back, and in themselves partake of the spirit-child's condition. They keep coming and going until their time is right. History itself fully demonstrates how things of the world partake of the condition of the spirit-child. (487)

Azaro's abiku consciousness allegorizes the hybrid condition of migrants and postcolonials. The novel's central abiku character is an icon of arrested political maturity, unfulfilled potential and premature failure. Similarly, Dad's millenarian optimism (quotation previously cited) is viewed as nothing more than the inspiring, if naive, talk of a young revolutionary.

On the other, the language of these passages quite clearly belongs to New Age spiritual discourse in general and Okri's views on politics and spirituality in particular. Ade's vision of an impending great transformation followed by a golden

age in which people have realized a great meaning is the very stuff of New Age. Likewise, Azaro's picture of human history as series of recurrences and reincarnations that continue until the time is right and something new and beautiful has been created. There is also clearly a sense of allegory in which references to African history to independence and to political change are shown. When Ade proclaims that "[O]ur country is an abiku country" (44), he is not just talking about Nigeria in particular or some other African or postcolonial country in general. Rather, he is talking about all countries in which people have not learned to "love," as Dad says, and who therefore remain alienated from their true selves. Azaro points us toward this allegorical universalization of African history when he declares that "all things of the world" (44) cannot be more general and universal than this partake of the condition of the spirit-child. In short, the speeches of Ade and Azaro like Dad's great oration at the novel's conclusion embody New Age spiritual teachings, interpreting African history and human suffering in the Aquarian paradigm of spiritual self-actualization.

If there is a sense in which Africa and Africans are, as Okri's narrative represented in semi-allegorical terms, iconic of both the worst and the best of human nature (the ego-self with its poisonous grasping after material gain, the true Self with rich spiritual depths waiting to be realized), then this is also true of the novel's central characters, motifs and narratological strategies.

Azaro can remember his past lives and can see the future (e.g., the razed forest [242]). He is clairvoyant, seeing what is hidden to others (e.g., Madame Koto's triplets [464]) and experiences synesthesia, smelling "sweet-tasting moonlight" (4). Similarly, he takes "astral journeys" (188) and can enter "other people's dreams" (478). Moreover, Azaro is very passive. He drifts on the current of life and experiences its "mystery" rather than attempting to plan or scheme or otherwise

actively shape future outcomes. As such, he contrasts with Dad (the pugnaciously idealistic revolutionary and activist) and with Madame Koto, each of whom contributes in their own way to conflict, unhappiness and suffering in the human world. In short, Azaro not only possesses the kind of heightened consciousness that Aquarians celebrate and seek to achieve, but also eschews the ego-driven inauthentic paths to betterment that Dad and Madame Koto represent. The novel's abiku hero is a New Age role model and poster boy gifted with occult as well as spiritual ways of knowing. He is free from the busy restlessness of the ego-self that turns Dad and Madame Koto into monsters as they attempt, in different ways, to improve their own life and the life of the ghetto by material means. The true path to social harmony and inner peace, we are meant to understand, is neither the capitalism espoused by Madame Koto, nor the socialism espoused by Dad. It is rather the New Age, spiritual path of quietude, introspection, magical perception, and self-realization taken by Azaro.

Taking us into a state of heightened spiritual consciousness similar to his own, Azaro as the protagonist is a New Age exemplar, and New Age guru as the narrator. Not only do we vicariously see the way he sees, but the eccentricities of his narration force us back from the closure, certainty, and ways of thinking that our rationalistic ego-selves crave. These eccentricities include a directionless aggregation of events and perceptions. A spate of broken narrative promises (a rally and a child's death) is repeatedly foreshadowed but never actually occurs. The novel is teemed with an absence of causality, abundance of paradox and outright contradiction. It has a seamless merging of and flickering between two worlds. These distinguishing features of Azaro's autobiography break the conventional rules of narration, particularly about causality, closure, plot, foreshadowing, unity, non-contradiction, and so on.

Thus, by forcing us from our everyday habits of perception and reading, Azaro's narrative eccentricities work to give us the same consciousness. It is the expanding experience of enigma and mystery that is central to his own childhood journey. In such a way, the form of Azaro's abiku narration echoes some of the novel's central teachings. Namely, that self-realization is not a fixed destination, but a process without closure that suffering and injustice are ultimately produced by the ego-self's false perceptions.

