



## The Struggle of the Subjugated Inhabitants: *The Famished Road*

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### Abstract

African literature is primarily a protest literature articulating dissent in opposition to the infringement of the Britishers on the well-knit and cohered ethnic societies mourning the loss of an integrated multi-racial society. African fiction has surfaced as a sort of retort to the Eurocentric account of the Africans as untamed populace dwelling in a murky continent. However, Africans and their society are still living under the distress of subjugation of European imperialism. In the current scenario too the black race is hankering after sovereignty, communal integrity and egalitarianism that literature has sensed profoundly. Nigerian novelist Ben Okri revives the vanished era of the Africans via scrutinizing the muddle of iniquitous slavery, oppression, dislodgment and diaspora of precolonial, colonial and postcolonial period that brings forth the harrowing memoirs of the authors penning down the brutal instances of the said period. Okri's *The Famished Road* re-picturises an exceptional veracity of Nigerian history and ethnicity. The writer's recollections of the unvarying existence of civil war in his place while he was young has a sturdy sway in texting the novel. The work takes one and all to the mythic and implausible facet of African beliefs and lifestyle. *The Famished Road* is a lighthouse on the mounting deprivation, suppression, hunger and stillness of the underprivileged section corresponded aptly through the title. The novel portrays an asymmetric circulation of socio-political clout among the two thoroughly divergent factions viz-a-viz, the colonizer and the colonized, the affluent and the underprivileged, the white and the black, the politicians and the commoners, and the modern and the ancient. Herein one group seems to overpower the other by virtue of its authority and dominance. The present paper endeavors to comprehend and depict the current socio-political reality of African state through Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* by peeping deep into Africa's traumatized past and accordingly rediscovering and regaining Africa's personal ethics and customs for an astonishing subsistence.

**Keywords:** struggle; paucity; hegemony; autocracy; dearth

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Ben Okri, a prolific postcolonial Nigerian writer has received substantial critical approbation in the literary arena focusing on postcolonial and postmodern views and his contribution to the front warding of African inscription has been overriding. Nigerian by origin, and currently a permanent dweller in London the writer takes pleasure in an exceedingly reputable silhouette amidst the British literary enterprise. A self-acknowledged Nigerian-Londoner, these dual groupings are what scored him as a man and as a writer. To copiously comprehend the growth within his narrative and poetic discourse one ought to be glad about the intricacies of this hyphenated identity and how it exercises its woolly draw upon his texts. The Booker Prize winner novel, *The Famished Road* (1991) is equally postcolonial and postmodern in orientation surveying the political aggression the writer himself has eye witnessed during the Nigerian civil war. The work “offers a very different vision of Africa, presented in what appears to be a ‘magical real’ style, but which may be better termed a ‘spirit-real’ conception of narrative reality, a state in which the allegorical, the material and the spirit realm are in constant interaction” (Ashcroft 714). It is visualized as a “literary representation of a specific subaltern history that exploits the indeterminacy of the linguistic sign and highlights its hybridic nature. The story of a community caught within the interstices of colonialism and postcolonialism in *The Famished Road* becomes an imaginary space where the empiricism and monoculturalism of western sign is deconstructed” (68-69). In Okri, the Western postmodern quandary of the disbanding of the theme is celebrated and even the abiku lad Azaro’s bewildering ontological standing denotes the postcolonial nation state in its muddled route from colonialism to sovereignty.

