

An International Journal of Language, Literature and Gender Studies
(LALIGENS), Ethiopia
Vol. 4 (2), Serial No 10, May, 2015: 45-64
ISSN: 2225-8604(Print) ISSN 2227-5460 (Online)
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/laligens.v4i2.4>

Postcolonialism as a Reading Strategy: Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*

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Abstract

This paper adopts post-colonialism as a reading strategy, by focusing, particularly, on post-colonialism as one of the most current of post-theories and as a peculiar literary theory which reflects or mirrors the conditions of 'post-Colonial' (third world) societies. It analyzes the characteristic features which Ben Okri employs in his literary text, *The Famished Road*. The paper aims at determining the extent to which these features reflect the postcolonial literary ideal. For easy and plausible analysis, the paper attempts an examination of the text through the paradigms of thematic concerns, formal techniques and discursive strategies. The significance of the study is that it shows how post-colonialism can help bring out meanings of literary texts. . The study finds that Okri uses meta-narratives to represent the imprint of the material forces of politics, economics and culture that act upon post-colonial societies within imperial framework. Within these, Okri reflects on post-colonial themes of dispossession, displacement, colonial and neo-colonial domination, post-colonial corruption, cultural fragmentation, change, problematic of post-colonial identity, alienation and exile.

Key Words: Post-colonialism and Theory, Post-colonial Societies, Political Corruption, Colonial Imperialism, Neo-colonial Domination, Post-colonial Identity, Reading Strategies, Literary Interpretation

Introduction

As a way of re-echoing Terence Hawke's observation, "...we are living in a time of radical change," and "Modes and categories inherited from the past no longer fit the reality experienced by a new generation" ("General Editor's Preface vii-viii). It seems this rapid radical change is more apparent in the field of literary studies. This is evident in the multiplicity of methods of analysis, concepts of literary forms and modes, notions of the nature of literature and views of literature's role in society that have emerged since Aristotle's classical period.

In the field of literary criticism, for instance, M.H. Abrams has identified four major orientations that have, over the years, been employed in the criticism of art: mimetic, pragmatic, expressive and objective orientations. The mimetic orientation sees art essentially as an imitation of aspects of the universe. The pragmatic orientation views art as an imitation with an end to pleasing and ultimately to teaching. The expressive orientation defines poetry, in Wordsworth's terms, as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings". In other words, poetry is the overflow, utterance or projection of the thoughts and feelings of the poet. The objective orientation regards the work of art in isolation from the external points of reference. This orientation sees the work of art as being self-referential – art for art's sake ("Orientation of Critical Theories, 5, 11, 17, 21).

Within the spectra of these four major critical orientations have emerged various literary theories which fall under the four groupings of Mimetic Theories, Pragmatic Theories, Expressive Theories and Objective Theories. Of these four theoretical groupings, the dialectical argument on the nature and function of art has been more vociferous among the critical theorists of the more recent Objective Theories. In fact, the dialectical argument of the objective theories has spanned the evolution of such literary theories as the nineteenth century French Symbolism, the Russian Formalism, New Criticism, the trio-theories of Phenomenology, Hermeneutics and Reception Theory, Marxism, Feminism, Structuralism, Post-Structuralism, Deconstruction, Modernism, Post-Modernism and Post-Colonialism.

Our intention in this paper is not to dwell on the dialectical argument about the nature and the function of art, but to focus particularly on Post-Colonialism, not only as one of the most current of post-theories, but also as a peculiar literary theory which reflects or mirrors the conditions of the 'post-Colonial' (third world) societies.

Post-Colonialism and Theory

The idea that post-colonialism has as its primary task the deconstruction of the assumptions of totalism implies some forms of inadequacy in European theory in handling the complex and culturally varied post-colonial literary texts. We may not be able to contest the position of the post-colonial ideal having some short-comings, especially as virtually every theory that has emerged in pursuit of knowledge is known to have one short-coming or the other. But to completely write off post-colonialism as a theory that was “invented by Western Theory as a convenient nomenclatural handle on their epistemic spheres of influence”, as Niyi Osundare has done in his “African Literature and the Crises of Post-Structuralist Theorising” (8), indicate the condition of not only being too narrowly Afro-centric, but also of being too close-minded. Without doubts, post-colonialism certainly has something to offer.

To agree with Osundare, it is true that the colonial past is still painfully present in our post-colonial societies. But to continue to dwell on and bemoan the painfulness of the colonial past is like a mother who, not willing to let go of the painful memories of labour, refuses to give birth to more children. And to pick up quarrel with the post-colonial ideal for attempting to discourage us from dwelling on the woes of the colonial past is also like the aggrieved mother who picks up quarrel with anyone who attempts to dissuade her from dwelling on those painful experiences of labour.