Okri states, "the real hard world [is] created by the limitations in the minds of human beings" (493). Likewise, those persons are first and foremost spiritual beings even though most of them do not know this: "Human beings are gods hidden from themselves" (498). In short, the abiku Azaro is a New Age guru, deploying eccentric narrative techniques that not only mirror his own spiritual life and his spiritual "teaching," but also work to lead readers into an enlightened liberated true state of consciousness at home with the mystery of existence. As such, he is like the wise abiku king whose life is marked by "the love of transformation, and the transformation of love into higher realities" (4).

Like the central characters and narratological strategies of Okri's text, some of its key motifs can be read as forming part of New Age allegory. For example, the novel is peppered with grotesque bodies-bodies that are deformed, abnormal, injured, unnatural, or otherwise perverted from the ordinary. There is an impossible two-legged dog, beautiful girls with eyes on the side of their head and three arms populate the market place. Midgets, albinos, and amputees patronize Madame Koto's bar. Madame Koto's body begins swelling and bloating preternaturally, as does Dad's after each of his boxing matches. On one level, these corporeal grotesqueries simply



signify their owners' proximity to the spirit world: the two-legged dog and the midget are clearly incarnations of the abiku king, Azaro's divine protector.

Moreover, the predatory albinos are linked to Azaro's tricky spirit-companions intent upon repatriating him to abiku heaven. On another level, however, the bodily grotesque always coincides with a turning away from self-actualization and enchantment toward the social dysfunction, corrupt politics, and interpersonal anomie generated by the ego-self. The deeper Madame Koto becomes embroiled in seedy business dealings (e.g., prostitution) and shady political entities (e.g., the Party of the Rich), the more bloated and handicapped by grotesqueries she becomes, a process culminating in her becoming pregnant with vicious abiku triplets. Similarly, Dad becomes obsessed with his troop of beggars for social revolution, and his pugilism. The pugilism makes him swollen, injured and discoloured. Thus, his family becomes grotesquely emaciated.

To wrap up, the different kinds of spiritual inauthenticity that Madame Koto and Dad allegorize are made manifest in their physical abnormalities. This fact is further underscored for us by the running contrast throughout the novel between grotesque and metamorphosing bodies. The former symbolizing alienation from the energies of cosmic love, the later, exemplified by the metamorphosing abiku king and by the woman who transforms into an antelope symbolizing the incarnation of those energies, "the love of transformation, and the transformation of love into higher realities" (4).

There is a real sense in which abiku as spirit-child is passionately committed to the love and harmony of his original home, and making vows to return there are exemplary of almost all human beings. Perhaps, for Okri, to be an abiku is to apprehend the paradox, mystery and fleeting beauty that glimpses of the spirit-world.

Further, Okri is not alone in representing abiku as a kind of catalyst for the advent of a new age, a social heaven. Okri's representation of abiku in *The Famished Road*, exemplified by its portrayal of abiku heaven, is influenced by and belongs to a larger and widely dispersed spiritual discourse - the New Ageism - well-established in the modern west. It is not only a national allegory but also an Aquarian allegory reflecting and transmitting central tenets of the human potential movement. New Age spirituality embodies some of the core values of Western modernity just like individual self-fulfillment, self-expression and the search for authenticity. Then, this raises problems for those who wish to see Okri's abiku epic as an allegory of postcolonial liminality or postmodern instability. It is not only because the New Age seems to be more modern than postmodern, but because it has an ambivalent relationship to the indigenous, non-western (including African) spiritualities that it exoticizes, appropriates and refashions to suit the enlightenment-seeking individual.

Belief in the perfectibility of human beings is not a part of African traditional religions where a human being consists of social, moral, spiritual and physical components united together. Gods and spirits are known through personal encounter as living agents often associated with elements of nature that may be understood as images or symbols of collective psychological and social realities in their powerful, dangerous and beneficial aspects. This is how the novel can be read as record of the powerful, dangerous and beneficial aspects of the spirit world as it relates to the physical world. *The Famished Road* asserts the enormous potential of spirit in a revitalizing of human life in the physical world.

