

Myths of road and abiku: A metaphor of postcolonial Nigeria in ben okri's *the famished road*

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Abstract

This paper focuses on Ben Okri's adoption of a mythical strategy to frame the image of a nation. The fact that the protagonist of the novel 'Azaro' is a spirit-child (abiku according to Yoruba myth) provides the base for all myths and metaphors in *The Famished Road*. Within the tale of myths and magical reality Okri weaves a story of war-ridden post-colonial Africa exposed to the turmoil of socio-political change. Writing from the aura of post-independence disillusionment Okri dramatizes the problems of a newly freed nation Nigeria. He also deals with the challenges of an emerging nation through violent history of Nigeria. This paper also aims to highlight how Okri uses the myths of abiku and road across the narrative with direct references as well as obscure symbolism. These aspects of the above mentioned novel will be explored by the method of applying post-colonial theory.

Keywords: myth, rhetoric, postcolonial, metaphor, nation

1. Introduction

Chinua Achebe, in an interview with Alastair Niven, mentioned explicitly that Ben Okri is carrying forward the torch of African Literature, from his generation to a new younger generation of Nigerian writers. Okri, undoubtedly, represents this younger generation of writers who are charting new directions for African literature. He is one of Africa's most prolific and celebrated authors. Novelist, poet, essayist Ben Orki (1959-) has received many awards including the Booker Prize (1991) for *The Famished Road*, Commonwealth writer's Prize for Africa (1981). Okri's creations have been widely categorized as postcolonial and post-modern.

Harry Garuba, in his review of *The Famished Road* observes: "Despite the background of myth and magic, *The Famished Road* is not a fable set in a never, never world of fantastic trivia, but a grim socio-economic tale of poverty and politics of a neo-colonial state" (Garuba, Ben Okri: *Animist Realism*, 23). *The Famished Road* is a perfect blend of myths, magical and real, metaphors and of post-independence aura of Nigeria. Okri in *The Famished Road* re-inscripts the spirituality into the discourses of Nigeria's nationhood through the re-articulation of the West-African concept of abiku myth.

The 'abiku myth' and 'the myth of the road' which this paper aims to explore are aetiological Yoruban tales that Okri aptly uses to explain certain phenomenon, belief and traditions. Theorists and scholars have attempted to ponder and grapple the meaning, concept and significance of myth. Gould in "Mythical Intensions in Modern Literature" affirms that the meaning of myth ranges from "primitive and sacred ritual to propaganda and ideological statement" (Gould, 1981:3-5) [4]. He further elaborates: "Myth is a synthesis of values which uniquely manages to mean most things to most man" (6). Myth, thus, can be described as any narrative, based on fact or fiction, that tries to explain the origin/ nature of certain phenomenon or belief and it can comprise of characters that are human, non-human or a

combination of both. Okri, in *The Famished Road* uses certain myths that metaphorically present the knowledge and experiences of the real postcolonial world.

Okri uses the 'abiku' myth of Yoruba ethnography by presenting Azaro (the protagonist and first person narrator) as an abiku child. Ato Quayson, succinctly explains the abiku phenomenon as a "child in an unending cycle of births, deaths and rebirth" (Quayson, 1997, 122) [6]. Abiku as per Douglas McCabe means "one who is born, dies". Douglas, also notes that "the compact 'born to die', with its implication of a fated or deliberately planned death, has become the standard translation" (McCabe, 2002, 46) [5]. Abiku is well established concept in West African communities and contemporary Nigerian literature as well. Azaro, as an 'abiku' child is entangled in an unending cycle of birth-death and rebirth. He lives in a ghetto, on the outskirts of a big unnamed city with his parents. Despite his condition of an abiku, Azaro determines to stay on in this earth and break the tragic cycle of life and death: "Those of us who made such vows were known among the living as abiku, spirit-children. Not all people recognized us. We were the ones who kept coming and going, unwilling to come to terms with life. We had the ability to will our deaths" (Okri, *The Famished Road*, 4). Azaro's life consists mainly of his many adventures and travel in the poverty stricken real world and in the spirit world of his companions who repeatedly lure him to come back to the other world of dead. Of himself he says.