It is of great importance to note along with Bill Ashcroft, Griffiths and Helen Tiffin:

The idea of ‘post-colonial theory’ emerges from the inability of European Theory to deal adequately with the complexities and varied cultural provenance of post-colonial writing (“Introduction” 11).

The weakening factor of European theory is inherent in their false assumption of totality. This is to say, the European theories possess presumptuous notion, which European canons of literature can and should be used to evaluate the literatures of post-colonial societies. Post-colonial, indigenous theories, therefore, emerged with the aims of disclaiming this wrong assumption of totality by European theory, accommodating the differences within various cultural and literary traditions of post-colonial societies, as well as describing in a comparative way, features shared across the traditions.

Another very important issue in the examination of the post-colonial ideal against European theories is the concept of political and cultural monocentrism. An offshoot of the colonial enterprise, this concept sees the universe as a cultural and political entity with Europe as centre, and the rest of the world as margin. This is where the concept of binarism also emanated. To European theorists, the universe bifocates into two: centre/other or periphery, metropolis/provinces, self/other, etc.

These relationships, in a way, also suggest those of dominating/dominated and colonizer/colonized.

The concept of monocentrism, biased as it may seem, projects a modicum of favour for the post-colonial societies which the purported European centre regards as margin. This favour is in the sense that the alienating process of monocentrism which primarily aims at projecting the European opinion of universality, ironically becomes the catalyst for arousing post-colonial societies' sense of self-awareness. That is to say, having been pushed beyond the peripheral border of 'European world' through the dominating tendency of the 'centre', the post-colonial 'margin' could no longer see itself as belonging to the 'European Universe'. Instead, it begins to see itself as constituting distinct national or regional entities. From this realization arises the need for the distinguishing of the Third World of post-colonial societies for the universality and monocentrism of the First World of the Europeans. In this way, especially to the post-colonial theorists, the purported 'centre' became 'uncentred', and the 'universe' became pluralistic and multifarious. In trying to emphasize the otherness of the 'other' from European 'self', the post-colonial societies indeed began to project their sense of self-hood, and consider Europe as the dominating 'other'. This was as a result of the need to preserve selfhood against all hazards.

Consequently, the post-colonial theory is that which seeks to establish differences between the 'centre' and the 'margin'; the colonizing 'self' and the colonized 'other'; the dominating 'metropolis' and the dominated 'provinces'; and the distinction between the European First World and the Post-colonial Third World. It is, in fact, an attempt to establish the peculiarities of post-colonial societies and their various cultural and literary traditions. The post-colonial theory emphasizes the value of the local and the particular over the universal and the eternal.

So far in this paper, we have been able to look at the nature of post-colonial theory and the way in which it interacts with, and dismantles some of the assumptions of European theory. In this, the Post-colonial theory does not only seek to establish the differences between the 'centre' and the 'margin', but it also attempts to establish the peculiarities of post-colonial societies and their various cultural and literary traditions.

A Post-Colonial Analysis of Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*

In this section, I am undertaking to analyse the characteristic features which Ben Okri employs in his literary text, *The Famished Road*. This is to determine the extent to which these features reflect the post-colonial literary ideal. For easy and plausible analysis, I am looking at the text through the paradigms of thematic Concerns, formal techniques and discursive strategies.

Thematic Concerns

In *The Famished Road*, Ben Okri employs as his grand-narrative, the ancient myth of the spirit-child. He creatively reconstructs this ancient African myth to mirror and reflect the heartlessness and innate depravity of human beings, as well as the aimlessness, mysteries, sufferings and atrocious evils inherent in the entire human society (especially capitalistic societies).

He does this by juxtaposing and sharply contrasting the world of the living with the world of spirits. In this way, atrocious evils and acute depravity of human beings in the world of the living are conspicuously foregrounded against the backdrop of eternal beauties and melodious serenity of the spirit world.

But apart from the grand-narrative of the spirit-child through which Okri comments generally on the depraved and uninhabitable condition of the human society, there are also sporadic and episodic meta-narratives through which he represents imprints of material forces of politics, economics and culture which act upon the Nigerian peasant life within the imperial framework.

We see material forces of politics in the political campaigns between the Party of the Rich and the Party of the Poor. For those who support the Party of the Rich, there is affluence, power and acceptance within the society as exemplified by the persons of Madam Koto and the Landlord; whereas for the supporters of the Party of the Poor, there is poverty, hardship and rejection, as experienced by Azaro's father, the Carpenter and their families. Okri's notion of politics in the Nigerian context is a game of deception and hypocrisy. Even the promises that politics offer are empty promises that eventually and ultimately turn out to be "rotten milk" that brings sickness and pain to the entire community.