#### Intertextuality in *The Famished Road*

Okri has indeed achieved a combination of distinct Western and African literary modes. A distinguishing feature of this narrative art in the novel is an

astonishingly swift shift from the conventional authentic description of the world of discrete things in the Western manner of narration to the mythopoetic description of the other reality. This shift occurs all the more strikingly within a single paragraph or within a single sentence which is very seamless. 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 garden 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, gentile 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 at 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. (307-08)

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. 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 smacks of socialist realism. What is the 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.

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 an authentic picture of Azaro's innate metaphysical or extraordinary consciousness as he "often finds himself oscillating between two worlds, [since] one world contains the glimpses of others" (8). As a result, the text avoids the conventional division between the terrestrial reality and the other reality between the factual and the mythical. Azaro apprehends both worlds simultaneously and finds them both real. Okri's narrative usage is quite unique. Throughout the novel, 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 traveling.

‘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 [...]. (326-27)

This passage is thematically significant for its re-enactment of the external bond between the abiku and his/her kindred spirit who are 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 so simple and 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, there is no centralized uniformity in the narrative of the novel. The narrative technique does not seek any oppositional stance. The intertexts assume parallel status

in the parodic re-working of the narrative modes. They refute the mutual exclusivity of center and margin.

Significantly, the parodic intertextuality incorporates and subverts the orthodox 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 of the European mode of narration. The en-centering (focusing) of the African folkloric mode of narration alongside 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 dominated and the dominators that pure state following colonization. Indeed, the novel's mythic narration takes on considerable descriptive, particularly in the realistic mode.

Okri's narrative style is actually a rewriting of the socio-cultural past in the present in a way that demands critical reinterpretation in anticipation of the future since the abiku's present contains both the past and the future. This re-contextualization recalls the literary past of the African folktale as an oral art up to the point of its textualization.

The African oral tradition, from time immemorial, expresses a sense of shared phenomenal world, both ordinary and extraordinary, to which there has always been a communitarian claim. As a traditional literary artist, Okri textualized the shared heritage of the folktale with the creative refashioning that naturally accompanies artistic transmutations from the oral into the written literature.

In *The Famished Road*, there is a radical point of departure from the conventional rendition of the abiku myth particularly in terms of setting. 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 fact, the worlds are inextricably interwoven as Azaro bestrides the two worlds communicating simultaneously with both worlds.

Recontextualizing historical of literary antecedents, Okri has inscribed the folktales all the while strongly questioning and contesting the literary aesthetic of truth-telling practised by his predecessors who begun the celebration of literary nationalism that has been greatly internationalized. The novel opens with the traditional verifying details that provide for the historicity: “land of origins” (3) of Azaro, a veritable spirit child. Having thus established the African ability to view reality in a certain magical way and accept supernatural elements as part of daily life, the novel then consistently sustains this marvelous African reality through Azaro’s extraordinary consciousness and powers. Okri’s recontextualization of the abiku myth is concerned with the complexity of the myth itself as well as with the complexity of the abiku’s plight. Most remarkably, there is dialogical relationship between Azaro and his parents as well as between himself and his kindred spirits, a situation that lends considerable dramatic vitality to the narrative. Moreover, Okri maintains a critical detachment that allows the novel to throw up the whole myth for a critical re-thinking of its ontology and epistemology. Again and again, the narrative shows Azaro truly trapped by his own metaphysical nature. To ordinary human eyes he appears characteristically mischievous. His kindred spirits consider him a renegade

and vengefully try to get him into trouble in various ways, such as breaking an old man's window:

[Mum] turned on me.

‘Why did you break their window, eh? Do you want to kill us?

Don't you see how poor we are, eh? Have you no pity on your father?

Do you want to kill us? Do you know how much glass costs, eh?

‘I didn't break it.’

‘Who did?’

‘The Spirits.’

‘What spirits?’

.....

I began to cry

‘You're lying.’

‘I'm not. It was the spirits. They stoned me and so I stoned them back.’

.....

‘Do you see what a dangerous son you are? You will kill us, you know. You will kill us with your troubles....’

