**MYTH IN BEN OKRI’S *THE FAMISHED ROAD***

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**TITLE PAGE**

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**DEDICATION**

I dedicate this project

to

Almighty God

for His protection and love.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I am grateful to God for His guidance and blessings. I wouldn’t have come this far without Him.

I am also grateful to my father Barr. Charles Iyizoba who made me believe in myself.

And also, I’m very grateful to my Dean Prof. Romanus N. Egudu.

To my supervisor Prof. Michael A. Ezugu and all my lecturers, I owe a lot more than what words could express.

**ABSTRACT**

Myths are embedded in the cultural heritage of nations. This research analyzes the treatment of myths evident in the African culture as seen in Okri’s *The Famished Road*. The text is imbued with elements that are germane to the objectives of this study. This research employs Northop Frye’s Archetypal theory which deals with recurring myths and symbols of season, life and death as well as images, and character types. This research maintains that myths are of great relevance in our contemporary society, especially as *The Famished Road* is almost an allegory of the Nigerian nation.

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**CHAPTER ONE**

**INTRODUCTION**

The life and activities of every community draw its vitality from the *Weltanschauung* of such a people otherwise called their worldview. This worldview as it is, underlies the basic tenets, norms and activities of a people; giving them a unique identity such that it marks them out as a people distinct from the rest of humanity. A people’s worldview is considered to be the cultural universal which is seen to be the nucleus of a culture that admits of no change even while the particular aspects of the culture (cultural particulars) constantly change. Language is a central aspect of culture that derives from the very heart of the worldview of the people that upholds such culture. This is to the extent that language is seen as typical representation of culture in signs and symbols (both oral and written). This is typical of literature across the world that portray contextual cultural values of the culture from which they are written. The African experience does not differ from this fact.

Since the emergence of *Things Fall Apart* till now, Nigerian writers have always resorted to what readers deem as verifiable in their narratives via various realistic aids and indices. In an effort to carve a niche for what could be validly regarded as African Literature, it has been the interest of authors to build on the African experience. In this effort, some authors have even set language barriers for what should constitute African literature in its real sense. Ngugi (1986) states in *The Language of African Literature* that it is an aberration to have African literature in English language or African literature in French. He argues that “the diplomatic way out of this problem is to ‘panel-beat’ the European languages – English and French – so that they function just as languages for us but not as carriers of our culture; then we infuse our culture in them. It is therefore imperative that the English language is brought home (tailored) to meet the demands of the aesthetics of the African languages – the Igbo-African aesthetics or the Zulu-African aesthetics; this is also true of all other tribes in Africa”. All this is an effort to relate a literary experience that is truly African. (Ngugi, 1986. P.14)

Besides the use of language, African writers have tried also to contextualize their works; drawing them from the lived experiences and cultural aspects of what are truly adjudged African. This projects in a simpler manner the fact that some African novelists employ myth in making their literary impacts.

Scholars have engaged the question of myth and how African literature employs it. Many of them consider myth as an integral part of a larger definition of oral tradition which they take as the fulcrum of African literary thematic preoccupation. Others have devoted intellectual energy to a thorough analysis of myths and their paramount place in the African worldview; Soyinka (1976) and Okpewho (1981) are classical examples. Myths, according to Akporobaro (2001):

Symbolize human experience and embody the spiritual values of a culture. Every society preserves its myths because the beliefs and worldview found within them are crucial to the survival of that culture…Myths often include elements from legend and folklore. They depict humans as an integral part of a *larger universe,* and they impart a feeling of awe for all that is *mysterious* and marvelous in life (emphases, added). (P.24)

Myths, legends and heroism are usually in the realm of oral literature which according to Akporobaro (2001) refers to “the heritage of imaginative verbal creations, stories, folk-beliefs and songs of pre-literate societies which have been evolved and passed on through the spoken word from one generation to another.” (P.26) it is also the unwritten traditions of a nation, their religious beliefs, stories, myths, and legends which express the artistic life and moral beliefs of the people. Oral literature includes folktales, ballads and songs, epic narratives, myths and legends, songs, riddles, proverbs, recitations, etc. These forms constitute in a real and significant sense, the literary traditions and achievements of indigenous African societies. They are the manifestations of traditional creative imagination beliefs and perceptions of social reality. They are modes which construct and deconstruct the social-cultural milieu of the people. These are the verbal, auditory manifestations of man’s creative impulse expressing his innate creative sensibility.

Emphasizing the importance of myths, Owomoyela (1979) explains the interrelationships of all things that exist and provide for the group and its members a necessary sense of their place in relation to their environment and the forces that order events on earth. From the assertion of Owomoyela (1979), it could be affirmed that the use of myths in literary works has both cultural and literal impacts. Culturally, such mythical works of literature help in the promotions of the values and heritage of such culture. Another important point to note is the literary import of the use of mythical method of writing. With the story telling approach, the reader is glued to the literary piece. Therefore, the use of myths is capable of capturing and sustaining the attention of the reader. The evidence of the benefits of the mythical method could be shifted from the number of authors who do not hesitate in taking advantage of the mythical method of novel writing.

**Background to the Study**

Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* is his “magnum opus” that seeks neither to glorify the African past nor to push the cause of nationalism too far, though it achieves both beautifully and without much effort, like any other true classics. Okri does not bother to present the details of African culture and social life or to argue for the preservation of the same. He is more interested in capturing exaggeration. He pushes the bounds of belief and creates his real, super-real world. All realms merge and run together, space is shattered and time is pushed back to the beginnings of all folklore. *The Famished Road* by Ben Okri is largely based on the first hand experiences of the author in relation to the Nigerian Civil War. This novel displays a certain vibe in the cultural and ancestral roots of the author; he states that his fiction more often than not bears the weight of certain philosophical conundrums (Halpé, 2010).

However, Olu-Owolabi (2011) contends that the present state of retrogression in Nigeria, and indeed the rest of Africa, stems from the near absence of the critical capacity to reflect and interrogate issues, concepts and circumstances by the present generation. According to him “All these signs of impending perilous times are products of our unexamined living,... but the good life, an ideal that philosophers have sought since time immemorial, can only be realized by constant rigorous and critical reflections”.

In other words, the seeming abyss in contemporary society can only be challenged by the ability to engage those issues critically. Added to this is OyinOgunba’s (1998) charge on the need for further exploration of myths in order to deepen the thematic concerns of African literature and further endear it to its enabling milieu. In other words, Olu-Owolabi’s concern above can be located in the present endeavour in Ogunba’s challenge with regard to the question of myth in African literature.

It should be stated that myths in African sensibilities do not just centre on fictional stories or escapist attempts at explaining away existential riddles. Rather, myths represent indigenous attempts at either fictionalizing reality or injecting the elements of the realistic into the fictional. In other words, myths in the African milieu are literary forms which interconnect the states of being, or in philosophical parlance, the different levels of being. The plight of Africa and its inhabitants is a subject of enormous concern. This may explain why Okri uses post-independence Nigeria as his setting with the narratives replete with satiric undercurrents. Okri’s *The Famished Road* seems in-depth in terms of universalizing a general angst over the state of the human self, thus making its satire less biting but rather subtle.