On the economic aspect, Okri presents to us a world where only those who engage in corrupt practices get the best things that life has to offer. He depicts a world where such people as political thugs and prostitutes get the good things of life without much effort, while the law-abiding citizens who work so hard to eke out a living get little or nothing commensurate to their efforts. For instance, Madam Koto, her thugs, the prostitutes and the landlord do little or no work, yet they wear the best clothes, and enjoy the best food, drinks and merriment; whereas such people as Azaro's father and the carpenter engage in all sorts of menial jobs and work their fingers to the bone, together with their wives who walk all the roads of the world in attempt to sell even a little of their provision; but they get little or nothing in return for all their labour. These "wretched of the earth" suffer untold hardship in the face of the harsh economic reality, as well as stand, painfully, as onlookers or spectators, as their less hardworking counterparts squander the society's hard-earned wealth in wanton and riotous merry-making.

For Black Tyger, the struggle for survival is fuelled by the desire to meet the needs of his family, and, but much more, by a mental and spiritual hunger. Azaro's father is seeking a means of improving his social status within the society. He is also seeking to understand some of the mysterious elements and riddles of the universe and of life. With each of his economic engagements, he seemingly attains higher knowledge, both of the society in which he lives and of the world in general. From the period he was a load carrier at the market to the time he was a night-soil-man, and then to the glorious moments of his fighting bouts, Black Tyger seems to grow from ignorance to experience. In fact, Azaro's father apparently underwent a process of metamorphosis or spiritual rebirth with each of those engagements. Consequently, at the end of the text, Black Tyger has grown from being a timid man who was being defeated by the vicissitudes of life, a man without any hope for the future, to a champion who has defeated all the opposing forces of life, and who is having the vision of a glowing hope for the future. At this point, Black Tyger has grown from being a man who is living within the precincts of his very limited knowledge to a man who is boundless in knowledge, potentials and freedom. He has grown from being a man who is confined to the narrow scope of his prejudices (especially for politics) to being a man who has gotten rid of his prejudices and, instead, has embraced politics – however, not the politics of “rotten milk”, but the politics that has a sincere, and even exaggerated, consideration for the poor, the beggars and the needy in the society. In short, Azaro's father can be grouped among the few human beings of the world who, though, “were born blind”, but who later “learn to see” (3).

The themes of exile and alienation are also discernable in Okri's text. Azaro, the spirit-child, feels some sense of alienation in a world that is replete with unfathomable mysteries; a world that is full of riddles that neither the living nor the dead can understand. But much more than this, Azaro's sense of exile and alienation is more pronounced in his not being completely at home with either of the two worlds to which he is attached. As much as he wanted to taste of the world of the living, “to feel it, suffer it, know it, to love it, to make a valuable contribution to it” (5). Azaro, like all the other spirit-children, was soon to experience the shock of being born into the world of the living from which he never recovered. The shock and his sense of exile are not unconnected with his dislike for

the rigours of existence, the unfulfilled longings, the enshrined injustices of the world, the labyrinths of love, the ignorances of parents, the fact of dying and the amazing indifferences of the living... the heartlessness of human beings, all of whom are born blind, few of whom ever learn to see (3).

These, coupled with the innumerable and inscrutable images and mysteries of life, make Azaro and his spirit companions to feel that, “to be born is to come into the

world weighed down with strange gifts of the soul, with enigmas and an inextinguishable sense of exile” (5). This is the reason why they always long for an early home-coming. They find it difficult “to entirely loose contact with that other world of light and rainbows and possibilities” (9). The spirit world, to them, is a “world of pure dreams, where there is no suffering” (4). It is, in short, a place of consolation, happiness and freedom – a place which blossoms with the eternal beauty of nature and is eternally filled with the most enticing melodies.

But in spite of the eternal glamour and attraction of the spirit world, Azaro has reason for breaking his pact with his spirit companions, and for not willing to return to the spirit world. Somehow, Azaro feels within himself an unwillingness to return to the land of the unborn where his other spirit companions are eagerly waiting to welcome him back home with melodious songs. But, at the same time, he does not feel thrilled living in the midst of the atrocious evils of the human society. He finds himself “oscillating between both worlds”. And with this oscillation comes the sense of exile. His unwillingness and inability to blend with the human society make him to stand aloof and view the human activities, and even the activities of the spirit beings, with, so to say, an open mouth.

On the forces of culture, Ben Okri largely depicts the potency of the supernatural. In a way, his text is animated by the conspicuous presence of the supernatural forces in the human society. This is mainly in the sense that not only do spirit beings mingle with and, in some cases, influence the actions of human beings, but the living consciously or unconsciously invoke or conjure up the spirit beings in their daily activities. With this, Okri seems to be saying that the world of the living is not complete without the presence of spirit beings and all other forms of creatures. In other words, it is a world of the good, the bad and the ugly.

