

The Significance of the Use of Masquerade in the Select Novels of Ben Okri

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Ben Okri

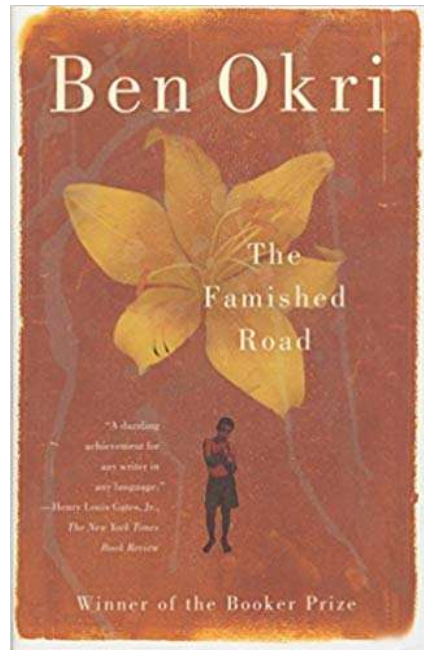
Courtesy: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ben-Okri>

Abstract

The Masquerade plays a significant role in *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment* of Ben Okri. The descriptions of its frightening appearance, the different views and the enigmas of the people, the mesmerizing effect of its eyes, and spirits that are associated with them, the fear and horror that it evokes and the weird atmosphere it creates, the wicked, and vile harmful influence make the masquerade becomes a powerful expression of the universal

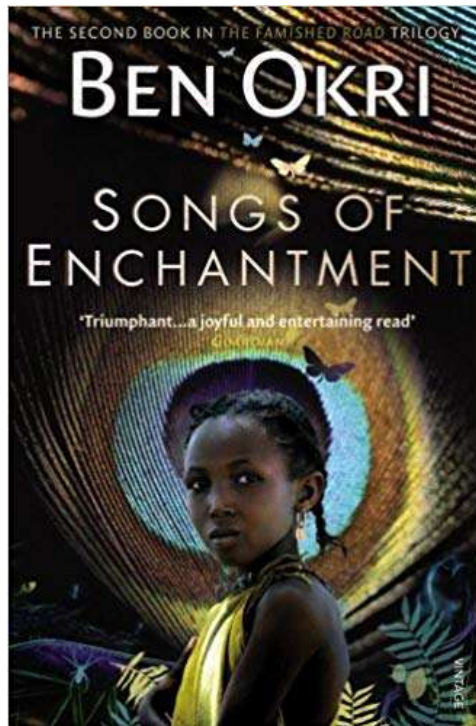
manifestations of evil. The evil that prevails in the society, in man and negative feelings, emotions, and thoughts of the fear stricken people are graphically portrayed by Ben Okri through the imaginary character of the Jackal-headed Masquerade.

Keywords: Ben Okri, Masquerade, Jackal-headed, Significance, *The Famished Road*, *Songs of Enchantment*



Courtesy: https://www.amazon.com/Famished-Road-Ben-Okri/dp/0385425139/ref=sr_1_1?keywords=the+famished+road&qid=1566152359&s=books&sr=1-1

Okri employs the imaginary Jackal-headed Masquerade as a character in *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment*. It is a fantastic creature of totemic significance. It is a creature of many heads and minds. The features of the Masquerade are as follows, "The Masquerade had the head of a jackal, with fiercely protruding jaws, and it had the twisted horns of a ram- but it had human eyes. The eyes kept looking at us, turning in this socket, regarding us with intense hostility" (SOE 98). This terrifying colossus was so tall even adults strained their necks looking up it. No one knew it.



Courtesy: https://www.amazon.com/Songs-Enchantment-Okri-17-Feb-1994-Paperback/dp/B012HV7QMY/ref=sr_1_1?crid=3J2MU872W6Z40&keywords=songs+of+enchantment&qid=1566152509&s=gateway&srefix=Songs+of+Enchantment%2Cstripbooks-intl-ship%2C451&sr=8-1

The Masquerade is used for specific occasions with various names in their tradition. They are used for entertainment, policing and arbitration. The different names of Masquerade are Oloolu, Alapasampa, Oleyo, Mojere and Aduagba. Some are used as guards. They are also used during traditional funerals as a link between the dead and the living. It is believed by the people that the Masquerade convey the messages of the living to the dead wishing them peace. It becomes a medium between the living and the dead. "The Masquerade's head was a mighty house. It was not one mind, but many; a confluence of mind. I wandered in its consciousness and found a labyrinthine kingdom" (SOE 114-115).