Therefore, the present study seeks to critically study myths in Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road.* The interest is to underscore the mythical method of novel writing towards identifying what truly can be defined as an African experience.

**Statement of Problem**

It should be noted that myths in the African milieu are literary forms which interconnect the states of being, or in philosophical parlance, the different levels of being.

Against the above backdrop, the question that agitates the critical mind is, why recourse to oral tradition? It may prove worthwhile to focus once again on myths and how they are reconstructed in the African creative context. It becomes imperative to examine, or re-examine the mythic sensibilities of the African self, as mirrored in the African novel. As a matter of fact, it is interesting to note that despite the fact that Ben Okri is permanently based abroad, he is being driven by formal, stylistic and thematic concerns as well as a quest for the roots. This shows that oral tradition continues to influence the creative consciousness in Africa.

The present study seeks to examine the relevance of the mythic in the portrayal of contemporary Nigerian/African society by Ben Okri. This is with a view to showing that African writers, especially in Diaspora, utilize the oral raw materials available to them in projecting contemporary literature of twenty-first century.

**Objective of the Study**

Certainly literary productions have the imprint of the milieu which produces them, since art penetrates social psychology and engages happenings in society. Accordingly, African literature has been said to be self-reflexive, especially through pungent depiction of the enabling situations. The African novel demonstrates a viable melting pot for the philosophy, oral, religion and world-view generally. Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* represents African prose fiction which centres on African mythic consciousness.

The main objective of this study is that African literature is inward looking and root-seeking. The social and political angst which runs in the world of *The Famished Road* is archetypal of post-independence African states. The study also seeks to appraise the mythical method of novel writing as a literary style while at the same time, establishing it as a formidable way of contextualizing African experience.

**Significance of the Study**

This work, in addition to experimenting with the 'mythical writing' adds to the existing body of works that have been done by different scholars on the language problem of African literature. Therefore, this work can be referred to in any study on the problem of African literature*,* and mythical writing, also, as a concept or style of writing. It will also be useful on any discourse of writing in African fiction.

The details of this work will be beneficial to students of literature particularly those study boarder on African Literature. Researchers will find this work handy and useful since it will be a veritable lead into the entire gamut of African mythic literature. The study will be helpful for academics who are in the field of literature and for other researchers, writers and authors alike.

**Scope and Limitation of the Study**

The content scope of this study is ‘Myth in Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road’*. This is an African Novel not simply on the grounds that it was written by someone who is African by birth, but because it qualifies to be identified as African Literature from the fact of both its content and method. The content of the novel relates the Post-Colonial African experience. It depicts a historical trend in the African setting with specific pointers to Nigeria. *The Famished Road* serves as the primary text for relating this African experience.

This research focuses on the primary text *The Famished Road* in relation to its stylistics of mythical writing and other texts that may be referred to.

This study is limited to the study of myths which primarily belong to the oral tradition not circumscribed by time and geographical boundaries.

**Research Methodology**

The method of this research is qualitative and wholly analytical. It draws most of its arguments from African and other literature. The present study adopted an Archetypal approach which is considered adequate since the approach places emphasis on recurring myths and archetypes in the narrative, symbols, images, and character types. Secondary data from other sources like the library, internet, reviews and critical analyses are also legitimate.

**CHAPTER TWO**

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**The Concept of Myth**

Generally, a myth is a story which is believed to be true and has its origin in the distant past history of a people. (Alagoa, 1978:9) argues that they are historical information transmitted orally by processes peculiar to each community. Myths are man-made stories that play explanatory functions in the African understanding of reality. *The Encyclopedia Britannica* defined myth “as a story handed down in oral form from our forefathers who explains reality, concepts and beliefs and further serve as explanations of nature events such as creations, origin of things, history of a race or a people”.

According to the *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary*, “a myth is a story from ancient times, especially one that was told to explain natural events or to describe the early history of a people”. It is also something that many people believe but could be false. According to Akporobaro (2012) “Myth is a kind of story or rudimentary narrative sequence normally traditional and anonymous through which a given culture ratifies its social customs or account for the origins of human and natural phenomena usually in supernatural or boldly imaginative terms. Myths, legends and heroism are aspects that mirror social realities and contain certain details.

From the foregoing it becomes obvious that myth is not just a product of human imagination but a direct expression of reality. Anyanwu (1987) citing Houndtonji says that “man cannot live without myths”. The reason is quite obvious: man is a being that cannot bear to live with certain questions unanswered that is why he sits down to formulate myths to make those questions answerable. Thus man is a myth-making animal (Anyanwu, 89). Some thinkers have rightly observed that myths are pre-philosophic in nature; that philosophy started where myths stopped, which presupposes that philosophy has its roots in myths (Jaja, 1994; 39).

It is pertinent to point out that myths are results of the revelation of “thou” and are often founded upon an original experience that reaches beyond the sensorial and rational, but they are not illogical. They are mostly susceptible to rational analysis and logical interpretation. An analysis of many myths as shown here shows that actions of gods and heroes often presuppose a keen analysis of given circumstances and are based on rational decisions (Kirk, 1974:60). It can be argued that some myths represent complex logical systems which are different from those which are usually found in contemporary western societies. Nevertheless, according to a common view, there is a radical separation between mythos and logos, between myth and philosophy. Myth is associated with the mysterious and illogical, and philosophy with the rational and logical (Apostel, 1981).

Myths are part of a way of life and state precedence and models for human actions, but they do not seek to explain them on a rational basis. Myths use images, philosophy, concepts. Philosophy asks generalized questions, relies on systematic reasoning, and rejects the supernatural explanations of the world, but mythological societies are unsystematic and deal with the sacred (Apostel, 1981).

Myth is wholeness in tune with the world as a whole because those who live in myth and are guided by it are engaged on many different planes with the whole of which the myth is an integral part. By teaching man and by regulating the way of his living in devotional engagement with the whole and by gradually disclosing many layers of its meaning, myth reveals the knowledge of the whole. But the knowledge of the whole is not merely theoretical. It is not merely a partial, intellectual knowledge, but it embraces the whole of life. Myth reveals the knowledge for which philosophy in a proper sense looks. But it does not disclose this knowledge without appropriate devotional engagement. Myth is completed already at the beginning, whereas philosophy seeks to be completed at the end. Mythical societies live in eternity rather than in historical time. The societies in which philosophy or science plays an important part constantly seek their completion and are in a permanent dissatisfaction with the results of their findings. They live in history and are time oriented. Myth corresponds to eternity, philosophy to the discovery of history.