But much more than that, Okri also portrays the cultural aspects of the African society. He particularly presents the herbalistic and superstitious tendencies of the African man. Madam Koto is the character through whom Okri seemingly presents the African medicine man. Her continual pre-occupation with sacrifices, consultations with and invocation of ancestral spirits help to reflect the African’s belief in the link between the dead and the living; as well as the African’s belief in the protective role of ancestors.

Also on the cultural aspect, the communal tendency of the African society is presented in the way the people in Azaro’s neighbourhood relate one with another. During the celebration of Azaro’s home-coming, as well as the periods of Black Tyger’s recuperations, not only do the poor people of the area come around to express their joy and sympathy as occasions demanded, but even the awe-inspiring and wealthy Madam Koto often comes to play her own communal role.

In a similar way, each of Black Tyger's practices and fighting bouts presents an opportunity for members of the community to come together to share in the conviviality of neighbourliness. The women hawkers see them as opportunities to sell off their wares to spectators, while the men take advantage of them to share opinions among themselves. Even for children, it was a time to make friends as was the case of Azaro and Ade. These scenes are, in a way, reminiscent of the African traditional wrestling matches through which African communities are entertained.

The African story-telling tradition is also employed by Okri to mirror African cultural practices. Just like the African child, Azaro is, at every opportunity, imploring an elderly one to tell him a story. And the elders have often responded in the true African way of either telling a story laden with wisdom and lessons for the youth or telling the child why it was unsafe to tell a story at such an unhealthy period (due to superstition). In most cases, the stories told to Azaro serve as meta-narratives through which Okri presents his episodic narratives.

In all, Ben Okri has, in one way or the other, presented a variety of themes, as well as presented imprints of the forces of politics, economics and culture on an African (Nigerian) society.

Formal Techniques

One of the formal techniques employed by Ben Okri in *The Famished Road* is that of magic realism. This is obviously seen in his characteristic mixing of the fantastic and the realistic in telling his story. To a very large extent, Okri's novel is a portrayal of the real world amidst the supernatural and the fantastic. With the spirit-child eternally hovering between the spirit world and the world of the living, the scenario presented throughout the text is akin to that of a fairy tale. But when we come to realization that the story is set in the world of the living, in fact in the neighbourhood of Azaro's household, then the realistic in the novel becomes pronounced.

The fantastic in Okri's text is seen in the invasion of the world of the living by spirit children, ghosts, ancestral beings and demons. Though set in the human society, the scenes emit the bizarre atmospheres that are characteristic of gothic fiction. This is much more pronounced in the policeman's house of ghosts, the shrine of the cult of silent women, as well as the scenes at Madam Koto's bar. For instance, in the policeman's house of ghosts was the pervasive presence of incubus, homunculus, and the different forms of ghosts, including the omnipresent ghost of the police officer's son, coupled with the eternal murmurings of the policemen during their fraternal and ritualistic swearing of the oath of allegiance through their little feathered goddess. One can almost imagine a shiver run down the spine of Azaro as a photograph of the police officer's son crashed to the floor. Also, Madam Koto's bar

seems to be the relaxation spot for both spirit beings and human beings. The spirit beings, in their various deformed forms, find joy in coming to drink the wine and pepper soup of the living as well as chat with the few human beings that also come there. In this way, Madam Koto's bar is seen as a microcosm of the macrocosm – a representation of the larger melting pot; a mini-society where all beings converge.

In his presentation of the fantastic and the real, Ben Okri constructs an imaginary life which, to use Gareth Griffiths' words, goes beyond "the anchoring historicity of a fixed ... geographical context" ("Being There, Being There" 14). This, especially, is in the sense of the spirit-child's journey to the known and the 'real' world, as well as being cut adrift from the identifiable features of the world. This kind of perception, in the view of Griffiths, is seen as "modes which displace the assumptions of immutability in Eurocentric discourses and taxonomies of place and time" (141). Also, with this kind of perception, Okri is able to comment on the existing world of limitations and boundries, as well as attempt to create a new and alternative one. That is to say, through the myth of the spirit-child, Okri tends to deconstruct both the geographical and metaphorical boundaries and limitations of the universe, and advocate for a boundless world – a world where even the spirit beings and human beings are free to come together without the slightest trace of prejudices.

Literalization of images is also noticeable in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*. Okri, in this novel, metaphorically presents life's endless journeys in the image of the road and the myth of the spirit-child. In this text, Okri's pictorial animation of the road and Azaro's endless wandering, tend to emphasize the ultimate truth in life: "You have to travel many roads before you can find the river of your destiny" (6).