*The Famished Road* divulges the unevenness in the allocation of socio-political power in the system. It exposes the perturbed concurrence of ethics and assemblages for instance colonizer versus colonized; affluent versus deprived; white versus black; politicians versus populace; and modern versus ancient. The text illustrates individual faction trying to enforce its dogma on the other in which the subject strives to oppose or challenge the ideological hegemony to the governing faction. The work is a tale of Azaro, the spirit child’s life or more specifically the *abiku* child, an apt word for such an individual in Yoruba. The boy dwells on the suburbs of a fragmentary town Lagos roughly during the time of independence. He belongs to a very poor family, the father, a load carrier and a boxer and mother, a peripatetic vendor. Azaro keeps falling into stupors of carousing and roving off into the woods and the bizarre lands. The narrative is a twine of imaginings coupled together by the practical struggles of human beings. Azaro is overwhelmingly inclined towards Yoruba chronicles, which have been yoked, maneuvered and altered. It presages against the desertion of primordial astuteness, nevertheless all the way through the ogle of an immigrant settled in London who scrutinizes Nigeria sardonically via the lens of mysterious telescope. Azaro’s acquaintances in the spirit world have pledged his homecoming to the terra firma of spirits, a place to which he actually belongs. The great sovereign sends envoys to him and he has tough time to keep him on the earth. Madame Koto, one of the richest persons in the vicinity who runs a tavern appeals him to frequent her trade to magnetize clientele. Madame Koto’s ingot and lanes of underprivileged quarter are the locales of a number of key confrontations amid the gathering of the moneyed and the



congregation of the unfortunate lot. All through the crusade, affiliates of the well-off jamboree furnish contaminated milk to the associates of Azaro's society. It is evidently noticed and intimidated by Azaro's father who discerns the entire community with the dissipated event. He even turns out to be the guardian of the rights and privileges of the deprived. The novel in a way seems intensely subjective towards Yoruba tales which have corruption, repression and implausible subject matter as backdrop.

The present paper intends to explore the socio-political veracity and vision in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* and to discern the core rationale of subjugation in Nigeria. The foremost concern is the life of powerless, hungry and dislocated populace, and the role of postcolonial creams of the crop to redress their impasse. Okri revives the lost epoch by probing the bewilderment of slavery of disarticulation and dislodgement and of diaspora, of precolonial, colonial and postcolonial experience, each one of which is proficient to bring about harrowing reminiscences in the intellect of the postcolonial writers. On an analogous mode, *The Famished Road* reinvents an exceptional actuality in Nigerian history and ethnicity. Okri's recollections of the unvarying existence of civil war in Nigeria during his adolescence might have robustly influenced his script of the novel, which is sited in Nigeria, with an unspecified name and in the decade of socio-political hubbub before Nigerian sovereignty in 1960. *The text* draws interest to the mythic and implausible facet of African philosophy and lifestyle.

*The Famished Road* heralds a postcolonial realism from an extensive array of standpoints and dominion with Azaro's portrayal of the rainy spell in which his father is convalescing from a formidable unconsciousness as an upshot of his boxing stint with the mystifying and baleful man in a white suit. In his comatose condition, Dad is vigorously revisualizing the globe. Following Dad in his recurring thoughts, Azaro narrates the "schemes of things" that his father witnesses and abhors:

In contrast to the political blocs - the Party of the Rich and *the* Party of the Poor - *He saw our people drowning in poverty, in famine, drought, in divisiveness and the blood of war. He saw ... people always preyed upon by other powers, manipulated by the Western world ... He saw the rich of our country, he saw the array of our politicians, how corruptible ... how blind ... how greedy ... how deaf to the cries of the people, how stony their hearts were, how shortsighted their dreams of power.... He saw the divisions in our society ... he saw the widening pit between those who have and those who don't have.... He saw the wars in advance. He saw the economic boom in advance, saw its orgiastic squander, the suffering ... the exile to strange lands, the depleting of the people's will for transformation. (564-565)*

While exposed in sort of a reverie, the ubiquity of dearth, autocracy, corruption, division, and feud is evenly a historical veracity in many postindependent African realms. In a somewhat diverse way, Dad's vision of historical actuality re-ratifies what Ade, an *abiku* child, foresees prior to his arrival to the spirit world. "*Suffering is coming. There will be wars and famine. Terrible things will happen. New diseases, hunger, the rich eating up the earth, people poisoning the sky and*



*the waters, people going mad in the name of history, the clouds will breathe fire, the spirit of things will dry up, laughter will become strange.... There will be changes. Coups. Soldiers everywhere. Ugliness. Blindness”* (547). In view of that the time scheme of the novel is positioned in a decade ahead of Nigeria’s liberty, equally Dad’s reverie and Ade’s predictions are to all intents and purposes narrative prefigurations.