Myths are seen as vehicles conveying certain facts or truths about man’s experiences in his encounter with the created order and its relation to the super-sensible world. For Abanuka (1994; 108), myth tells of the supernatural experiences of the community. Myth exposes the fact that man’s misfortunes on earth as well as his hardships are attributed to disobedience to the divine commands and moral codes of the deities as a point in his life.

Generally, myths contain three kinds of stories namely, stories of origin, explanatory stories and didactic stories. Each of these stories is meant to explain a particular phenomenon. Myth is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery but living chronicles in the minds of Africans. They contain and express the history, the culture and the inner experience of the African himself. Africans use myths to explain how things came to be through the efforts of a supernatural being. It is concrete and expresses life better than abstract thought can do.

These mythical stories are what African writers seek to tell in their novels and in a context that is truly African.

**Functions of myths**

Myths are very important to the human race and they are generally found in so many cultures. By studying about myths one tends to have a grasp of how different societies of the world have answered basic questions about their existence. The following might be considered as functions of myths:

**Entertainment:** This is one of the major functions of mythical stories in that they contain certain forms of entertainment that elicit laughter, anger, bitterness, and happiness etc. due to the fact that these stories are handed down from one passing generation to another in the form of folklore. The stories are not just entertaining but they also tell a moral lesson and we have for example, The Kings Magic Drum, The Woman with two Skins, *Ituen* and the Kings Wife, Why Bats Fly at night and Why the Sun and the Moon Live in the Sky etc.

Akporobaro posits in his book *African Oral Literature*(P.25) that;

Myths were originally created as entertaining stories with a serious purpose. A myth’s serious purpose is to explain the nature of the universe (creation and fertility myths) or to instruct members of the community in the attitudes and behaviors necessary to function successfully in that particular culture (hero, myths and epics).

Myths make use of magical features to influence the world. They are ultimately, ancients of deep complex and half felt elements of human nature and that is why they are told against a distant background.

**Explanatory**: As earlier stated myths are used to explain natural, social, cultural and biological facts existing in a particular society at a particular time in history. The story of the king’s magic drum basically talks about a certain king who had a magic drum and with the aid of this magic drum, he was able to keep his entire village and enemies at peace. Whenever an intended war was to happen the king would beat this drum and food would come out in an uncountable quantity and seeing this, his neighbors who came for war would eat and forget their sorrows. Also the story focuses on another character Tortoise who felt slighted by the king’s wife at the stream where she was washing her baby and because of that he insisted on meeting the king to settle the matter. Upon reaching the king, the king tells him to make his request since he would not take any of the gifts of settlement offered to him, because of his greedy nature he requests for the kings magic drum which he is given without any form of argument. He goes away rejoicing not knowing of the side effects of the drum. The story ends with the tortoise and his family making the prickly tree their home, the moral of this story thus is that as individuals we should learn to forgive and be contented with what we have. From the story it can be seen that tortoise was never satisfied and always wanted more than he could chew.

The story of the tortoise and the drum is also another story that focuses on the moral of contentment. The story begins with tortoise trying to pluck fruits from a palm tree and when he makes an attempt by using a stick to shake the branch where the fruits are, they fall and they fall to the ground and roll into a nearby hole, tortoise observing this tried to pluck fruits again and this time the same thing happens. So he decides to trace the palm nuts. After walking for what seemed like hours, tortoise comes out of the hole into a village square and then in his moment of realization that he is in the spirit world takes note of a spirit eating the very last palm fruit and when he confronts the spirit, the spirit apologizes and takes him into his home where he asks him to pick one drum and due to his small nature and the journey back home decides to pick a small drum. Arriving at the forest he decides to rest, while resting he beats the drum and to his amazement a feast spread out before him. Going home the next morning tortoise decides to throw a feast, already tired of beating the drum, he appoints elephant to beat the drum and when elephant does the drum gets broken and he sets out to journey to the spirit world for another drum. In the end he gets there and decides to pick a big drum and for the purposes of trying out the drum he does this and whips come out and he gets flogged all the way home.

These two stories employ the archetypal evil genius known as the tortoise and from the above we can see the explanatory function of myth in the sense that language used is simple and straight to the point. It serves its purpose of entertainment but at the same time it teaches morals and the virtue of contentment.

**Descriptive**: The descriptive functions of myths are connected with the authoritative presentation of details that exceeds ordinary reason and observation. Myths describe the origin of the world and it describes what one using reasoning and observation cannot grasp. The descriptive function also accounts for the educational value of myths in traditional societies expressing a perennial human need and is a reminder that modern men do not have to regard myth as something that ends with the termination of primitive civilization.

**Validatory**: Great varieties of myths answer questions about the nature and foundation of ritual custom. According to the Yoruba tradition, the death of a king as seen in Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman* must be followed by the ritual suicide of the king’s horseman, because the spirit of the horseman is very vital to the king’s ascension into the afterlife, otherwise the king’s spirit will roam the earth and cause harm to the people. Myths also account for a specified group social or religious nature such as the New Year’s celebration which is often related to or justified by mythical myths concerning a return to chaos and a return of the dead.

**Engaging Myths in African Literature**

Scholars have engaged the question of myth and how African literature employs it. Many of them consider myth as an integral part of a larger definition of oral tradition which they take as the fulcrum of African literary thematic preoccupation. Others have devoted intellectual energy to a thorough analysis of myths and their paramount place in the African worldview; Soyinka (1976) and Okpewho (1981) are classical examples. Myths, according to Akporobaro,

… Symbolize human experience and embody symbolize human experience and embody the spiritual values of a culture. Every society preserves its myths because the beliefs and worldview found within them are crucial to the survival of that culture…. Myths often include elements from legend and folklore. They depict humans as an integral part of a *larger universe,* and they impart a feeling of awe for all that is *mysterious* and marvelous in life. (2001)

The above definition can be located in Okri’s appropriation of the *abiku* myth. The novelist attempts giving meaning to the various levels of existence and also shows that the human plane of existence is only an aspect of a larger existence of spirits, ghomids and several other beings.

Ogundele (2002) observes the prevalence of myths in African creative imagination, against the historical. This shows that African creative imagination naturally yields to the mythic. In his words “Although there is much ado about myth, history and literature in African literary discourse, the overwhelming bulk of that labour is expended on myth and literature, with fairly little to spare on history and literature” (35).

The implication of this is that if African literature cannot fulfill the historical mandate, then it can interrogate history through mythic devices. This is readily manifest in the political and historical dialectic of the world of Okri. Okri concentrates on a society bedeviled by the consequences of bad leadership and the antics of corrupt politicians. In other words, there is critical and thematic unity in myth and the accompanying histories of the social contexts in Okri.