But here, Okri employs a technique which is most fascinating. In the text, while it could be seen that it is the spirit-child, Azaro, who is made to physically wander the roads, the reality is that it is his father who is doing the actual wandering. As he searches for the river of his destiny, Azaro's father wanders from being a load-carrier at the market to being a nightsoil man, then to being a famous boxer, and, finally, to being a humane politician. Just as the spirit-child has to go through many births, so also his father, Black Tyger, has to undergo many rebirths in his search for self-realization.

With this technique, Okri seems to be saying that, there is the man in the child; and that, the nation, and even the world, is in the individual; that just as the spirit-child wanders the roads of life and undergoes several rebirths, so also must the the individual, the nation and the universe need to undergo several rebirths in continuous cycles in their search for fulfilment; and that, just as the road has no end and no final destination, so also the world and its inhabitants have no final destination. Thus, to Ben Okri, life is a continuous process.

But, apart from the main images of the road and of the spirit-child, Ben Okri also employs other images in his attempt to reflect the inscrutability and hardness of life. These include the images of Azaro's father swallowed up by a hole in the road; his Mum dangling from the branches of a tree; Azaro's hands covered with the yellow blood of a stranger; as well as images of a prison, a woman covered with golden boils, pitiless sunlight, a flood, an earthquake, and death (7). All these images characteristically point to the harsh realities of life in post-colonial African societies. In addition to these, there are other images that reflect Okri's particular focal point: the Nigerian post-independence situation. An example is the felled tree which drips blood, which Okri likens to "A Murdered Giant whose blood wouldn't stop flowing" (6, Capitalization Mine). It is an undeniable fact that literary artists have continued to employ such images as murdered giant, raped woman, sucked land and corpse for predators to depict Nigeria's deplorable condition after the colonial era. Ben Okri's case appears to be one of such.

Still on animation of imagery, one thing that is apparent in the language of Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, is that life is given to virtually every object. In it, the narrator could swear that he "listened to all the sounds of the house"; that "There were voices everywhere".

I heard the air whispering, the walls talking, the chair complaining, the floor pacing, the insects gossiping.... Figures move about in the darkness. I saw yellow beings stirring, white forms floating, blue shadows flying about the ceiling. (21)

Also, "a photograph of the police officer's son crashed to the floor" (23). Azaro could "hear the peculiar dialogue of the flies around his (madman's) ear" (17); the talking of a giant turtle, the growl of thunder and the crackling of lightning" (26). Azaro could sense hunger in his voice, "the fury of an empty stomach", as well as see "when night was beginning to change mood" (27), when "the road woke up" and fires sprouting over rubbish heaps (11). With these animations of images and similar others, Okri places into our hands a novel that is so full of life, that if it is not held firmly, it could probably jump out of our hands and run off. As one reads through its pages, one can almost hear the audible murmurings, as well as see the visible swarms of spirits all around. No wonder Linda Grants comments: "When I finished the book and went outside, it was as if all the trees of South London had angels sitting in them" (*Independent on Sunday*).

Discursive Strategies

Perhaps the most appropriate starting point for a discussion of the discursive strategies employed by any literary work of art is to consider its narrative techniques. Consequently, we shall begin this section by examining the narrative techniques

employed in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, after which we shall go ahead to look at how other forms of discursive strategies such as irony, allegory, self-reflexivity, doubleness, playfulness, etc. are employed in the design of our text under study.

As we pointed out in the section under thematic concerns, the story Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* tells is based on the ancient African myth of the spirit-child (abiku). The main narrator is Azaro, the spirit-child, who tells his story in third person, past tense, omniscient way. With this, Azaro is not only distanced from the activities which he describes, but is, in fact, "displaced" and, to use Griffiths' words, "cut adrift from the anchoring historicity of a fixed ... geographical context", as well as from the identifiable features of the world ("Being there, being there" 142).

With his narrative distance, occasioned by his belonging properly to neither the world of the living nor the world of spirits, Azaro serves as a narrator who is capable of giving an objective and unbiased judgment of the activities that go on in the two worlds. This is more so when we come to the realization that Azaro, as a spirit child, has had the rare privilege of experiencing the two worlds. In the same way, Azaro's ability to see into and through things as well as hear and understand the inaudible voices of spirits, plants and animals place him in a better stead to interpret the inscrutable riddles of life. But for the simple fact that life's riddles are inaccessible to neither the living nor the dead, he does not make any attempt to crack the hard nuts of life. Instead, he presents the facts of life just as he sees them in the two worlds.

Though the narrative technique employed in *The Famished Road* is similar to that of the naïve narrator, it is a bit different from it. This is in the sense that though Azaro is a child, his hindsight, sight and foresight are more than those of a child. His ability to see and know what is going on in other people's minds, enter into and participate in other people's dreams, listen to and converse with spirits and animals, as well as project into the future or look back into the past equips him with a special knowledge which is far beyond that of the child, or even of an adult. But Okri presents Azaro as someone who is not conscious of the powers which he possesses. For this reason, Azaro does not take undue advantage of the powers. He merely sees himself appearing and disappearing, flying in the air or roaming in the stomach of the earth, in people's dreams or in the underworld of spirits. This is the area where he comes close to the naïve narrator.