The opening section of *The Famished Road* sets as an instance, “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), and the above biblical aperture not merely evokes the title of the novel, but also reiterates key premises throughout the content. The boulevard is equally a historical providence and a historical leeway. Supplementary to it, the road is where past, present and future convenes, as well as where precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial experiences confound. In African fiction, a road is typically envisaged as an *access* for European infringement and colonial invasion, and a *tabula rasa* for forced narratives of progressive and imperialist history. Consequently, a road is factually an account of tangible dealings, for colonialism is allied with the construction of roads, the influx and exodus via roads, and figuratively a pictogram for colonizing and marginalizing African mores and aesthetics. Nevertheless, by pointing that the road has on one occasion been a river, which is coupled with verve, instability and mutability, Okri proposes that the history of Africa is at the moment yearning for vivacity, deliverance and revitalization subsequent to centuries of despotism and disintegration. In addition, by articulating that the road is hungry, Okri falls back on an African mythic conviction in the ravenous road and its deity that desires to be fed and nourished.

In Azaro’s imaginings, he encounters the certainty of “mortgaged” futures and deferred fortunes, as political factions combat for ascendancy even in the spirit world by calling on “djinnns and chimeras, succubi, incubi and apparitions,” and soliciting “the ghosts of old warriors and politicians and strategists” (568). There is no absolute splitting up amid the human world and the spirit world, when the sorcerers of party politics give a free rein to rumble in the spirit dominion, rain swamped underneath. Making trips to both human and spirit globes in his dreams, Azaro’s father portends historical realism of a new-fangled era. Awakening as if from death, Dad is physically and piously rejuvenated; specifically, he is additionally politically cognizant:

*We have entered a new age. We must be prepared. There are strange bombs in the world. Great powers in space are fighting to control our destiny. Machines and poisons and selfish dreams will eat us up .... people who look like human beings are not human beings .... dreaming of wiping out their fellow human beings.... Rats and frogs understand their destiny. Why not man.... God is hungry for us to grow. (571)*

In contrast to the political blocs - the Party of the Rich and *the* Party of the Poor - skirmishing in opposition to each other for affluence and authority beyond voracity, Dad is a pugilist for integrity for the deprived and the feeble. He even strives to systematize the Convention of Prostitutes and Party of the Beggars. In this sagacity, the road signifies more than the



consequence of colonialism, it is in addition a figurative road - the road of existence - in which an individual has to discern directions and goals for future.

The first communal manifestation of politics in the narrative is about the Party *of* the Rich fetching putrid powdered milk to bribe the poor and bringing sadism to the environs. The photographer accounts this incident with his camera, clicking pictures of “the miserable landlord and the surging crowd and “the thugs flexing their muscles” (147-148). Abruptly subsequent to the “secret faces *of* politics” are divulged as the tainted milk that sources endemic nausea and illness. Poisoned by the milk himself, the photographer went from housefront to housefront, taking “pictures of the milk-heaps and vomit outside the houses” and of “sick children, men in contorted forms of agony, women in attitudes of hungry outrage” (156). The photographer exhibits these films in the glass cabinet outside his studio that turns into a “public gallery” in the ghetto society and transforms it to be a “local newspaper” to the external world (167). When Party of appalling Politics revisits in the evening, “the photographer frenziedly took pictures” of the party thugs whipping people (181). The photographer is detained and angst-ridden for footaging the felony and sleaze of the Party of the Rich. “Prison seemed to have changed him and *he* went around with a strange new air of myth about him, as if he had conceived heroic roles for himself during the short time he had been away” (183). The photographer plays a gallant role in essaying the community’s battle against ghastly politics and forming it into newspaper headlines. Azaro is amazed at something that they did with such dearth of planning, something that they *had done* in such a petite curve of the enormous sphere that could gain such eminence.