George (1991) not only underscores the interconnectedness of myth and history, but also demonstrates how indispensable a fair treatment of both is to an objective consideration of African literary works in what he calls a ‘qualitative approach’. This is to a very large extent true of *The Famished Road* and *Abiku*, given the fact that: “The employment of the artistic resources of the African oral tradition in addressing the contemporary social history of Africa continues to engage African writers concerned with creating an artistically authentic African literature”. (104)

In other words, writers do not just engage myth and history but also employ the devices of oral story-telling tradition. This implies that the task of the writers is to reconstruct socio-historical experiences. To return to George’s poser:

How are the artistic devices of the oral story-telling tradition and fictive-imagination married to (re)construct past and contemporary social experience in Nigeria? And this is done within the framework of the qualitative approach to African literature, a recent strain of African traditionalist aesthetic criticism which recognizes that ‘tradition’ is dynamic rather than static (1991; 222).

The above re-echoes Isidore Okpewho whose (1980) classifications of the different levels of how African literature employs myth and oral tradition. He observes:

It soon becomes clear that the further a tale moves away from the world of real-life experiences into that of fantasy, the more it liberates itself from the bondage to historical time and thus addresses itself to larger philosophical questions of existence .(45)

In essence, critical contentions on the deployment of myths in African literature have expressed and highlighted the inherent value of myths. In other words, myths remain an important creative invention through which the African world is explored and appreciated. Thus, myths are important ways.

**Ben Okri: A Short Biography**

Ben Okri is a man of many talents. He is a poet, novelist and short-story writer. He was born in 1959 in Mina in northern Nigeria to an Urhobo father and an Igbo mother. His first school was the Children’s Home School in Sapele. Shortly after he was born, his father won a scholarship to study law in England. He took his family with him to England. Ben Okri’s earliest years were spent in Peckam in south London. He attended John Donne Primary School. In London, he developed a liking for comic books.

After his father had finished his education in the Inner Temple, the Okris returned to Nigeria. He continued his education in Ibadan and later in Warri, in Urhobo College. In 1966, there was a military coup d’état in Nigeria, and in 1967, there was a civil war between Ojukwu’s Biafra and the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

By the age of 14, Ben Okri had finished his secondary education. He spent about five years writing short stories for women’s journals and newspapers. He also started work on his first novel, *Flowers and Shadows*. He did most of his writing at night, since he held a day job as a clerk. He wanted to study science at tertiary level, but no Nigerian university would offer him a place.

In 1978, Ben Okri won a scholarship and moved back to England where he studied English and philosophy at the University of Essex. His second spell in England was full of hardship. He lost his scholarship when the government of El Hajj Shehu Shagari decided to curtail overseas spending. He went to live with his uncle in south London. His uncle’s house was knocked down and Ben Okri took to the streets. He slept wherever he could, on the streets and in the railway stations. Most of the time, starvation stared him in the face.

He soon found employment in the BBC’s African Service at Bush House and as poetry editor for the weekly magazine *West Africa*. In 1986, he published *Incidents at the Shrine* and was immediately propelled into the mainstream of Literature. *Incidents at the Shrine* won both the *Paris Review’s Aga Khan* Prize for Fiction and the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Africa. Two years later, he published *Stars of the New Curfew,* which was also well received by the public. *The Famished Road* was published in 1991. It entrenched his unique style and won him the prestigious Booker Prize. He has since published other novels like *Songs of Enchantment* (a sequel to *The Famished Road*), *Infinite Riches* and *Astonishing the Gods*.

**CHAPTER THREE**

**MYTHIC CHARACTERS IN *THE FAMISHED ROAD***

*The Famished Road* the third novel by Ben Okri, was published in 1991 and won the Booker Prize. It has been called both “the classic magical realist novel of West Africa” (Liukkonen 2) and a “postmodern Thousand and One Nights with a boy Scheherazade” (Appiah, “Spiritual” 146). His works explore the liminal border between diverse cultural traditions while displaying “his own mastery of realism, modernism, and African mythical traditions, thereby demonstrating that these diverse cultural traditions can coexist within new hybrid forms” (Bennett 368). Ben Okri lives in London and is writer-in-residence at Trinity College, Cambridge.

Fanon saw how the colonial subject suffered from the traumatic effects of leaving behind their pre-colonial customs and Okri agrees with the idea that this was harmful. In the use here of Turner’s ritual process luminal model to interpret his novel, *The Famished Road*, seems compatible with Okri’s philosophy as he had previously spoken of the importance of ritual passage in a radio interview:

We need ritual passages to separate different points of our experience. We need ritual initiation, transcendence of consciousness. We need these things because without them, we don’t know if we are growing or if we are static. We don’t know when we’ve crossed certain silver lines in our consciousness, from childhood to adulthood, from pain to illumination. These are things that are always part of all societies. It’s just we went ahead and forgot. And I think we are paying a terrible price for it, and it’s only the psychiatrists who benefit. (qtd. in Ogunsanwo 40).

Okri highlights Azaro’s position as a subject who is placed in a static luminal position and exists between this world and the next. This young, rather naive character provides a “device which allows us to experience the wonder Azaro discovers in his own childhood while observing for ourselves an all-too-familiar pattern of exploitation, industrialization, and environmental ruin that is encroaching on his family because of Africa’s postcolonial history” (Wilhelmus 248). *The Famished Road* fits the previously outlined model of a luminal novel, even though it surpasses the other two novels addressed here in the strong surreal quality of the prose and the inherent magical realism of Okri’s style. The complex, chaotic and sometimes incoherent nature of Okri’s writing reflects the confused states of the luminal *abiku* child as well as the struggling, transitional nation state. The inherent discursive nervousness reflects the fact that the narrator’s position is doubly luminal. The protagonist, Azaro, an *abiku* child, is situated in a luminal position straddling the threshold between worlds because he resides partly in the consciousness of the spirit world and partly in the world of the real. As an adolescent he is also situated in a luminal phase of his rite of passage towards adulthood. He is straddling the crossroads of the spirit world and the real world at the same time. He also sees the status of his father and mother in the turbulent society of Nigeria and he has the added task of making his way down the road to adulthood in this trying environment. Azaro feels the precariousness of a fractious postcolonial existence, much like the other two novels’ protagonists. He has not been able to identify fully with the stable figure in his Laconia mirror. His nation, as it is also an *abiku* nation, faces the same daunting challenge of ultimately passing through this static luminal stage. In the end, Azaro is given a clue to what a postcolonial and postmodern future may hold in easing these challenges when in one of his many dreams he optimistically “realized that new forces were being born to match the demands of the age” (496).

