

# A Panorama of Societal Ramifications in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*

**Dr. K. Saranya., M.A., M. Phil., Ph. D**  
**Guest Lecturer,**  
**Periyar University Constituent College of Arts and Science,**  
**Idappadi, Salem-637 102.**  
**Email id: saran92ponmani@gmail.com**

## **Abstract:**

This paper means to give an overview on the authorial reticence and authentic expression of Ben Okri in connection with Yoruba myth to explore the political perception extensively. Okri's voice gives an eye opening vision at the end of dark days. Being a professional writer Okri has largely recognized that he should transcend the exploited Nigeria for the betterment of the nation and betterment of the moral privilege of the people. This paper especially focusses on Okri's intelligible treatment of his fiction as a social statement true to reality as a means of political reawakening. This paper explains the impression of social status of Nigerians in developing and advancing condition.

## **Key Terms: Nigerian Literature, Transformation, Societal Change.**

The powerful pen draws and records the breath taking and awe-struck narratives and adds visions to conquer the human minds. The striking beauty of undiscovered enchantment is the outcome of mighty pen. Spread across such remarkable level of quality in his writings, Ben Okri has sharpened the aesthetic erudition consistently. Okri's remarkable height in writing is more prodigious because of his limitless and everlasting source of Nigerian mythology and the elements of it. It has enabled him to reach the height of greatness. His writings are largely based on the culture and beliefs of his continent and country. Okri consciously mirrors the chaos of daily life, and satirically presents in his works of art. Okri is critical of the political and economic problems that Nigeria has encountered in many aspects.

Before moving into the paper, brief explanation on Ben Okri's biography is essential. Ben Okri was born in 1959 in northern Nigeria to an Urhobo father and a half-Igbo mother. His family left for London in order for his father to study law. His earliest years were spent in England and at age of seven Okri returned to Nigeria in 1968, in the middle of the Biafra War. Ben Okri, is known for works that focus on life in modern-day Nigeria. His tales depict the problems which beset his homeland, particularly poverty, famine and political corruption. Okri parallels the relationship between the natural and spiritual world in his writings, combining western literary techniques with the elements of traditional African folklore and myth. For his academic growth Okri returned to England and earned B.A in Comparative literature. Working as a journalist, he began writing essays and short stories.

When a reader tries to comprehend the writings of Ben Okri with a typical and conventional aspect then it would be a difficult task. Rather a reader must possess a special quality in analysing his words with reference to its past. Giving stress to African myth, folklore and emphasis on spirituality and mysticism to rise the society of Nigeria and the associated problems have brought glory to Ben Okri. It did not stop right there, rather his writings captured Nigeria in world-wide discussion. His best-known novel *The Famished Road*, which won the Booker Prize in 1991 is selected for the present study.

In a similar way this research paper mainly portrays the authorial reticence and authentic expression of Ben Okri in connection with Yoruba myth to explore the political perception extensively. With myth and its associated factors Ben Okri has implicitly and explicitly mentioned the status quo of the Nigerian nation. Also Okri discussed the socio problems, political issues and the poverty stricken people who has been attacked physically and mentally. His unique way of telling the problems with myth as a strategy is the result of evolution as a writer and his artistic experience.

The hypothesis of this paper is, Okri's voice in his fiction gives a strong persuasion that not everything is lost, and there is surely an eye opening vision at the end of dark days. Such an unfailing optimistic thoughts, have made his voice, an unforgettable one in modern Nigerian and African literature.

*The Famished Road* records the adventures of Azaro of Eleven years old, who is an abiku or spirit-child. This abiku is a form of Yoruba myth (According to the mythical belief, the abiku is originated to Yoruba, where a child born dies before the age of twelve or before the attainment of puberty and the spirit of that child returns to the same mother many times to be born again). The protagonist Azaro has the liberty to choose the place where he wishes to dwell, either earthly place or spiritual kingdom. Azaro decides to stay among the living to face the hard life and rejoice with loved ones of the living. From the same stature, Azaro has taken many births previously and presently he stays in the Earthly world to make his parents happy.

Azaro's father carries heavy loads in the market place, works as a labourer and earns by it. Every day he returns home with full of exhaustion caused by his labour, but still he strives with courage to hold on his dreams of a better life. Azaro's mother works by selling goods as a hawker and scrapes out only the tiniest amount from her workforce. His parents represent, like so many of the working poor in Nigeria, who struggles to make ends meet. On the whole the entire family lives only a hand-to-mouth existence in the most terrible poverty. Creditors harass them, the Landlords raises the rent of the houses. Political burglars and rich thugs oppress and torment them. Poverty is equalled with oppression, which contains many factors to be discussed, harassing landlord who raises the house rents and calls police to create confusion among the ghetto people.