However, Azaro's boldness, daring impudence and fearlessness displayed in his confrontations with grotesque and frightening figures, reveal that he is more than a child. For instance, when he meets the talking giant turtle, he does not display any sign of surprise or fear; instead, he converses freely with the turtle in the following dialogue: (the turtle speaking first):

‘Why are you shouting?’

‘I’m lost.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘I don’t know where I am.’

‘You are in the under-road’

‘Where is that?’

‘The stomach of the road!’

‘Does the road have a stomach?’

‘Does the sea have a mouth?’

‘I don’t know’.

‘That’s your business’.

‘I want to go home’.

‘I don’t know where your home is’, the turtle said, ‘So I can’t help you’.

Then it lumbered away. (17)

In another situation where Azaro meets his exact replica, he does not flinch. Instead, the following dialogue ensues, with the other person speaking first:

‘What are you doing here?’

‘Me?’

‘What about you?’

‘What about me?’

‘Why do you ask?’

‘Because I want to know.’

‘I am on a message.’

‘What message?’

‘To you.’

‘To me?’

‘Yes’

‘What is the message?’

‘I was sent to tell you to go home.’

‘That’s what I am trying to do.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes, of course. Anyway, who sent you?’

‘Who do you think?’

‘I don’t know!’

‘Our king!’

‘What king?’

‘The great king.’

‘Where is he?’

‘What sort of question is that?’

‘you look like me,’ I said

‘It’s you who looks like me’, he replied. (66-67)

Azaro’s bold utterances and daring questions to adults and the various strange, unusual and frightening figures that appear before him, show that he is indeed a peculiar and an extra-ordinary child – a child who is more than an adult. This, in a way, makes his narration to be objective or near objective; and to be valid or near valid. With Azaro as the narrator, we can see beyond the ordinary – the human description of the extra-ordinary events of the two worlds – the world of the living and the spirit-world.

One may therefore say that, with the mind, the eyes and the voice of the spirit-child, Ben Okri has been able to reflect on the boundless and limitless universe. He is able to go beyond the limits of a fixed geographical and spatial context in order to paint a more objective picture of the universe. What Okri appears to be advocating with this is that all, especially the literary artists, need to possess the mind and eyes of the spirit-child in order to give objective and valid representations of the happenings around us – representations which are free from prejudices that are based on spatial and geographical limitations.

One of the discursive features that Ben Okri has exploited, probably more than any other African writer, is the technique of ironic doubleness. With his internationally acclaimed masterpiece, *The Famished Road*, Okri has been able to depict, to use Linda Hutcheon’s words, “the sense of being caught between two worlds” (“Circling the Downspout of Empire” 163). Azaro, the spirit-child, seems to

be the allegorical figure of the displaced post-colonial man who is neither here nor there. He does not feel a sense of belonging in the new, mysterious and foreign world into which he has been born neither does he possess a strong, resolute and firm determination to return to the blissful land of beginnings where there are no boundaries. He, indeed, finds himself eternally “Oscillating between both worlds” (8).

This is in the sense that the post-colonial man feels a sense of loss and still longs for the blissful ‘land of the beginnings’ where there were no boundaries and limitations and in which the cultural practices and values of the people were still intact. But with the harrowing colonial/imperial experiences, the post-colonial man and his cultural values has become so contaminated by the foreign culture that he no longer can fit into nor return to his original state in the land of the beginning, neither can he claim to belong to the new and foreign world. And this brings about the sense of being caught between two worlds. With this sense of exile and oscillation between both worlds comes the difficulty of surviving in the foreign world. In connection to this, Black Tyger, like the spirit-child, is seen hovering and floating about in his attempt to survive within the hostile post-colonial society.

With the technique of ironic doubling, Okri seemingly attempts a construction of a self-reflexivity revelatory doubling in which the metaphor of the spirit-child ironizes and parodizes the colonial experience. Okri’s text is, in a way, a shadow of the Eurocentric text. Like the images produced by the photographer, the text presents the experience, to employ Laura Mulvey’s description, “the way that photographic aesthetics have apotheosized the decisive moments” (10). He does this by valorising those ugly incidents that would, otherwise, have been excluded in the dominant pattern. Okri literalizes this through the threatening presence of the photographer, his camera and his indomitable and indefatigable resolve to record and publish the good and the bad sides of the post-colonial society through his invented medium, the class cabinet. It is through the photographer’s pictures displayed in the glass cabinet that the society is informed about the ugly incidents that are taking place in the political scene as well as in the social and economic scenes of the society. Okri, in this text, apparently infer that, nothing that is done in the society can escape the eagle-eye of the photographer’s camera; that even when the agents of government try to destroy and eliminate the camera, the photographer and the glass cabinet from the society, in one way or the other, they escape destruction and remain to continue to record and publish the unmitigated atrocities of the human society.