Ben Okri has drawn a picture of a mythopoeic Nigeria where spirits dwell alongside the very real people struggling with the day-to-day poverty of their neighborhoods. The young protagonist Azaro fights off the spirits who are calling him to return. The myth of the *abiku* child is based on the belief that *abiku* babies are born repeatedly to the same mother, but die and return to the spirit world because its pull is strong and is always present. Azaro has decided that he prefers to stay in the world into which he was born rather than to return to the spirit world which is constantly calling him to return. He feels that,

It is terrible to forever remain in-between. It may also have been that I wanted to taste of this world, to feel it, to suffer it, know it, to love it, to make a valuable contribution to it, and to have that sublime mood of eternity in me as I live the life to come. But I sometimes think it was a face that made me want to stay. I wanted to make happy the bruised face of the woman who would become my mother. (5)

The spirit world continually entices Azaro back with the promise that in their world he will be bathed “in an ecstasy of everlasting love” (18). Azaro’s plight of being caught between these parallel worlds, being and non-being, is reflected in the constant shifting of the text’s focus between a dream-like landscape of the spirit world and the more real, but still carnivalesque postcolonial Nigerian slum. The tension resulting from the “in-between” status of the *abiku* child, the postcolonial nation and the transitional society lends itself to this revolutionary style of aesthetic output.

As an infant Azaro oscillated between worlds:

One day I was playing on the sand when they called me from across the road with the voice of my mother. As I went towards the voice a car almost ran me over. Another day they enticed me with sweet songs towards a gutter. I fell in and no one noticed and it was only by good fortune that a bicyclist saw me thrashing about in the filthy water and saved me from drowning. (8)

He then becomes very ill and spends much time trying to reason with his spirit companions. He is finally so ill that he is given up for dead by his parents and only wakes up to find himself in a coffin during his funeral. His mother then decided to change his name from Lazaro (with its overt suggestion of Lazarus) to Azaro (58).

Azaro grows into an adolescent in the Lagos slum setting. His day-to-day trials with school and home life come from events that arise as a result of trying to compensate for being poor. He lives in the ghetto surrounded by squalor and strange characters. Mum and Dad are central to his life, followed by Madame Koto, the enormous proprietor of a “chop bar”, the International Photographer, and Ade, another spirit-child who decides not to “stay”. Azaro’s movement towards any sort of resolution of his rite of passage is stalled in this liminal stage. It will not be until he can find some way to *re*write the past, in the same way that his nation must, that the path or road to a future can be traversed. This novel, as well as the other two, offers two choices for both the protagonist and his nation, despair or *re*juvenation. These choices are “maintained within a shifting, episodic, accretive narrative frame which invites the reader to make connections and draw conclusions” (Bryce 3).

Cezair-Thompson sees *The Famished Road* as a narrative that *re*places the history of colonialism rather than *dis*placing it (40). *The Famished Road* can be read as an allegory of the birth of a nation, as the novel is set on the eve of independence of the state of Nigeria from Britain. It serves as a national allegory in that the nation can be seen as paralleling the protagonist *abiku* child in its recurring struggle for a clear identity: “Dad found that all nations are children; it shocked him that ours too was an *abiku* nation, a spirit-child nation, one that keeps being reborn and after each birth come blood and betrayals” (494). This allegory exists with other intertextual and mythic references. The novel begins with the sentence: “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” (3). This metaphor certainly refers back to the opening sentence in the New Testament gospel of John. “In the beginning was the word...” and lends an air of mythopoeic importance as if the novel were an epic tale.

A key metaphor is that of the insatiable monster of the famished road. The road in colonial times was something that was imposed by the colonizers to help them acquire access to Africa’s resources and secrets. Here it is more three-dimensional and holds a mythopoeic meaning, which replaces the colonial historic one. Wole Soyinka’s poem “Death in the Dawn” contains a reference which may be the source of the novel’s title:

The right foot for joy, the left, dreads

And the mother prayed, Child

May you never walk

When **the road waits, famished** (Soyinka 10)

The metaphor of the “famished road” also harks back to the Yoruba myth of Ogun, the “Guardian of the Road”. Azaro’s Dad tells him of the giant called the “King of the Road”:

His legs were longer than the tallest tree and his head was mightier than great rocks. He could see an ant. When he drank, a stream would empty. When he pissed, a bad well would appear. He used to be one of the terrible monsters of the forest and there were many like him, competing for strange things to eat, he changed from the forest to the roads that men travel (258)

Azaro’s father continues to describe how it is necessary to leave a sacrifice to the King of the Road so that he would allow passage. For a long time people give sacrifices but then decide they must kill him. They make a huge dish full of poisons which make him eat everything in sight including his own body, except for his stomach which during the rains that night goes underground and became part of all the roads in the world. The fact that he is still hungry today explains why there are so many accidents and why people still put out food on the road before they travel. The *road* as used here could be seen as a metaphor for an overwhelming “hungry” way of genuine liberation.

The father figure, Dad, is portrayed as being weak even though he has learned how to curse well, something reminiscent of Caliban who says to his “colonizers”, “You taught me language and my profit on’t is, I know how to curse” (Shakespeare; Macbeth, 55). Dad has suffered from the equivalent of castration by colonial domination; he is shown as a combative boxing hero, but this front is further contrasted with his daily task of carrying “unhuman loads of goods with an unearthly smell of sweat and oppression” (140). Phillips makes the connection between Dad’s character and the postcolonial subjects’ luminal status:

The altered state of consciousness generated by ritual is closely related to the liminal spaces in which Dad wrestles with death and receives knowledge from the African Way for his rebirth in the human sphere (177).

The famished road was a “road which was hungry for great transformations” (180) and transformations come to the family members towards the end of the novel. Dad becomes a philosophical giant after he awakes from his long three day dream and tells Mum and Azaro that “God is hungry for us to grow...Our hunger can change the world, make it better, sweeter...It is more difficult to love than to die. It is not death that human beings are most afraid of, it is love” (498). Mum’s reaction to this transformation is “you have become heavier, my husband” and Azaro’s thought which appropriately ends the novel is “A dream can be the highest point of a life” (500).

Madame Koto provides an oppositional element to Mum’s sacrificial, maternal qualities. Her expanding frame “contrasts painfully with the shrinking living and eating space of the deprived majority” (Aizenberg, “Famished” 25). She provides a sort of Baktinian “grotesque realism” where “earth is an element that devours swallows up (the grave, the womb) and at the same time is an element of birth, of renascence” (Bakhtin 21). The immense Madame Koto is pregnant with three babies which Azaro is able to see through the duiker’s eyes. He sees that they are spirit children:

One of them had a little beard, the second had fully formed teeth, and the third had wicked eyes. They were all mischievous, they kicked and tugged at their cords, they were the worst type of spirit-children and they had no intention of being born (464).

These babies may represent the new nations which are on the verge of being born to “mother Africa”, but they have problems seeing the light of day.