Drastically, the photographer elucidates the revulsion of execution as something proceeding in “another continent” (305). When inquired why “some, white people” hanged the man, the photographer enlightens Azaro, who “is too young to hear all this,” that it is for the reason that they are not fond of piano melody. Couched in piano composition is “the unity of the black and white keys, a metaphor of racial connectedness” (Cooper 109). With the imagery of piano harmony, the photographer thumps upon a collective precision of ethnic prejudice and chauvinistic mistreatment. His larger acquaintance and know-how upsurge the reliability of his plot in the novel. Through his camera, the photographer is proficient enough to perceive the humankind with “a third eye” and to arbitrate amid what is observed and what isn’t, creating the indiscernible belongings perceptible and refashioning diverse perspectives of illustrating actuality, even portraying it in a manner that is impressive for the benefit of illuminating truth otherwise overlooked and veiled.

*The Famished Road* represents a vibrant portrait of substantial and metaphysical backdrop. Okri not only confronts the image of Africa as imperialist “spheres of influence” but also makes up an all-embracing discourse stuck between European and African creed and aesthetics. His mythical imagination intermittently dwells upon the pliability of spirit, the suppleness of aesthetics and the competence of dreaming (Wilkinson 86). He denounces the omnipresent sleaze and brutality in existing Nigeria, bestowing accent to the underprivileged and defenseless African population and recounting the enduring row amidst Western and aboriginal ethnicity in postcolonial Africa.



Every individual's truth is credulous; it is a straightforward actuality that no one in the globe can get rid off or even get away from this state of fallacy. The scientist's too visualizes the earth as superstitious for the reason that it is an interim portrayal of reality. The performer is superstitious, for an identical means since it rules out, the individual who has acquired an incredibly sturdy spiritual conviction is superstitious as their values erect the cosmos, every individual's universe, every individual's insight of the planet and of time is inimitable - It is a world in itself.

Homi K. Bhabha illustrates the postcolonial perception as being surfaced out from the colonial evidences of the Third World realms and the discussion of minorities with the geopolitical separation of East and West, North and South. Postcoloniality is an artifact of cultural dislocation and societal prejudice where political survivors grow to be the best historical spectator of this antagonism. It entails the yearning for sovereignty, the longing for affirmation and subjugated natives to salvage and reassert their subdued aboriginal cultural ethnicity and histories. Postcolonial writings are lexis of the experiences of the marginalized, dislodged and browbeaten civilization and their pursuit to retrieve their affluent historical ideals from the cesspit of imperial ascendancy. It is an aspiration that bestowed momentum to supernatural realism as a facet of postcolonial discussion that materializes to confront the very schema.

Okri's application of *abiku* myth is basically an additional scholarly endeavor to recognize the fact with which he incessantly thrives in a structure of naturalistic – as against scientific rationalism. He scrutinizes that the mythic tactics in the literary works are employed to narrate the tales pertaining to Africa's historical background, its miseries, its invisibility and its delusion, and to demonstrate how Africa is professed. His folk tales emphasize the intertwined liaison amidst political affairs and creed; he rearticulates the picture of the homeland; and intensifies the understanding about identity, inter-group affiliation and the humanistic quest of the universal good. *The Famished Road* is a lighthouse on the mounting hunger amongst the populace; from the child to the beggars, the starvation is overriding. The title of the work corresponds to the subject matter of hunger. The boulevard is famished, the Nigerian inhabitants are hungry. The novel illustrates Nigeria as an *abiku* population, Azaro as the bystander of each and every event that symbolizes an unborn realm. The beggars are the depictions of the paucity incapacitated citizens of Africa. The community of slums is impecunious as occupant. They earn their livelihood by manual labour, and Azaro's family is one among this faction, his Dad carries a towering optimism to transform Nigeria.