When it was so dark that one couldn't see the far corners of the sky and the forest lacked all definition, the landlord turned up and immediately started ranting. He threw himself on the ground. Rolling and thrashing, he unleashed a violent torrent of curses on us... 'Everyone must stay here!' the landlord said, screaming in the dark. He hurried away and returned an hour later with three policemen. They fell on us and flogged us with whips and cracked our skulls with batons. (*The Famished Road* 12)

Along with these present violations and turbulences faced by them, the past annoyances compared to the spirits, monstrous creatures constantly appear in the novel to annoy the protagonist's family in particular. Thus Okri presents an authentic picture of the postcolonial country along with the spiritual ideas and gives life to the characters with an optimistic point of view. Discoursing upon the setting of the works of art, Okri sets it in the transitional moment between the end of colonialism and the dawn of Independence, a time when the appropriate re-dreaming of national communities was particularly important. This setting deepens and digs out the thought of colonialist and neo-colonialist imaginings and still caught in their hold.

This is the unsure time, where the people were in a chaotic times on the outskirts of being decolonized nation, developing modernity: "Our road was changing. Nothing was what seemed anymore" (*The Famished Road* 428). Azaro himself claims at this hazardous time which is evidence from his words, "I knew we were in the divide between past and future. A news cycle had begun, an old one was being brought to pitch" (*The Famished Road* 256). Azaro's personal transformation of spirit to human is quite an allegory of the entire nation's transformation. Brenda Cooper, a Professor at the University of Cape Town specialised in the centre for African Studies has said in her book *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing With a Third Eye* about the Nigerian nation, "Okri's society is the bizarre product of both new and old, tradition and burgeoning change" (Cooper).

Okri's unique artistic excellence is, he has mentioned the chaos and the filthy society in his seminal text *The Famished Road*, also he has given a hope and strength of how to survive chaos and rise above the poverty and unprotected society prevailing in Nigeria. He has given the solution to every hardships discussed in the novel to look beyond what one sees. The hope and wisdom that Okri has portrayed reduces the pain upon the soul of the characters of the novel and readers of the novel.

Being a professional writer Okri have largely recognized that he should transcend the exploited Nigeria for the betterment of the nation and betterment of the moral privilege of the people. The stereotype of thoughts and problems can be traversed with the cognizant growth and vision matrix. By the implementation of this discourse, the people of Nigeria can come out of the victimised stature with an active participation.

Okri's aim is at the rapid age of advancement, absolutely for his country people. Meantime the thorough study of Okri's works of creation, he shows an individual to be at the different dimensions. Either it can be personal/psychological, political or social. The problem is an individual's conflict. The individual is subjected to the

traumatic experiences and enchanted visions. The pressures are caused from colonisation and the struggle for independence, the act of slavery and finally the destabilized government. In such a nation with full of mutiny and disorder, the individual gets agonized unendingly at diverse levels. The trope of slavery is seen from the memory of the characters, who expresses here and there, which also marks the historical reference,

I kept watch I perceived, in the crack of a moment, the recurrence of things unresolved – histories, dreams, a vanished world of great old spirits, wild jungles, tigers with eyes of diamonds roaming the dense foliage. I saw beings who dragged clanking chains behind them, bleeding from their necks. (*The Famished Road* 207)

Azaro, being an abiku and the first person narrator of the novel gives the spotlight of slavery and its brutal deed, “I saw the ghost figures of young men and women, heads bowed, necks and ankles chained together, making their silent procession” (*The Famished Road* 521). Okri metaphorically explores the issues surrounding slavery and imperialism in *The Famished Road*. He encounters the scene of torture underwent by the people near slavery. The anecdotes of slavery in *The Famished Road* offers the harsh pictures of the treatment of slave trade with the mention of words like neck, ankles, clanking chain and bleeding necks.

Everyone are aware of what the colonialism would perpetuate through the oppressed state of mind and makes an individual to lose his identity and in some case he/she doubts his identity in the society. At this stage the colonized loses his behavioural sense in all aspects and accepts whatever he is. Such condition should be wiped off from the very mind of fellow being. The seemingly magical transformation, transforms the mind and spirit makes a person to be conscious of his role in the society more intellectually. This alchemy is Okri’s alternative providence to the present misfortunes. Okri’s aim is supported by Edward Said’s opinion,

Blaming the Europeans sweepingly for the misfortunes of the present is not much of an alternative. What we need to do is to look at the matters as a network of interdependent histories that it would be inaccurate and senseless to repress, useful and interesting to understand. (*Culture and Imperialism* 19)

Many of the African writers write and speak about the collective identity as a whole, but Okri speaks the individual growth equally concentrating on the community growth. An individual’s persistent fight for his identity will stand collectively for the community’s identity. Particularly in the colonised nation, the problem becomes more implicit and explicit which is visible in *The Famished Road*. The novel concerns the effects faced by the people. The nation is on the edge of dislocation and broken thoughts of people. To quote for better explanation, Okri’s epic poem *Mental Fight*, is a song of rage and restoration. The poem speaks to the arrival of new moment and new thoughts. It is a poem of inspiration and most needed to grow the dreams of a person.