The International Photographer, Jeremiah, besides being a character, is a key metaphor as the name Jeremiah is that of the seventh-century B.C. prophet who warned against moral decay. Jeremiah leads the rats out of the rat infested slum as the Pied Piper of a different mythological past did, intending to save the people by using his photographs to root out corruption and expose it. His keen perspective shows the “delirium of a colonized world” reflected in the photographer’s gaze (Aizenburg “Famished” 29). He travels throughout the world and stands on the threshold between colonial rule and post-colonial destiny. The wish to resist the pull of the pre-colonial or colonial ways and the urge to plow ahead and forge a new path would be like going into exile, as the photographer does, or being stuck in the liminal stage which is clearly a way of postponing the destiny of the nation and the child. However, Okri makes the point at the end of the novel that

History itself fully demonstrates how things of the world partake of the condition of the spirit-child. There are many who are of this condition and do know it. They all yearn to make of themselves a beautiful sacrifice, a difficult sacrifice, to bring transformation and to die shedding light within this life, setting the matter ready for their true beginnings to cry into being, scorched by the strange ecstasy of the will ascending to say yes to destiny and illumination (487).

This reflects the strong urge of both the postcolonial subject and nation to choose *re*juvenation and to move beyond the liminal phase. To move forward with “the regenerative forces of replacement, rather than the debilitating colonial legacy of displacement” (Cezair-Thompson 34).

**The Mythic Characters in *The Famished Road***

* **Azaro** is the story's narrator. He is an *abiku*, or a spirit child who has never lost ties with the spirit world. He is named after Lazarus, of the New Testament. The story follows him as he tries to live his life, always aware of the spirits trying to bring him back. The mythic nature of the character is that Azaro chooses to experience the world of humans in order to partake of human life and to appreciate the plight of the downtrodden. Okri imbues Azaro with extra-human powers in order to pass an objective commentary on the decadence that is prevalent in the world of this novel. Again, Azaro’s spirit of resistance, especially of his spirit kindred is a parable of the self. Azaro embodies self-assertion and will, though with a proportional level of mystic power, from his essence.
* **Azaro's father** is an idealistic load-carrier who wants the best for his family and the community. He suffers greatly for this, eventually becoming a boxer and later a politician. Azaro's father loves him deeply, but is often bitter at having an *abiku* and occasionally goes on angry violent tirades. The mythic character in Azaro’s father is evidenced in the fact that his family belonged to the lower class in the society and as such, are in the list of the vulnerable. This is evidenced in Azaro’s recollection “I was still very young when in a daze I saw Dad swallowed up by a hole in the road” (7).
* **Azaro's mother** works very hard selling anything she can get her hands on for the family. She cares for her family deeply and constantly gives up food and security for her family and their ideals. She is proud that Azaro is her son and goes to great lengths to protect him. The mythic character portrayed in Azaro’s mother is that of one who is vulnerable in the face of the anomalies found in the society. Azaro himself reminisced thus “...Another time I saw mum dangling from the branches of a blue tree” (7). The images indicate anomaly, perpetual suffering and despair. There is horror in the figure dangling from a tree branch and in the color change, owing to assault on nature’s green by forces of environmental degradation.
* **Madame Koto** is proprietress of a local bar. She has a liking for Azaro, though at times is convinced he brings bad luck. She starts out as a well-meaning woman, trying to get along with everyone else. However, as the story progresses, she becomes richer, siding with the political Party of the Rich, and is often accused of [witchcraft](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Witchcraft). She tries to help Azaro and his family on numerous occasions but seems to try to take Azaro's blood to remain youthful.Azaro is in Madame Koto’s bar; two albinos and one beautiful woman kidnap him and take him away in a sack. He is taken through many roads and tortured…” I fought and struggled like a trapped animal. The more I strained for freedom, the more they tightened the sack, till I had no room to struggle (112). The mythical dimension to this is evidenced in the facts that in developing nations like Nigeria, the rich would only reach out to help the poor as a way of retaining their loyalty. Their charity and philanthropy always come with strings attached.
* **Jeremiah, the Photographer** is a young artist who brings the village to the rest of the world and the rest of the world to the village. He manages to get some of his photographs published, but practices his craft at great personal risk. This is likened to the biblical Jeremiah who served as a bridge between the Israelites and God. His commitment to this course was not without risks; even risks of losing his own life. This has mythical import of one who is patriotic against all odds.
* **The Landlord** supports the Party for the Rich and is angry with Azaro's family for causing troubles for him and his compound. The mythical dimension to this is that with the dawn of independence, the blacks quickly acquired the positions vacated by the white rulers and continued the exploitation, deprivation and oppression of the people. The only thing that changed is the color of the rule but the character remains the same.

**Ben Okri’s Style**

There are very few books on the work of Ben Okri (Oka Moh, 2000). Critical essays and books are very few; most texts on Ben Okri can be found on the Internet and not in libraries. His writing is relatively new, although it has been thirteen years since he won the Booker prize. I say ‘relatively’ in comparison to older and more established West African writers like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and Ferdinand Oyono.

A lot of the writing that goes on in Africa is based on the fantastic. This tradition comes straight from the fireside tales and oral literature that are handed down from generation to generation. In these tales, realism is not important; fantasy and magic are the main ingredients (Gérard, 1985).

Third world societies usually function on a small scale: they are clanic, tribal societies where everybody knows everybody else so that social constraints inside the group are particularly effective. They are not only pre-literate, they are pre-urban, pre-industrial, pre-scientific. Their only verbal medium is the spoken word. *They cannot account for the realities of their environment except in metaphysical terms and they cannot hope to act upon their environment except through magic.*

*The Famished Road* fits the description above. Some of the characters (Azaro and his father) feel that the world is very corrupt. The only way to climb up the social ladder is to join the detested Party of the Rich. They cannot have any real impact on theworld because they are living in abject poverty and belong to the Party of the Poor. To compensate for their poverty, they spend most of their time dreaming. Azaro’s father plans to build houses for the poor, tar all the roads, clear away all the rubbish in the streets, open massive stores to sell food cheaply to the poor, become a musician, bring free education to the poor, become head of state, or an invisible ruler of a very educated nation (408-409). He even listens while his son reads tales about Sundjatathe Great and Shaka Zulu.

Some concepts which the writer mentions are strange to the English language, so he has to make up new words for them, enriching the English language in the process. Daria Tunca of the Université de Liège has described Ben Okri’s style in these words: A projection of hopes for the world based on the release of mankind’s as yet untapped mental and physical resources.

Okri’s novel reads like a mystical piece. There is no dividing line between the world of the living and the world of spirits. Human beings intermingle with ghoulish creatures. In one scene, Azaro is walking home when he sees a messenger of ‘the great king’ (66). This messenger is unnaturally hairy and his face sits upside down on his neck. In another scene, we meet the ‘boy-king’ who has a palace of ‘turquoise mirrors’ (245).

Symbols play a major role. The Nigerian nation is described as an ‘Abiku nation’ (494). It has not settled on one face, it keeps metamorphosing. Azaro himself is a symbol of survival and the struggle between men and gods. The Party of the Rich, Madame Koto and the Landlord represent the new elite that has replaced the colonial master and goes to the poor only when it needs votes. The Party of the Poor, Black Tyger (Azaro’s father) and The International Photographer represent the champions of the poor who will do everything to make sure that their kind gets a fair deal.