Okri delineates the white masters ludicrously. The depiction of Madame Koto leading a patrician and grandiose life is an apt portrayal of royal whites. She is no less than a queen who is always guarded and escorted by scores of women in her routine living. She has orderlies carrying umbrella and such like things for her comfort. The blind elderly man is a true copy of an opportunist who fits very well in to Madame Koto's side, for he is the one who believes in walking with the influential. However, Dad's character imparts the inhabitants an effervescent vigor. On one hand the boxing moves us towards the conventional African way of life and on the other hand it sets up Dad to encounter and eventually copes up with destitution. Representing the



intensely deprived community, he comes to blows with Green Leopard and yellow Jaguar and trounces them. Green Leopard is the spirit of the grand champion boxer and Yellow Jaguar belongs to the globe of spirits. His eternal resistance inspires the indigenous population to refute the quandary and conquer their subsistence. Dad as the defender and campaigner of the underprivileged always reflects on metamorphosing the human race. Dad's reverie is to become a politician, a savior and thus to transform the fortune of Nigeria. He is an adherent of the Party of the deprived, the Poor, his inner and outer vehemence in opposition to Madame Koto, the proprietor and the besmirched Party of the Rich is a pictogram of resident's distress against the colonizers. The characters are in jumble and in nightmarish. The central character is proficient enough to observe both the genuine and the spirit world. A multitude of spirits with seven-headed spirits takes part in a vital responsibility in shaping the avant-garde plot of *The Famished Road*. Being proscribed by the aliens - the whites - Okri proposes that the inhabitants believe in an ocean alike world of spirits. It is noteworthy that no one other than Azaro can perceive both the real and the spirit worlds. The ghetto is in the vicinity of the woodland and he is able to witness the deeds operational at Madame Koto's tavern and as well can spot his spirit cohorts. Okri portrays the putrefaction and dilapidation subsequent to the annihilation in the sixth decade of the twentieth century. All the way through fancy, he confers magnitude to the ascendancy of Nigerian conservative conviction in the world of spirits. As per as the writer is concerned, for him, the Nigerians ought to go to their distant past to salvage those ethics in order to chuck out the hegemonic description.

The novel articulates the significance of African prosperous history in which the ancestors are being remembered and revered. As Mum enlightens Azaro, "When the white people came to our land, we had already gone to the moon and all the great stars. In the olden days they used to come and learn from us. My father used to tell me that that we taught them how to count.... We shared or knowledge with them" (325). Mum's outlook towards the ancestors is an accolade to the incredibly "learned people" who illumine conduit to others. The whites have at this moment elapsed all that which the Africans taught and trained them. "The second time they came they brought guns. They carried away many of our people to become slaves across the sea" (325). The whites convince Africans to disregard and overlook their times of yore and ancestors' grandeur, conversely, Ben Okri puts all his efforts to perk up that lost splendor. Dad too entreats to the divinity to revitalize Nigerians' credence on the local deities. In precolonial conviction, the spirit and cryptic globe is also real where the foliage converse and have spirits. Via the exemplar of the tree spirits, the author draws attention to the Nigerians' faith on the spirits in vegetation. Illustrating the dead, amused and singing, Ben Okri crafts the gyratory spirit of the deceased. The colonials have a strapping faith in the elements of prudence, judiciousness, logic and reason, while the Nigerians believe in the heaven and the soul. Okri aspires to persuade of what is 'above the physical,' turning 'this worldliness' being swapped by 'that worldliness.' In the same streak Hinduism too is known for carrying credence in the notion of soul and reincarnation. Lord Krishna in Bhagvad Gita conjectures that the soul is perpetual; it is *Atma* that is an exclusive authority of human body. Africa deems on the "soul" humanity figuring Azaro and Ade as paradigms of the conception of soul.



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