This case would be much more foregrounded if we relate it to a former Nigerian Government versus the Press situation. It is undeniable that in Nigeria, especially in the hay days of military regimes, government, for one reason or the other, has always been on the lookout for opportunities to either exploit the press for

its own advantage or destroy it and its journalists where they are found to be antagonistic to government or agents of government. The killing of Dele Giwa, the incessant closures of media houses and the continuous incarceration of media executives and journalists in Nigeria point to this fact. However, as earlier observed, Okri, in this text, apparently expresses the opinion that the Press remains the indestructible medium through which the society will continue to be informed of happenings in the society, whether good or bad. It is worthy of note that even if the agents of government succeed in silencing the press by appropriating it for government use, there remains another voice, the literary artist, who will continue to record the events of society.

Serious and tragic as the post-colonial situation may seem, Okri also employs the technique of playfulness and pun to ridicule the colonial experience and its neo-colonial and post-colonial fallouts, as well as the displaced and eternally wandering post-colonial man. For instance, there is element of playfulness in the way the people react to the political campaigns of The Party of the Rich. This is seen in the mocking comments that are made following each of the amplified utterances of the Campaign Manager:

‘VOTE FOR US. WE ARE THE PARTY OF
THE RICH, FRIENDS OF THE POOR...’
‘The poor have no friends’; someone in the
crowd said, ‘Only rats,’
‘IF You VOTE FOR US....’
‘... we are finished,’ someone added.
‘... WE WILL FEED YOUR CHILDREN...’
‘.... lies.’
‘.... AND WE WILL BRING YOU GOOD ROADS...’
‘.... which the rain will turn into gutters...’
‘.... AND WE WILL BRING ELECTRICITY...’
‘.... so you can see better how to rob us!’
‘.... AND WE WILL BUILD SCHOOLS....’
‘.... to teach illiteracy!’
‘.... AND HOSPITALS. WE WILL MAKE YOU RICH

LIKE US. THERE IS PLENTY FOR EVERYBODY.
PLENTY OF FOOD. PLENTY OF POWER. VOTE
FOR UNITY AND POWER.

By this time the mocking voices were silent (123)

Here, the mocking voices of the people that counter the promises of the politicians suggest the insincerity of the promises given. However, their inability to sustain their mockery reflects the gullible nature of the masses. Their gullibility becomes much more pronounced when the politicians decide to give a proof of their promised abundance by dishing out free milk to all. This is seen in the unanimous greed with which they rush for the politicians' milk. Then, the gullibility of the mob is brought to a climax as they, with equal vehemence and alacrity, eventually wreak havoc on the politicians and burnt their van for their poisonous milk. (152-155).

Despite the seriousness of their havoc, one cannot help but laugh at the comic way in which the mob wrapped the landlord in his lace agbada and eventually wrenched it from his body and tore it into shreds. Other ludicrous events in the text include the various ways in which milk was spilt on people's faces and bodies, the screams and groans of people who were being trampled upon and the circumstances surrounding the beating of the politicians and the burning of their van.

Another instance of playfulness and pun is seen in the chants of the political thugs who unleashed mayhem on the neighbourhood at night:

'Kill the photographer'
'Beat the photographs out of him!'
'Finish him off!'
'Bind him.'
'Blind our enemies!'
'Destroy them!'
'Teach them a lesson.'
'Show them power!'
'Break their fingers.'
'Crack their heads!'
'Crush the photographer.'
'And leave his body in the street.'

‘For mocking our party.’

‘Our power!’

‘Our Leader!’ (179)

The counter-chant and attack of the people is also very humorous:

‘Fight them back!’

‘Fight for your freedom!’

‘Stone them!’

‘They poisoned us with milk.’

‘And words’

‘And promises!’

‘And they want to rule our country!’

‘Our lives!’

‘And now they attack us!’

‘On our own street!’

‘Fight them without fear!’ (180-181)

This pun is reminiscent of the tearing of the heart of Cinna the Poet from him in William Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*. Though one is prompted to laugh at the comic way it is related, the seriousness of the incident is, nevertheless, foregrounded. To a large extent, it reflects the neo-colonial domination tendency of African leaders who practise leadership by force, and the revolutionary tendency of the masses of post-colonial societies.

Still on the issue of playfulness and pun, Ben Okri, through the comments of spectators, makes mockery of Black Tyger who continues to pursue his boxing career and political ambition at the expense of his wife and sons:

‘His son starves.’