Mum got so worked up in her fear that she came over and grabbed my ears. She held them tight between her fingers and thumbs. She twisted them till I thought she was going to wrench my ears from my head. I howled [...] then she swiped me across the head. She hit me so hard I went flying across the room. I collapsed against the wall and slid down to the floor, I sat still, eyeing Mum with a vengeful solemnity. (321-22)



This long passage evokes the tension that characterizes the private family life. Azaro says that after his Dad had repaired the window, he “lashed me as I ran, wincing, round the room. He thrashed me with the full energies and muscles of his great whip [...] he bedded my feet, my neck, my back, my legs, my hands” (324). Azaro also experiences the old man’s hostility and intimidations. Shortly before the window episode, the old man had said to him, “Come here [...] I want to see with your eyes” (313). People with supersensory powers, such as the blind old man and Madame Koto, either get Azaro into trouble out of spiteful jealousy or, out of admiration, turn his metaphysical powers to good account for themselves. Azaro’s perception of elemental entities is fictional to his parents, whereas it is factual to Madame Koto, the blind old man, and Ade (another abiku boy) since they occasionally cross one another in interspace.

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. At a party held at the beginning of *The Famished Road*, people celebrate Azaro’s escape from kidnappers where Madame Koto with her supersensory perception offers a wonderful prayer for him: “The road will never swallow you. The river of your destiny will always overcome evil. May you understand your fate. Suffering will never destroy you, but will make you stronger [...]” (46-47). Obviously, Okri has inscribed and contested the literary use of Yoruba myths and their multiple dimensions.

The mainline of the narrative 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, actually form the social (mundane) setting of the novel. Such events are mainly presented in the form of 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 the 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 dreamlike framework of the mainline folkloric narrative's historico-cultural context. As a result, the African folkloric and mythic mode and the conventional well-made realistic mode emerge broadly in the text. These modes take on parallel status, creating both narrative and cultural interdiscursivity in the text.

## CHAPTER IV

Okri's Reconstructed Universe of Spirit in *The Famished Road*

Okri's African universe is born out of spirituality and governed by the principle of religious syncretism. *The Famished Road* portrays the author's reconstruction of the idea of Africa. In it, Okri freely draws insight from traditional Africa, African's discursive practices and Western postmodern discourse. In doing so, he shows three points. First, he shows that religion still plays a significant role in Africa. Second, he also shows that the religion that plays a role in Africa is not a ready-made package that is passed on from one generation to the next (or from one context to the other). Rather, religion in Africa is most likely to be a syncretic (hybrid) construct. Africans, as any other people for that matter, are not passively shaped by their cultures. Instead, they skillfully and creatively construct their identity borrowing insights from whatever resources they have available to them. Third, the emphasis on human agency in this research demythologizes the idea of the incurably religious African. Yet in a more positive note, it liberates Africans from the constrictive embrace of ethnicity and tribalism as Okri's appeal to Yoruba mythologies demonstrates.

Okri constructs the universe of New Age reality in order to escape from the tyranny of "what is," the gods are relegated to otiosity, away from the arena of activity. This move, which goes against the grain of the received notions about Africa and the Africans, is both an innovation on and a repetition of a theme already present in African traditional religions. The move presents the students of religion with a challenge by problematizing the role of God, and religion is to play an effective and constructive role in the reconstruction of Africa. The role can no longer be taken for granted. True orthodoxy that will make a difference in Africa is not necessarily

inherited, but constructed orthodoxy. Between an immanent and transcendent God, there are Africans like Okri who opts for the latter.

Azaro, the protagonist of *The Famished Road* finds himself in a space vacated by the gods. Whether dictated by sheer realism or ideological consideration, this way of depicting Africa leaves one with a question: Is there a future for an immanent God who is actively involved in Africa? It is up to orthodoxical religious followers, and especially those among them who are believers, to show that divine immanence is not opposed to human freedom and emancipation. This, we must confess, is not an easy task in light of the tragedy that Africa is today.

Similarly, intertexts create a discursive multiculturalism or cross-culturalism that effectively contests and re-formulates the dominant Eurocentric perception of different cultural phenomena. In the case of *The Famished Road*, by the churning of different religious beliefs, Okri creates New Age Spirituality which refutes religion itself. In the novel, Okri blurs the line between divine and mundane world. By including the uniqueness of African culture, spiritual narrative technique seeks to explode the myth of a centralized sameness that privileges the Eurocentric ideology. In the novel 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. Through the spiritual narrative technique (that is created by intertextuality), Okri de-emphasizes the centrality and dominance of center, ancillary African folkloric and mythic narration, en-centering its functionality and so giving to both narrative modes the same attention.

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