"How many times had I come and gone through the dreaded gateway? How many times had I been born and died young? And how often to the same parents? I had no idea. So much of the dust of living was in me" (5).

Azaro spends most of his time wandering around in the forest and in his ghetto or sitting in Madam Koto's bar, perceiving what is happening around him through the consciousness of a child; the poverty and devastating living conditions of his parents, rivalry between the Party of the Rich and the Party of the Poor. Azaro, being an abiku child

is able to perceive what is not visible to ordinary eyes.

In the text under study, we encounter Ade as another abiku child. While Azaro wants to live the earth's life, he observes that "Ade wanted to leave, to become a spirit again, free in the captivity of freedom" (487). Okri, uses both, Azaro and Ade to frame the image of Nigeria. Ade feels that "our country is an abiku country. Like the spirit child, it keeps coming and going" (478). Later, on page 494 Azaro also reveals, "Dad found that all nations are children; it shocked him that ours is an Abiku nation, a spirit child nation, one that keeps being reborn" (494). Okri, by using the abiku myth conceptualizes the domain of experiences of Nationhood in terms of the domain of experiences of a spirit-child. Within the text, Okri weaves the tale of turmoil of socio-political changes in impoverished postcolonial Nigeria. Azaro being a spirit-child is capable of perceiving the things after independence that the mode of oppression did not abate but in certain situations increased. The only thing, that changed when independence was gained, was the colour of the oppressor. Conditions remained the same.

Okri uses another etiological story 'The myth of the road' to frame the African history in terms of group relationship (exploiter vs. exploited) and experiences of African indigenous people. He presents 'the myth of the road' from both physical and mythical dimensions. In *The Famished Road*, colonialists start to construct a road through the forest that continues throughout the *The Famished Road* trilogy including the *Songs of Enchantment* and the *Infinite Riches*. Azaro observes:

It was indeed a splendid road. It had been built by the natives....He dreamt that on this beautiful road all Africa's wealth, its gold and diamonds and diverse mineral resources, its food, its energies, its labour, its intelligence would be transported to his land to enrich the lives of his people across the green ocean. (Okri, *Infinite Riches*, 236)

The phrase 'splendid road' concealed the fact that it was not made for the benefits of Africa. This physical road was actually constructed to facilitate the quick and easy exploitation of African resources. The underlying metaphor of the road symbolises the social relationship between Africa and the west in terms of master vs. slave and colonizer vs. colonized. At the mythical plane, however, Okri informs us, why the road is famished. Dad tells that Azaro's grandfather was the "head-priest of our shrine, priest of the Gods of Roads" (70). He narrates about the supernatural existence of the road:

The king of the road was a giant who used to live in the forest. When the forest could no longer satisfy his huge appetite, he decided to relocate to the road.... For a long time people made him sacrifices so that he would allow them to pass on the road.... However, when he became a terror to the people of the world, they decided to either make peace with him or kill him.... What had happened was that the King of the Road had become part of all the roads in this world. He is still hungry, and he will always be hungry. That is **why** there are so many accidents in the world. (260)

Okri conceptualizes the life of a nation in the form of a 'famished road', while its journey towards growth and progress is uncertain and hazardous like a trip on a bumpy road. The image of the 'king of the road' also describes that a newly freed nation like Nigeria cannot survive unless it comes to terms with political, social and economical upheavals on its path. The insatiable appetite of the 'beast' symbolizes the 'west' with its huge appetite for exploitation.

The myth of the road also equates with the obstinacy of the West. The mythical road, thus can be seen as an epitome of the impediments to national growth, development and integrity.

Conclusion

Okri in *The Famished Road*, posits that 'ours is an abiku nation' and aptly describes the 'abiku' as 'an icon of the nation'. He uses Azaro, rather than Ade, to re-work the image as Abiku as Azaro is willing to endure torture, pain and all the weight of the world. Okri uses Azaro's positive disposition to express his optimism about Nigeria, it implies the survival of the nation in spite of the many problems. The myth of the road frames the western relationship with Africa. Thus, through the myths and symbols Okri expresses his desire for Nigeria to escape its socio-political as well as economical birth-death and rebirth cycle. His narration of nation within Abiku myth deepens our understanding about nationhood and inter group relationship.

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