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Magic Realism in Ben Okri's Selected Novels

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Abstract:

Ben Okri is a Nigerian writer. In 1980, he left his African homeland and moved to England where he has been living and writing for thirty years. During all this time, he has delighted his readers and novels, short stories, essays, and poems. His border-crossing from Africa to Europe echoes Azaro's, the narrator-protagonist of *The Famished Road* trilogy. Like the spirit-child who abandons the safety of spirit world, Okri decided to leave the haven of his family and flee into exile, a world hostile to him. As if following his character's example, Okri escaped into the First World out of a desire to discover and explore its mysteries. Finally, he made this world of paradoxes his home. From London, the writer has looked back at his former homeland and narrated it in most of his novels and short stories. He has also depicted his experience as a black immigrant in the white metropolis.

Keywords: magic realism, narrator, protagonist, spirit – child, azaro.

On the African continent magical realism and postcolonialism have gone hand-in-hand particularly in West and South Africa. In West Africa, the Yoruba mythologies and beliefs in particular have provided material for other African writer such as Ben Okri and Amos Tutula (1920-97). In addition to drawing on the western novel form and upon themes such as colonialism, religion and internationalism, West African magical realism often incorporates local influences to produce a cross cultural literature that emulates the situation of many West Africans today. As the critic Brenda Cooper notes : 'African writers very often adhere to this animism, incorporate spirits, ancestors and talking animals, in stories, both adapted folktales and newly invented yams, in order to express their passions, their aesthetics and their politics' (1998:40). She claims that these stories are still prevalent due to the superficial influence on the local culture of colonialism in West Africa (Cooper 1998:40). Because of this, although Okri is a British Nigerian who has lived in London for most of his life, his novel *The Famished Road* ([1991] 1992) is told predominantly from a West African and perspective.

As we discussed above that in the summational *modus operandi*, magic and reality are interwoven with one another and in this kind of narration real is suffused with the supernatural. In what might otherwise seem paradoxical, then, supernatural has been employed to elevate in excellence the natural domain in *The Famished Road*, the code of magic elevates the code of realism. Whereas magical realist texts cannot be restricted to single *modus operandi* of subversion which has been a historically and aesthetically crucial deployment of the mode. For this particularist hermeneutic, *Famished Road* offers its restriction of the mode to particular

aesthetic ordainments of sociopolitical issues, would not be able to make sense of, first, this narrative's crucial adoption of its protagonists with the reality and domain of human being, and thus the code of realism, and, second, its employing realism to confirm humanism, a framework closely affiliated with the colonization and west.

As these three figures, Azaro, the Abiku nation of Nigeria, and the king of the Unborn alternately dwell in the spirit world and on earth. While the photographer and dad are already the age and physical stature of men. One must remember, that this is not a traditional coming of age narrative but a magical realist variant. The thread which unify them runs through these figures, the focus of this chapter, is that how they develop into a common means of being and their belonging in the world, so that *The Famished Road*'s maturation motif encodes its strategy of belonging.

First, narrative magic and realism effect the change of order of the values hierarchy wherein the supernatural exercise control over the natural realism, portraying the human sphere or scope as the locus of supreme value. This will be seen later in the upside down of the Heaven/Earth dual. Second, and to be in harmony with the last, transcendent values, such as invincible, is enfolded within the mortal plane. Third, narrative magic acts leads in support of human beings and their attachments. This is modeled in the way the development of Dad's character involves supernatural growth, whereas in the fourth type, in contrast to the last, narrative magic functions in opposition to realism. The protagonists must refuse to obey defamed supernatural entities who are antithetical to their natal attachments and thus their maturation.

The central theme of *The Famished Road* is maturation. In the world of spirit which has been referred as "the land of origins" where Abiku spirits and unborn, or spirit-children, are presided over by the king of the unborn, Azaro, who is still a spirit at this point, explains that their King, many times, has become a man and woman. On the other hand other Abikus and Azaro are making oaths with each other to return from life at their first opportunity, and thus never become man, the reader is presented with the contrary example of their King:

"He had been born uncountable times and was a legend in all worlds. [...] It never mattered into what circumstances he was born. He always lived the most extraordinary of lives [...] Sometimes a man, sometimes a woman, he wrought incomparable achievements from every life. If there is anything common to all of his lives, the essence of his genius, it might well be the love of transformation of love into higher realities." (3)

Okri not only has given destiny to traditional Abiku figures in *The Famished Road* but also extends the Abiku "condition" beyond the realm of West Africa to a common. He extends it to global condition which includes diverse places, people, and events. By doing so he suggests destiny itself is a common condition of human life :

Many things "are of [the abiku] condition" Azaro explains, nations, civilizations, ideas, half-discoveries, [...] historical events. [...] They all yearn to make of themselves a beautiful sacrifice, a difficult sacrifice, to bring transformation, and to die shelding

light within this life [...] scorched by the stranger ecstasy of the will ascending to say yes to destiny and illumination. (487)

Okri by deconstructing history offers a progressive reading of the future. This progressive reading does not exclude the past but moves beyond it. We can say that Okri advocates history as a natural step not only toward a present but more importantly toward a future. Okri achieves this through the way he “*deconstructs [the] traditional image [of the Abiku] by following Azaro to choose life over death. In doing so, Azaro breaks the vicious cycle of birth and rebirth, which has caused much suffering for his family, and instead attempts to fulfill a social obligation toward his community*” (165-66)

This study associates one’s voyage through the complex issue of belonging within the world as itself an universal issue. From this perspective we can view all protagonists as cosmopolitan figures. The photographers, in *The Famished Road* not consistently remain loyal to his natal community but also periodically sneaks back at unexpected moments to visit and help Mum, Dad and Azaro and to take more photographs.

