

Interpreting Post colonialism in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*

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“A writer is always a watchdog or a jester, but the primary function of the writer is to act in such a way that nobody can be ignorant of the world: a novelist cannot escape engagement in political and social issues” (Sartre, 56)

Abstract

Postcolonial theory and criticism started to gain prominence from the last two decades. It consists of the study of literature which has been formerly colonised by the imperial masters. It includes the new literatures which got affected by the colonial process. The new literatures named as “Commonwealth literature” covers the literature from the Latin America, South Asia and Africa respectively. The African Literature had the most adverse effects of the colonisation process. As a result, the natives cannot forget their painful historical past. The writers of the African literature have embedded the painful histories with the rich oral tradition. Postcolonial African Literature discusses African oral traditions, gender identities, nationalism. This paper analyses the characteristic features which Ben Okri employs in his literary text, *The Famished Road*. The paper aims at determining the extent to which these features reflect the postcolonial literary ideal. This paper investigates the attributes of postcolonialism like hybridity, nationalism etc. Apart from these, Okri also reflects on the themes of corruption, dispossession, colonial and neo-colonial domination, and identity crisis.

Keywords- Postcolonialism, Neocolonialism, Hybridity, Nationalism, Magic Realism.

Introduction

The above statement emphasises on the role of a writer. The writer cannot escape from present socio-political conditions of the country. Nor can he avoid the traumatic condition of the colonial past. Likewise, Ben Okri, the Nigerian Writer portrayed the realistic situation of deranged, fragmented and corrupted Nigeria of his times. Ben Okri has critiqued the problems of corruption and violence in his novel, *The Famished Road*. *The Famished Road*(1992) is Ben Okri's booker prize winning novel, which depicts the grotesque socio-political situation of the neo-colonial Nigeria. The novel also sheds light on the divided national history of Ben Okri. Ben Okri is a highly acclaimed Nigerian author known for his

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novels and short stories. As a true African nationale, he juxtaposes the African oral myths with the contemporary political problems in his novels. All his narratives raise the voice against the problems that the nation faces. To reiterate the postcolonial problems, he adapts a unique style of writing in all his works. Every novel has a different radical narrative style to critique the existing political situation and problems of the country. Hence, *The Famished Road* uses magic realism as a narrative technique to depict the problems of Nigeria. He explores the conflict between the western and traditional myths.

Ben Okri, in *The Famished Road* demonstrates the contemporary realities of Nigeria through myths, legends, and fables, thus reviving the ancient oral tradition. Thus, the novel gives a comprehensive picture of the oral African tradition. As Stephen Hart and Wen Chin Ouyang observe, “What is curious [...] about Okri’s text, is the fact that –even while it fuses the magical with the real, and the animal with the human, the spiritual with the material, and the natural with the supernatural- it never loses its political relevance” (Stephen et.al 10).

Therefore one can see that the Nigerian society with the binary codes like real and imaginary, realism and supernatural, old and new, and esoteric and mundane. Okri raises the issues of political power, corruption, gender and violence through the use of folklore. The novel intertwines the elements of the folklore with the post war situation of Nigeria. *The Famished Road* is a story of an abiku child named Azaro. An abiku is a motif in the Yoruba folklore, which passes through the endless cycle of death and birth. The “Abiku” or “Abi” is a different name given to the spirited child who has to die at the age of twelve and pass through the endless cycle of life and death. The author has deliberately chosen this motif to depict the past, present and future of the Nigeria. The “abiku” image serves as the metaphor for traumatizing history of the country from which the colonized cannot escape. Azaro can be identified as a “Postcolonial nation” with recurring political and economic instability. This can be recognised with Fanon’s concept of nationalism. Fanon has given different observations on the intellectual native writer. Fanon recognises three different stages of development of the native writer. As he proclaims in *The Wretched of the Earth*:

In the first of these phases, the native intellectual almost applies the culture of the occupying forces. In the works of this phase, the native intellectual gives expression to more or less the similar themes, styles, and narrative techniques of the colonizers, as has been inspired by European models. He calls this phase as” the period of unqualified assimilation. (Fanon 179)