The psychedelic visions in the novel show the feebleness of human existence and highlight the plight of new city dwellers as they try to pick themselves up from poverty. Ben Okri’s style is based on the urban narrative technique, the criticism of the government’s shortcomings, and finally on magic and fantasy (Oka Moh, 2000).

*The Famished Road* can be read like an allegory, a battle between good and evil. One scene in particular (120-125) captures the battle between good and evil. Politicians come to a desolate part of town to campaign for the Party of the Rich. After their campaign they distribute milk to the poor people. The impatient crowd fights for the handouts. The milk is poured on people and transforms them into wraiths. Later the milk is found to be contaminated with insect larvae. The entire poor section of town falls sick. Azaro and his father are the ones who discover that the milk is bad. This incident is the defining moment of Azaro’s father’s life. Thereafter he becomes the champion of the poor. He challenges the government agents (the forces of evil) every time he gets the opportunity. All the rich characters are on the side of the antagonists: Madame Koto, The Landlord, and The thugs of the Party of the Rich.

Azaro’s father is constantly arguing with The Landlord. The latter, who is not happy that Azaro’s father has not joined his party, looks for the slightest chance to confront him. This soon comes when some tenants harass Azaro’s mum and ask for the money his father owes them. Azaro’s father threatens them with a beating. When The Landlord comes (in Azaro’s father’s absence), he says: “Tell your husband…that if he repeats what he did last night, I will throw him out. I don’t care if he is called Black Cricket. I myself am a lion. If necessary, I will send my boys to beat him up”.(100)

In the spirit of most allegories, the physical portraits of the characters are not really developed. Importance is placed on what they represent as concepts rather than on what they represent as human beings. No character’s physical portrait is developed, not even the main character Azaro. Even the ‘Madame’ of Madame Koto, the bar owner is the name that is used for ‘she been queens’ and restaurant owners all over West Africa.

**CHAPTER FOUR**

**Dynamics of Myth in *The Famished Road***

The thematic preoccupation of Okri’s *The Famished Road* reveals an African writer mindful of the functionality of his art as well as the quest for roots, a fact underscored by Adetugbo (1992:7), citing John Parry et al that ‘History reveals the need [in] all men for roots and self-expressions, for belonging to, and identifying with a community that has a memory of its past’

Human society as *abiku* is the contention of Okri in *The Famished Road*. In Okri, the picture appears clearer: “It shocked him too that ours was an *abiku* nation, a spirit-child nation, one that keeps being reborn and after each birth come blood and betrayals, and child of our will refuses to stay” (494).

In Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*, the mythic template certainly prompts an appreciation of the progressive movement from a world of actuality to the other level of existence. This experience is more visible in Okri’s

Azaro, who partakes of the experience of the real world and that of spirits. Deandrea (2001) offers an insight:

“Okri’s use of the *abiku* differs from his predecessors in as much as he found his magical-realist style with its co-existent rational reality and spirit world on Azaro’s first person narration, since the child’s contact with his original place is never severed and his perceptions therefore, constantly touch on both dimensions at the same time” (1).

Okri’s use of the mythic seems to suggest that Azaro’s dual vision is a metaphor for re/presentation of the postcolonial African condition. In fact, the theme of post-independence decadence seems prevalent in *The Famished Road* as the novelist soon deploys the force of mythic narration to underscore the satiric undercurrent of the novel. As Bennet (1998) explains:

Each time he revisits these common post-colonial themes, therefore he finds extraordinary new ways to express them with greater insights, imagination and complexity. Taken together, Okri’s fiction represents one of the most significant explorations of literary form in the canon, of postcolonial African literature (364).

Ogunsanwo (1995) follows this up by introducing the intertextual dimension to Okri’s narrative. This is instructive and clearly shows that Okri’s attempt, is an affirmation of a device earlier exploited by Soyinka and Clark in their poems, ‘*abiku*’. He contends:

What makes *The Famished Road* post-colonial and multicultural both in form and content is precisely what makes it post-modernist that is response to ‘the need to clear oneself a space’. By means of mythic narration, Okri clears a space for the quintessential texture and structure of African folkloric narrative (42).

In Liman (1997), Okri is shown to be furthering a tradition and not necessarily pursuing a post-colonial agenda, but the mortising issues that are universal and not in any strict terms a ‘response’, as a postcolonial aesthetic would imply:

There is indeed nothing postcolonial about the picture grim realities of existence Okri has presented. His magnification of the microcosmic unit of an ordinary family struggling against the overwhelming forces of monopoly capital is typically in place with the normal preoccupation of literary practices in Africa (75).

One can assert that Okri’s exploration of mythic consciousness, demonstrates that mythic discourse is capable of multi-thematic attention. Encircling all these concerns, as most critics seem to agree is the magical realist agenda.

It should be noted that *The Famished Road* is an attempt by Okri to interrogate the crisis of the self. He weaves the elements of traditional *abiku* mythology into a formidable alliance with contemporary magical realism, to achieve this aim. Okri’s *abiku* character, Azaro, is a mythic reconstruct. Unlike the *abiku* in Soyinka and Clark, Okri’s *abiku* chooses to stay by empathizing with his mother. Okri’s deliberate deconstruction of the *abiku* personality is a device which empowers his main character to comprehend and comment on the two levels of existence. As an a*biku*, Azaro has a vivid description of his previous existence in the spirit world:

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…the serene preserves of our ancestors were always with us, bathing us in the radiance (4).

Azaro’s choice to stay represents a force of mythic dialectic. He turns away from the bliss of his other existence to partake of the penury, want and deprivation of human existence. His reasons are many:

I wanted to taste of this world, to feel it, suffer it, know it, to love it, to make a valuable contribution to it… But I sometimes think it was a face that made me want to stay. I wanted to make happy the bruised face of a woman who would become my mother (5).

Azaro chooses to experience the world of humans in order to partake of human life and to appreciate the plight of the downtrodden. Okri imbues Azaro with extra-human powers in order to pass an objective commentary on the decadence that is prevalent in the world of this novel.

Azaro’s immediate family stands for the underprivileged. Society’s cruelty frustrates Dad’s self-determination and prowess. The picture of suffering in the household is grim. The mother struggles with the negative forces of disempowerment. The recurrence of *abiku* children until Azaro chooses to stay in compassion for her also shows her helplessness even in the hands of nature. Azaro recollects vividly: ‘I was still very young when in a daze I saw Dad swallowed up by a hole in the road. Another time I saw mum dangling from the branches of a blue tree’(7). The images indicate anomaly, perpetual suffering and despair. There is horror in the figure dangling from a tree branch and in the colour change, owing to assault on nature’s green by forces of environmental degradation.