Masquerade is also believed to be a representation of dead. They believe that the dead visit the living from time to time through a medium. There are different types of ethnic tribes in Masquerade from society to society and from places to places. The use of masquerade among the Yoruba tribe in South West Nigeria has been as old as the history of the people.

The Masquerade can be understood by the people's attachment to the spirits of the ancestors. All who die do not become a masquerade. There are some conditions which must be fulfilled while the person is alive. In the opinion of Adebari, "Traditionally they hold the ancestors as the closest link between the physical and spirit worlds. African traditional religion

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depends very much on the spirit world" (9). The people who have committed the evil crime against the society are summoned before the Masquerade for punishments. They wear a special traditional dress during the ceremony.

The gigantic Masquerade first appears in *The Famished Road* bursting out of the road, "with plumes of smoke billowing from its head." "This terrifying colossus was so tall that even adults strained their necks looking up at it. No one knew who had built it, who had brought it there, or when" (SOE 98).

The masquerade raises a volley of questions. No one is able to explain the dark enigmas of how the Masquerade stands upright on its long wooden legs without being blown away by the wind. No one among the gathered people is able to explain the most puzzling fact of all. People have different views about Masquerades. A man suggests, in a whisper, that there is a human being high up in the Masquerade. But another man remarks that it is impossible and wonders how someone could be up there so still, in a space as small as the head, trapped in raffia and nails" (SOE 98).

Masquerade, in funeral roar fills the street with an ancient silence. Azaro remarks, "I watched it in horror. I watched it by its shadow of a great tree burning, as it danced in the empty street" (TFR 13). "That night, the unleashed Masquerade pursues women across streets because they are not supposed to see its terrifying presence" (TFR 35).

A sense of fear that the Masquerade imparts is powerfully depicted in the following lines. "The evening darkened. The wind made frightful noises as it blew over the head of the Masquerade. People hurried to their homes and heard the first mutterings of an exodus" (SOE 98 – 99).

Retreating to the backyard the wind blowing hard, caused a weird jackal cry which comes out from the Masquerade. "The cry was so powerful and strange that for a long time afterwards all the nocturnal animals, the dogs, the cats, the weeping children, were utterly silent till the wind had passed and the coded cry had been carried away to the distant regions of the forest." (SOE 101 – 102)

Spirits are closely associated with Masquerades. In the words of Azaro the protagonist of the trilogy.

I was about to return to the bar when I saw red spirits clambering up the fretful white horse. The wind made the Masquerade's jackal head cry out. People rushed from the bar to see what was happening. The shining machete reflected moonlight on us and the horse neighed, rearing. Tossing in head, the white horse kicked out and raged in

an inexplicable access of terror. The red spirits clambered on it and the horse galloped instantly round the Masquerade. (SOE 101 – 102)

Azaro notices white spirits clambering all over the red Masquerade. Then a tall man, with 'a bullet shaped head and elongated eyes' steps out towards the horse and with his hands outstretched. The red spirits jump off the horse and on to the man and they vanish in him, as if his body has absorbed them. And then the horse trots over to the man with its head lowered as if ashamed. The people clap and the dogs stop barking.

The weird atmosphere associated with the Masquerade is conjured up by Ben Okri's powerful language. To recall the words of Azaro "I fled to the barfront and sat near the door. The white horse breathed over me. The moon burned the eyes of the jackal – headed Masquerade. The red haze round me began to grow hot again; soon I felt my flesh on fire" (SOE 214).

He is not able to move. He hears the blind old man laughing in his head. He becomes "aware of him staring at him maliciously through the eyes of the jackal – headed Masquerade." A 'curious sand hot wind' blasts his mind. His brain begins to itch with insurgent passions. The red haze around him grows more intense.

In darkness Azaro finds himself circling in a moonlit space and spots the Jackal – headed Masquerade riding the white horse and swiping the air with its silver machete and the white flag fluttering in its grasp. Its jackal mouth slavers and its eyes red. The white horse gallops furiously in the night- spaces, through the forest. The Masquerade slaughters the trees, 'felling them, cutting down invisible enemies' that cry out become silent. And when the jackal eyes see him and the horse turns and rides towards him, shaking its great head, Azaro screams. The air in the room is heavy, as if there are 'no longer any boundaries between the world outside and our private lives.'