Fanon emphasises here the native intellectual writer imitating the colonial masters. Not only that, the traumatized memory cannot be escaped from the writer, and he uses the ancient memories intertwined with the oral aesthetics in their works. As Fanon rightly observes in *The Wretched of the Earth*, “writings of this phase as the literature of just before the battle which is dominated by a kind of disgusting humour and allegory” (Fanon 179). By adapting the writing of the colonizers, the colonial native writer becomes stronger with the course of time and uses his own oral tradition to delineate the problems of the present day

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political situation. Fanon identifies this phase as, “the “fighting phase”. In this phase, through his fighting literature, revolutionary literature, the native writer awakens his people. The writer in fact, becomes “the mouthpiece” of a new reality in action” (Fanon 179). This is very true of Ben Okri as well. Okri becomes a revolutionary writer and gives a very authoritative voice to his readers. Okri, therefore describes all the maladies of the Nigeria in his novel, *The Famished Road*. He deconstructs the abiku myth to reflect the heartless depravity of human beings in the continent. Thus, Okri becomes a prominent voice to show the deprived condition of human beings in Nigeria.

Ben Okri has used the Yoruba mythology to comment on the problems of the Nigerian society. Life plays a pivotal role in Yoruba cosmology. Therefore, Okri has used the imagery of life cycle to maintain the balance between the past, present and future of the natural cycle through proper rituals. Okri identifies this concept with the colonised past and the present of the country. The author has chosen Azaro, the spirit child as a narrator who shows the constant changing political scene of Nigeria. Azaro comments on the constant changing nation as well as the people of the country. He critiques on the way the native people are behaving much like their colonial masters. Azaro narrates the satirical picture of the natives who are forgetting their cultural past and becoming more imperialistic and individualistic in their pursuits. Azaro, as a novice, identifies this behaviour of their natives as highly colonized and mimic in terms of imperialistic selfish manner. Azaro gives innumerable instances of the native characters that become blind for the stake of political and economic power. One such example is of madame Koto, who becomes richer and more wealthier with the help of political party. She thus becomes a representative figure of both the colonial power and her forgetting the history. She becomes the metaphor for the colonial transformations of the country. Madame Koto is seen running the shabby bar which is transformed into a modern place full of political meetings with the course of time. Her ghetto bar is suddenly changed into a place full of political talks. She turns out to be an initiator of hybrid identities, who try to imitate their colonial masters, and become alienated in the due course. She supports the party of the rich and so the opponents spread rumour for her describing a person full of illicit behaviour. The opponents of the party portrayed her in this way, “most terrifying cults in the land”, and even her “drinking of human blood” (Okri 158). Not only that, the party people stereotyped her in the following words:

A fabulous and monstrous creation. It did not matter that some people insisted that it was her political enemies who put out all these stories. The stories distorted our perception of her reality. Slowly, they took her life over, made themselves real, and made her opaque in our eyes. (Okri 165)

We can see here that Okri explicates the grim realities of the colonized Nigeria. Apart from that, Okri has used the images of binary oppositions to convey the realistic portrayal of poverty stricken nation. Madame Koto is presented showing the world oscillating between the living and the dead. In other words, the paradoxical images of the real and the imaginary,

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dark and light, realistic situation and the magic, ancient and modern are reiterated constantly in the novel. These paradoxical dimensions define the concept of Bhabha's hybridity. He says: "The concept points towards a new definition of culture that favors in-between spaces, translation, and renegotiation of cultural meanings to fixed identities or Manichaen positions (Bhabha 24). Not only the binary oppositions are shown to present the societal realms, but Okri also ridicules the follies of the neo-colonial nation and its natives by the imagery of two opposing parties.- the party of Rich, and the party of Poor. As described here in the following words, "Vote for us. We are the party of the The Rich, Friends of the Poor...the poor have no friends; someone in the crowd said, 'only rats', 'If you vote for us...' 'We are finished,' someone said "(Okri 123)

The above passage critiques the fickle promises to be given by the politicians of the neo-colonial nation. It also comments on the naive natives who literally fail to adapt to the real circumstances and harsh realities of the Nigerian state. Apart from this image, Okri has also given the image of the rats to reflect corruption, greed and avarice. The image of rats is analogous with the greedy merchants who are never ever satiated. The greedy merchants are thus creditors as "rats cowards thieves and rogues" (Okri 97).