‘His wife is lean.’

‘Have you noticed that as he gets stronger....’

‘His son gets thinner.’

‘While his power increases....’

‘His wife’s presence decreases.’

‘While he learns new tricks....’
‘His son’s legs become like sticks.’
.....
‘He eats up all their food.’
.....
‘Something has entered his head?’
.....
‘Big man...’
‘With no shame.’
‘Big muscles...’
‘With no brain.’ (137)

Beyond the fact that it mocks Black Tyger himself, this pun seems to be a mockery of those men who, for one reason or the other, cannot provide for their families.

Ben Okri also, in various ways, makes mockery of the foolishness inherent in the struggles for ascendancy and the hypocritical religious wars. For instance, the scene on the senseless struggles of the princes for ascendancy ironically depicts and ridicules the issue of power tussles that are so common in post-colonial (particularly African) societies. With this scene, Okri implies that there is no sense in fighting and killing ourselves over ascendancy to power, to the neglect of the more important issues of development, growth and progress.

The ridiculous scene of the religious hypocrites who wage war against the GREAT WHORE OF THE APOCALYPSE points to the shamelessness with which religious fanatics pursue their causes. In this way, Okri unveils the ulterior motives of some of religious hypocrites: “They can publicly attack and criticise the GREAT WHORE OF THE APOCALYPSE and her practices, but are not ashamed of receiving favours from her.”

Okri has greatly employed the image of the rats to reflect on neo-colonial corruption, greed and avarice. As far as Azaro’s father is concerned, such people as the fake politicians, the affluent, the thugs, the greedy landlord, and the creditors are “RATS COWARDS THIEVES AND ROUGUES” (97). They are, indeed, heartless pests who continue to share and make life more miserable for the people. Ben Okri literalizes this by depicting the image of the rats that continually eat into the lives of people in the picture of the greedy landlord who eternally and selfishly munches at his kolanuts. The only thing that can eliminate the rats from the household is the

photographer's poison. When applied, it proves to be most effective. What Okri seems to be saying by this is that the press possesses a weapon with which to rid society of pests. This weapon, it is believed, is the potent voice of the writer.

Another image of pests is seen in the cigarettes and mosquito coils of Azaro's father that perpetually burn in the dark. Here, the perpetual burning of mosquito coils implies the perpetual presence of blood-sucking and blood-draining human pests in this dark world. The resolve of Azaro's father to kill and get rid of the mosquitoes through his ever-burning coils also signifies the resolve of man to eliminate murderous men from the human society. But more than this, the perpetual glow of Azaro's father's cigarettes and mosquito coils in the dark depicts a man who, engulfed in the darkness of the world is continually pondering on the inscrutable mysteries and riddles of life and how to resolve them. That the cigarettes and coils continue to glow in the dark reveals an undying hope in the midst of the prevalent darkness.

In another sense, the images of the rats, the ever burning cigarettes and mosquito coils, the three-legged chair, etc, are also employed by Okri to depict the abject poverty of Azaro's household. In fact the squalor in which Azaro and his household live is highly foregrounded in the scene of the celebration of Azaro's home-coming where the invited guests squeeze themselves in the hut of a room and sit on anything available including Azaro's father's boots and their clothes.

With the various instances of playfulness and pun in the text, Ben Okri has been able to present the serious issues of post-colonial African societies in such a comic way that the reader, in spite of the volume of the text, often finds himself laughing at the follies of the post-colonial man as he struggles to find his feet within the harsh and hostile realities of the post-colonial societies.

Conclusion

At this juncture, it suffices us to say that Ben Okri in *The Famished Road* employs a multiplicity of strategies and techniques in representing the various predominant themes of the post-colonial African (particularly Nigerian) societies. We have seen that Okri employs the ancient myth of the spirit-child as his grand-narrative. With this he is able to comment generally on the hostile and uninhabitable condition of the human society. Also, Okri uses other meta-narratives to represent the imprint of the material forces of politics, economics and culture which act upon the post-colonial societies within the imperial framework. Within these, Okri reflects on the post-colonial themes of dispossession, displacement, colonial and neo-colonial domination, post-colonial corruption, cultural fragmentation, change, problematic of post-colonial identity, alienation and exile.

Ben Okri has employed such formal techniques as magic realism, detailed description, literalization of metaphor and animation of imagery to comment on the boundless universal situation and the conditions of the post-colonial societies. In the same way, Okri employs such discursive features as the third person, past tense, omniscient narrative technique, irony, ironic doubleness, allegory, parody and playfulness with which he seemingly undermines and subverts the dominant pattern of representation of events. Deriving from the foregoing, Ben Okri has employed a variety of post-colonial features in *The Famished Road*.

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