The magical phenomena exhales during Dad’s unconsciousness which reflects the narrative’s usage of magic as an advocate of human life. The supernatural brings physical growth to Dad’s body and giving him greater human power for fighting just causes and affirming his psychic development. Dad also appeals to charitable forces in the spirit courts for support in the human domain. Dad does not passively rely upon excellent powers to ordain change on earth.

Quayson suggests that because of numerous ways in which the narrative interconnects “the esoteric with the real, the narrative works to undermine any easy conclusions that may be arrived at from an examination of any one method of interweaving. “Quayson list at least four different ways that Okri combines the esoteric and the real:

- 1) The spirit world operates between real events.
- 2) Reality and spirit worlds are strictly dichotomized
- 3) Reality and esoteric worlds are blurred
- 4) The narrative is oriented towards both planes simultaneously, but is mainly focalized from esoteric plane.

On contrary, in *The Famished Road*, one might consider the realist aspect of the mode Okri portrays the harsh historic and political reality of this Nigerian community who daily struggles physical hunger and, increasingly, the neocolonial political hegemony. While Okri convey a supernatural African worldview through the magical components. We can clearly see that Okri has interwoven the threads of magic and realism together in numerous ways in this narrative, so that one might view their interactions of the narrative web. In *The Famished Road*, Okri by depicting the nation as Abiku imagined community interwoven with some traditional ideas about modern nation-state. In *The Famished Road*, Okri constructs strategy of belonging through using magical realism.

Madame Koto's bar is a single space within *The Famished Road's* narrative cartography in which the worlds of supernatural, political and natural most pronouncedly overlap. Hence, it is the center where the merging of spiritual and political metaphysical is revealed. This location of Madame Koto's bar becomes an exclusive meeting place for party members, as Madame Koto's renowned palm wine and pepper soup as Dad. In addition to it, Madame Koto's powerful mysticism makes her bar a site heavily trafficked by bizarre spirits.

The Famished Road is significant within the magical realist collection from various angles such as narrative styles, cultural issues, techniques. The narrative employs its magic to construct a strategy of belonging which foregrounds its humanist ideals instead of employing indigenous beliefs to subvert Western hegemonic frameworks.

Infinite Riches is Ben Okri's the third volume of *The Famished Road* trilogy about the spirit child, Azaro. It continues the story of Azaro, the Abiku child who sees into the spirit world and do fantastic things. Also, the struggle between the political parties – the party of the poor and the party of the rich- over who to take the mantle of power once the colonialists has granted the colony its independence continues unabated. This story is set in at the point of independence of no particular country, or better still of Africa, Okri showed that the current political gimmicks, thuggery, shenanigans, and corruption, began at the second birth of new continent.

Infinite Riches is a book that is boundless in its subject and style. In matters of style, it mixes African magical realism with surrealism and science; on the other hand, through Azaro, copious references were made to the development and use of the atom bomb. We find something similar operating in Okri's use of what critics generally call 'magical realism', in the countless number of unearthly phenomena in the trilogy, such as the cast of spirit-children (Azaro and Adel), the "invisible black insects" clinging to the Governal-General's body during the highly-anticipated political rally (*Infinite Riches* 232).

Okri trilogy may be described as a bottom-up literary textualization of the magical. That is to say, the magical it represents is derived not from external sources but from indigenous beliefs (the Nigerian Abiku phenomenon, the Yoruba concept of predestination and belief in living ancestral spirits, and so on) that are central to the community upon which the trilogy is based. It is for this reason that Okri says magical in his works is not "not magic" at all but "a deeper kind of realism and a dimension of the spiritual". As he explains in an interview,

"I'm looking at the world in The Famished Road from the inside of the African world view, but without it being codified as such. This is just the way the world is seen: the dead are not really dead, the ancestors are still past of the living community and there are innumerable gradations of reality, and so on. It's quite simple and straight forward. I'm treating it naturally. It's a kind of realism, but a realism with many more dimensions."

The impossibility of formulating a 'one size fits all' interpretative solution to the magical can only be a positive good, since it allows the critic to 'multiply the possibilities of interpretation of

a work [e.g. the Abiku trilogy]; to open up a work, to illuminate the world of a work; not to reduce it and to diminish it”. However, with regard to the magical, it is important to note that the openness of Okri’s fictional writings is not simply there to facilitate an infinite dialogue between reader and text, but to put it to the reader that, within and beyond the universe of fiction, “what is perceived and said are real things too.” On the relation between the magical in his writings and the Nigerianness of his personal reactions, Okri says:

I still believe that words are things [...] If you were to say that tonight’s poetry reading would be a failure, I would ask you to withdraw it for fear that saying it would make it happen. Words resonate. They are parallel to events. It is magical thinking. Not what many critics have called magical reality. That is an exaggeration of reality. Magical realism is (the belief) that what is perceived and said are real things too.

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