Ben Okri has employed many mythic images and motifs to convey the dreadful realities of the nation. One such motif is of the road, as used in the title of the novel also. The road myth exemplifies the sinuous, tortured and rough path to obstruct the self discovery of the spirit.

In the beginning there was a river. The river became a road and the road branched out to the whole world. And because the road was once a river it was always hungry. In that land of beginnings, spirits mingled with the unborn. We could assume numerous forms. Many of us were birds. We knew no boundaries. There was much feasting, playing, and sorrowing. We feasted much because of the beautiful terrors of eternity. We played because we were free. And we sorrowed much because there were always those amongst us who had just returned from the world of the Living. They had returned inconsolable for all the love they had left behind, all the suffering they hadn't redeemed, all they hadn't understood, and for all that they had barely begun to learn before they were drawn back to the land of origins (Okri 1)

Therefore, the road motif is used constantly to decipher various meanings of life in the novel. The imagery of road shows the past, present and future of the human existence as well as civilisation. Through the narrator Azaro, the road is shown as a symbol of petty, ghettoized lives of the natives in the politically instable state of Nigeria. Roads are representation of the human civilization of the pristine age. Also through the imagery of road, the endless cycle of life is represented. The author has applied the technique of ironic doubleness to manifest the hardened life situation in the country. As seen here, "Azaro finds himself oscillating between both worlds" (Okri 8). The author shows a complete picture of neo-colonial society, where the natives face a complete sense of loss and existential crisis. Thus, again the harsh realities of the Nigerian state are represented in the novel.

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Another important image that Okri uses, is of the “Nigerian nation”. Nigeria is metaphorical image of an abiku child, who frequently tries to solve the problems of the society as per his wish. For this, an abiku child oscillates between the two worlds constantly. He could not escape the endless, vicious cycle of life and death, as he wants to work of the betterment of the Nigerian political condition. This fact is reiterated by another spirit child of the novel, Ade. Ade comments on the corrupt political nation. He satirizes the role of the political leaders of the nation. The concept of nation is redefined by the author by presenting its image as a whole unified nation, in spite of the fragmented identities. Azaro’s dad gives a very optimistic view of transformation of the Nigerian society. He reverberates as:

Our country is an abiku country. Like the spirit-child, it keeps coming and going. One day it will decide to remain. It will become strong [...] Dad found that all nations are children; it shocked him; Ours too was an abiku nation, a spirit-child, one that keeps being reborn and after each birth comes blood and betrayal, the child of ours will refuse to stay till we have made propitious sacrifice and displayed our serious intent to bear the weight of a unique destiny. (Okri 478 & 494)

We can see here that Okri has critiqued on the atrocious political condition of Nigeria. To critically analyse the problems of the Nigerian state, he has juxtaposed the myths and history with the real situation of neo-colonial Nigeria. The whole narrative surrounds the grim realities of the Nigerian nation. The abiku myth literally talks about the innumerable issues of Nigeria, yet to be resolved. Hence Okri comments on the continuous chaotic and disoriented political situation of the postcolonial Nigeria. Also, we see the attempt of the writer to depict the postcolonial condition of Nigeria with the help of the ancient African folklore. Therefore, the African literature serves as a manifestation of interpreting the postcolonial attributes like identity formation, nationalism, hybridity in the novel. It becomes a medium to connect the cultural past and colonial present of the country.

Conclusion

Thus, we can say that Ben Okri has employed the techniques of ancient Oral African literature to delineate the vicious, atrocious society of Nigeria. For this, he has used the abiku myth as a narrative strategy to reflect the ghetto environment of postcolonial Nigeria. Okri critiques the inhabitable conditions of the country through various folk lore images. Thus, the article comments the grim and harsh realities of the neo colonial Africa through the various postcolonial features. Thus, the novel appears to be a perfect medium to describe all the traits of the postcolonial studies. The Postcolonial themes like hybridity, nationalism are seen throughout in the novel, *The Famished Road*. Thus, we can say that the text exhibits all the postcolonial characteristics like corruption, dispossession, colonial, neo-colonial domination, and identity crisis to reflect the condition of Nigeria.

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