Azaro’s spirit of resistance, especially of his spirit kindred is a parable of the self. Azaro embodies self-assertion and will, though with a proportional level of mystic power, from his essence. He is conscious of the ability of his dual essence and seems to suggest that comprehension of life’s oddities requires the possession of extra-human powers – he does not want to lose contact entirely with that other world of light and rainbows and possibilities. (9) His mother also tells him ‘You are a child of miracles… Many powers are on your side’ (9). Okri explores the mythic side of existence in order to endow his work with extra depth, and to demonstrate the dynamism in his literary agenda.

*The Famished Road* yields to satire without necessarily shedding its mythic strength. As a luminal character, Azaro reveals the obvious and the subterranean in existence. For instance, the commentary of the rape of the earth reveals both unseen and seen realities: ‘The clearing was the beginning of an expressway. Building companies had leveled the trees. In places, the earth was red. We passed a tree that had been felled’ (16). Azaro’s luminal powers enable him to see beyond the ordinary environmental degradation that the above represents. He uses this to instantiate the wrangling and upheavals in the spirit world. Okri succeeds in combining the elements of the grotesque in satirizing society. He narrates the irony inherent in human society through a scenario within the ranks of the police, who despite that they swear to oaths, go ahead to betray public trust reposed in them (22).

Okri seems to suggest that to trivialise such a sacred oath is as a result of the indifference to mythic consciousness and traditional ethics. Okri captures police brutality especially in post-independence Nigeria under military rule like several African states. He however elicits pity the way the events bring out the bestial tendencies in society. He seems to suggest that the reaction of the agents of misrule to genuine reaction by the people is nothing but wickedness:

Dad was there, imprisoned for taking part in the riots… He had been beaten by the police and there was an ugly cut on his forehead, bruises on his face.

This is Okri’s way of reflecting social and political malaise. But his is more refractive than reflective. It is a general commentary. Each event is symbolic of a whole in terms of space and time. Society is viewed from a cyclical point of time. Human activities get satirized from the point of view of this omniscient narration who has all the benefits – hindsight, foresight. The way Azaro recalls his spirit world experiences, through flashback, reminds one of the capacity of the human soul to interrogate history. Okri’s *abiku* hero demonstrates the viability of using mythic consciousness to highlight the ills of society.

Given the fact that Azaro’s spirit world is blissful, he seems to suggest that the opposite is what exists in the world he has chosen to live. Also, Azaro’s satiric commentaries bring forth the realities of poverty, deprivation and disempowerment. He also suggests that suffering tends to bring out the fullest of man’s capacity for comprehending a world of incongruities. He paints the image of penury and demonstrates that society tends to imbue the deprived self with a capacity for violence and resistance. Madame Koto prays philosophically:

The road will never swallow you….The river of your destiny will always overcome evil… Suffering will never destroy you, but will make you stronger (46).

As Azaro narrates one horrible experience of the ghetto after another, the oppositional structures of the world continue to be fore grounded. He captures modernist disenchantment (91), a tolerant spirit of self-assertion (93), anger, frustration and helplessness. Okri advocates recoil to the self; he does not share recourse to Marxist struggle or armed resistance, but rather supports a retreat to the self by the self in order to assign meaning to a world of void. At different times, Azaro comments:

We were heroes in our own drama,

Heroes of our own protest (156).

We may be poor, but we are not slaves (203).

THINK DIFFERENTLY…AND YOU

WILL CHANGE THE WORLD…

REMEMBER HOW FREE YOU ARE,…

AND YOU WILL TRANSFORM YOUR

HUNGER DIFFERENTLY

Thus, Okri is advocating a psychological rebirth and sees this as the ultimate respite for the impoverished self. His aim is to bring out through Azaro the human capacity for survival and defiance. This, one submits, he activates with literary dexterity.

**CHAPTER FIVE**

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

Postcolonial African literature responds with a more mythical than historical imagination to the historical experience that brought it into existence (Ogundele 2002). It should be clear that attachment to historical, time-bound reality robs a tale of its chances of yielding an abstract, transcendent message, and that ‘the mythic quality of tales of the fanciful lies in their flight from time bound circumstances and their employment of the medium of symbol and mimesis’ (Okpewho 1980: 14). On the basis of these contentions, the various images projected by Okri have been explored and they have yielded significant critical finds, mainly the continued viability of the African traditional mythic structures as base for African literary productions.

It has also been shown that Okri is targeted in looking inwards for thematic directions. This is demonstrated in the exploitation of the *abiku* myth to address contemporary issues bedeviling the society of the novelistic universe. As the observations of Okpewho and Ogundele suggest, Okri is a conformist and meets the parameters of Okpewho. Given the level of African civilization, a constant revisit of history in African creative imagination is pertinent for a political order and tranquility.

Okri’s attempt at fictionalizing, perhaps Nigeria’s most agonizing moment under military rule is indeed both a factual and socio-historical *exposé*. The point is that his literary concern is in tandem with the satiric beckoning of his Nigeria in *Abiku.* As Ogunsanwo (1995), departing from Chinweizu et al, points out, ‘It is the creative artists transmutation of his/her *donne* that determines the significance and effect of the raw material’ (43). The above explains the divergence of mythic utility in Okri. There is no doubt that Okri’s sense of the nature of man and his conduct is in total agreement with the observation of Akporobaro that:

the human mind everywhere and at all times is dominated by a deep consciousness of good and evil. Apart from psychological factors, the reality and dominance of this consciousness is intimately bound up with the nature of human experience, desires and the temper of the environment in which man operates (P.32).

The point is that, notwithstanding the fact that Okri is a ‘non-resident’ African writers, he engages the realities of the Nigerian nation. His *The Famished Road* interrogates the plight of the self in a world of inherent contradictions. Okri sees a world that is bettered through a people’s determination to end the seeming cycle of misrule. This results in an underdeveloped society in decadence.

This essay shows how the African situation in the African creative imagination can be effectively engaged by African mythic exploration which provokes a peculiar nativist consciousness. Since myths, by their very nature, heighten reality and make magic almost part of existence, *The Famished Road* shares this traditional aesthetic.

This research has demonstrated that Ben Okri in *The Famished Road* aptly fit into Stuart’s (P.36) contention that ‘the self-apprehension of the African world in terms of concepts and categories can be embodied in properly African cultural forms, forms which can be considered to have artistic merit’. The mythic identity of *The Famished Road*, therefore, provides an enabling literary sanctuary, to tell the story of African anguish, first to Africans, and then to the rest of humanity. Okri ultimately fulfils what Irele (P.42) means when he observes that ‘immediate engagement with history is the outstanding attribute of the modern African writer’ (69). Okri has therefore through the exploration of the mythic consciousness in his novel, appropriated the cultural worldview of the enabling society to engage the ever-recurring issues of post-independence woes.

In *The Famished Road* the author has being able to explore the surreal nature of man in relation to his physical environment. It can be inferred from the beginning that the protagonist of the novel is an Abiku child who would do anything to know and feel the pains of the mortal world and who also sometimes wishes to be in the immortal world. The author has been able to employ the African traditional belief system in the novel.

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