Then you must begin today to remake  
Your mental and spiritual world,  
And join the warriors and celebrants  
Of freedom, realisers of great dreams.  
You can't remake the world  
Without remaking yourself  
Each new era begins within.  
It is an inward event,  
With unsuspected possibilities  
For inner liberation.  
We could use it to turn on  
Our inward lights.  
We could use it to use even the dark  
And negative things positively.  
We could use the new era  
To clean our eyes,  
To see the world differently,  
To see ourselves more clearly. (3)

The message conveyed through the poem is highly thought provoking. It did not blame others and not a single element for their condition, rather the poem speaks with the deed of cleaning one's mind to rejuvenate only his/her mental thoughts. To transform the whole experience embracing the mental consciousness is the primary task of an artist. That is what Okri attempts in his (abiku) novel. This attempts to authenticate the artistic vision of Okri, which generates the better forthcoming days.

The main analysis of the paper attempts to investigate the vigorous thinking of literature in the destiny of an African nation, Nigeria, especially since independence. The system of methods in the debate inheres in an analytical examination of arts, using an informed wide-ranging combination of socio-cultural and political rubrics – neo-colonialism, post-independence disillusionment and the like. It is understood that Okri's texts are of great worth for studying the interaction of art and politics.

*The Famished Road* offers an enquiring epic of Nigeria's political history over the past years. The overall view of the paper is that the Nigerian writer Ben Okri has regularly comprising the informing vision of his imagination bound by the socio-political experiences of the nation, which his works both reflect and refract. This paper reassesses the interface of art and how art is used for criticising politics. The ideological outcome is given in the form of vision.

The consequences of a dysfunctional and unsuccessful state which are the aspects of the happening of most post-colonial African States are concurrently forming the main analysis of Ben Okri's novel, *The Famished Road*. The novel interrogates issues such as poor governance, corruption, injustice and insecurity which create inequality and other forms of injustices in society. The selected novel imply that in the face of irredeemable poverty and injustice, the future of many people, represented by Azaro, Mum, Dad and ghetto inhabitants, are permanently blighted unless individual men and women rise to the challenge of bringing about social change.

Indeed, a gleam of hope is seen in the emergence of a few honest, hard-working men and supporting women who try to turn things around by their self-determination and uncompromising attitude towards corruption and wrongdoing. The author seems to be saying that a reorientation and redirection with a third eye vision is needed to create viable societies of the future by and for Nigerians. Okri's Utopian vision is built on the layer of suffering. A small word of appreciation bring good things to a person's mind, heart and body. At this point the comments of Bill Ashcroft on Okri is worth referring,

Ben Okri on the other hand generates a utopianism through an exuberant language that provides a richly utopian view of the capacity of the African *imaginairito* re-enter and reshape the modern world. It is not merely a hope for African resurgence, but a vision of Africa's transformative potential. (Introduction: Spaces of Utopia7)

Unlike many writers, Okri not only depicts the antecedents of the crises of decolonization more precisely, but also shows the unique nature of collateral presence of an alternative world of reference-a spirit world that demonstrate new categories with which to read and contest the legacies of colonialism.

In Okri's philosophy of art and life, the necessity of transformation represents a major challenge, especially in an imperfect world that is characterised by political (and other), power struggles and economic imbalance, corruption and injustice. The assumption of transformative agency is, in his view, fundamentally linked to the power of vision, insight into the real nature of the present condition – the ability to perceive things differently – as well as the readiness to envision alternatives, and alternative realities for the future.

In this regard, Okri's transformation of the motif of abiku would seem to imply hope. As an abiku child, trapped in cycles of life and death, Azaro's most heroic act, which remains a challenge throughout, is his decision to stay in this world rather than join his spirit companions in the other world. By breaking the universal cycle of repetition, he counteracts the seeming impossibility of real change, transforming his fate against the odds. In the words of Margaret Cezair Thompson, "Azaro resolves his own inherent duality, and in doing so he represents the ability to overcome a seemingly interminable cycle of instability;" and Wright has put it rightly,

Azaro's commitment to the living seems to Okri to signify a defiant assertion of faith in Africa's material survival and betterment, no matter how difficult the circumstances and how great the suffering... Through the device of the spirit child, postcolonial Africa appears to be envisaged as a resilient survivalist...

Okri intelligibly treats his fiction as a social statement true to reality as a means of political reawakening. At the same time his artistic sensibility is remarkably observed. Okri has given the experience of men and women to justify the social justice irrespective of gender. As a writer of African literary tradition, Okri is said to be subjected to standardize summations that give promising positive images. Literature should integrate the writer with the society as a process of display and knowledge. Okri has fulfilled the role of a writer as surrounding the sociological framework. Okri is unlike to the subordination of literature to a purely art for art's sake practice. Rather he says, "The poet is not a creator but an alchemist, poets are helplessly on the side of the greatest, highest causes, the most just future" (*A Way of Being Free*, 6).

This humanistic feel of the novelist or a writer should determine the literature, whose moral insight enlightens the society. Okri desires to accomplish this verdict and as a writer he is closer to the sociological path. He wishes to nurture his people with a newness in society.

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### **Research paper.**

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