The following passage highlights the experiences of Azaro,

Revolving in the sky, high up above the people, I found myself looking down on the perforated zinc rooftops. My head was swirling, there was fire in my brain, and acids in my spirit. Evil whisperings flooded my mind Horrible incantations of ritual power were breathed into the Jackal's head by the blind old man, sorcerer of manifestations. Weighed down with hideous spells, I realised with the greatest terror I have ever known that I had entered the universal mind of evil things, numinous things, the thoroughfares of indescribable forces that were spreading their empires over the air

and night spaces of the world. I had entered the Masquerade's mind. I was trapped and didn't know how to get out. (SOE 114)

Through the terrible eyes of the Masquerade Azaro sees that they are merely one of a thousand universal manifestations and each land has its own kind of Masquerade. It is when people notice the eyes that they begin to be really mesmerize with horror. "And as our speculation increased so did the palpable malice in the eyes of the red colossus" (SOE 98).

Azaro sees the world through the eyes of the Masquerade and when horror courses through him. The blind old man who is sorcerer of manifestations with hideous spells breathes into Jackal's horrible incantation of ritual power. Terror strikes him when he enters the 'universal mind of evil things numinous things, the thoroughfares of indescribable forces spreading their empires over the air and night spaces of the world'. He is trapped and is not able to find the way out.

That night the Jackal – headed Masquerade, surrounded by the multiples and companions of hyenas and panthers, chanting with the voices of possessed men, wreaked an incredible violence on the forces of wind and forest, slaughtering the spirits and the insurgent women, murdering the trees and our silent protectors, the dormant gods sleeping in our dreams. (TFR 35)

Some of the vile wicked and evil influences of the masquerade are reflected in the following passage.

"And when the Jackal – headed Masquerade laughed three hundred children died in the country in secret ways, and many fathers went berserk, and for the first time in many years some of our women committed suicide. And the oracles and luminous stones of secret shrines burst into twisted laughter, breaking out in livid prophecies of butterflies dying in the air, birds turning into stone in mid-flight, prophecies of monstrous birds, of wars that make mothers go insane, catastrophes and freak earthquakes, prophecies of madness – making wealth, of oil bursts alongside famine. (SOE 139)

Other strange experiences follow with the appearance of the masquerades.

When the oracles laugh the wind rages and the glass tombs split open and wooden cages catch fire, roasting their trapped birds, and churches collapse, and fountains of blood burst out from white concrete floors in "empty army barracks, with animals delivering eggs of metal, birds giving birth to snakes, donkeys giving birth to frogs, as if the cycles of life" (SOE 139). have

death and have gone mad. With the erection of the Jackal – headed Masquerade with of obscene size, Azaro begins to understand the ‘illusion of the new conquering force’.

Even after the Masquerade disappears, its influence on the people and the atmosphere does not fade. It penetrates their fabric and permeates the wind. It operates invisibly as a secret censor becoming “the eyes of harmless – looking butterflies” and investing “its spying spirit into lizards and moths” and ultimately makes the people powerless and helpless.

The masquerade wails such a dreadful and harmful influence. In the words of Ben Okri,

Those who oppose the party, or who speak ill of it, peoples suffer inexplicable pains, their children and become temporarily blind, seemed to prove to us the greater powers of the invisible Masquerade. Every illness, every fever, every failure in endeavour, the rain flooding the living rooms, children who accidentally cut themselves on glass, men who rave for two hours and return to a stunned normality, convince us that we were surrounded by an implacable force. And because we could not see what it is to which we attribute so much power, we feared it even more, and build it up into something which could not be defied. (SOE 180)

In the words of Azaro, "Through the Masquerade’s eyes he understands that there is a war always going on in the night-spaces."

Azaro remarks "I saw the invisible masquerade of the western world, saw their worshippers and order, money, desire, power and world domination” (SOE 115). The Masquerade primarily signifies the naked aggression and brute political will of totalitarian power which spreads itself into everything with an intimidating menace. It creates violence.

The masquerade thus plays a significant role in *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment* of Ben Okri. The descriptions of its frightening appearance, the different views and the enigmas of the people, the mesmerizing effect of its eyes, and spirits that are associated with them, the fear and horror that it evokes and the weird atmosphere it creates, the wicked, and vile harmful influence make the masquerade becomes a powerful expression of the universal manifestations of evil. The evil that prevails in the society, in man and negative feelings, emotions, and thoughts of the fear stricken people are graphically portrayed by Ben Okri through the imaginary character of the Jackal – headed Masquerade.

Abbreviations

TFR – *The Famished Road*

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