

Material Survival, Hierarchal Exploitation and Urban Space
in Ben Okri's *Converging City*

Sarah Abdullah



Ben Okri

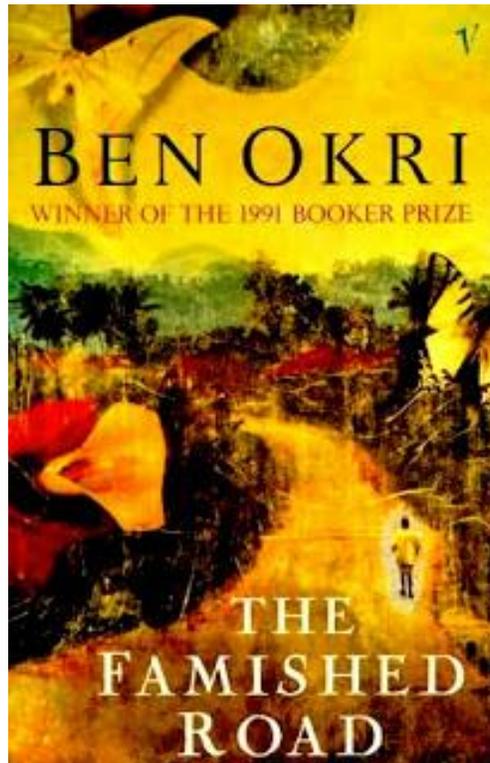
Courtesy: <http://freduagyeman.blogspot.com/2012/05/25-famished-road.html>

Abstract

Though Ben Okri's acclaimed novel *The Famished Road* has been much under discussion, his short stories have not been processed enough by academics and researchers alike. Taking one of his short stories "Converging City", this article explores how the urban setting of the narrative reveals the nature of post-colonial societies that only allow an individual to change

his inferior position through counter-hegemonic strategies as he can not step outside the chain of exploitation that marks his place in society and thereby define his position within larger socio-political milieus.

Keywords: Ben Okri, Converging City, material survival, urban setting



Being Nigerian, Ben Okri's consciousness has developed in a community where struggle of a personal and communal nature existed since the time of its independence. Nigeria has gone through many phases both turbulent and transitional. It has been under direct colonial rule from 1900 to 1960. In the initial period of that colonial era the British had an indirect rule especially in Northern Nigeria where only the co-operating chiefs were given the power to sit on the throne. Thereby only those power structures were allowed to develop that ensured the strengthening of Britain as a colonial ruler. During this time the masses resisted not only against the colonial masters but also a political hierarchy imposed upon them by the indigenous proxies. The Nigerians showed resilience in the face of these unwanted and exploitative authorities but were also deeply influenced by them. They engaged in cultural exchange with their white masters assimilating many of their religious and social beliefs. One example of such an influence was

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religious syncretism where people amalgamated Christianity, the religion of the colonial masters with their own indigenous belief system. They became members of the local church but also went to witch- doctors and herbalists for their physical and spiritual health. That way they were able to survive as well as develop in a state whose social and political structures were literally reconstructed by the colonizers either directly or indirectly through local governing bodies.

This situation resulted in internal conflicts between indigenous ethnic groups and destabilized the country during later years. Nigeria was a country which consisted of a variety of ethnic groups. Geographically it was divided into Southern and Northern provinces and the Lagos colony but ethnically there were as many as two hundred and fifty groups; each with its own set of customs, beliefs and language. It was the British which without taking into consideration these cultural differences merged them together under one rule. After independence these groups became increasingly estranged, with the result a civil war broke out resulting in an everlasting damage to the country's economic and political systems.

Uzoigwe in his book *Troubled Journey: Nigeria Since the Civil War* traces the development of a survival culture during and after the war when "Most people were concerned more about personal survival than worrying about the survival of a neighbor." (41). This was different from the pre-war era where communal cooperation and community development were prioritized over personal interest. The war left many of the people embittered and disillusioned especially the ones whose families suffered and died during the war and those who lived in a fear of being accused of sabotage.

Uzoigwe further writes, "In any case, tormented by economic adversity and haunted by the uncertainty of future, the generality of Nigerians became more concerned with economic survival than with ethical regeneration". The two coup d'états of 1966 and the civil war of 1967-70 left the country with little stability and there was little economic growth. In these conditions the lower classes faced a hard time trying to make ends meet.

The nature of Nigerians' struggle is the focus of many of Ben Okri's short fiction. Most of his characters are caught in a class struggle where they are time and again exploited by political coercion and cultural ideologies.

All his stories are about individuals belonging to an underprivileged or marginalized class. Arthur in “Stars of the New Curfew” is a salesman; Agodi in “Converging City” is a small time shopkeeper, Anderson is a guard at a museum in “Incidents at the Shrine” so on and so forth. These characters are constantly threatened by a social and political structure that aims to objectify them. They represent all the dimensions of poverty in their volume and complexity. Poverty is simply a deprivation of material wealth in some stories but in others it is a deprivation of skills and resources needed to acquire wealth.

This paper looks at one of his short stories “Converging City” as a narrative where the protagonist in his struggle for economic survival goes through the process of disillusionment. He sees though the ideological control exerted on him yet chooses to remain a part of it. This ambivalent position alone ensures his survival as he cannot step outside the chain of exploitation that marks his position in society and thereby define his value in larger socio-economic systems. The story is about a day in the life of Agodi, a shop-keeper who is trying to make ends meet against corruption and lawlessness. His goods are held by custom officials that openly ask for money to give them clearance. His church is not ready to financially assist him and some unknown burglars are threatening to rob his shop. Pitted against these odds, Agodi is trying his best to salvage his goods and save his shop, during all of which he comes across many farcical situations like getting in fight with a woman on whom he accidentally spits and being beaten by a heavy weight wrestler. However the pivotal point of the story is a traffic jam in which he is caught along with other characters like a mad man and the head of the state. The whole city is converged during the traffic jam that is itself metaphoric of the chaotic state of Nigerian society.

In this story the spatio-temporal structures are determined by the struggle of the protagonists to make ends meet in an exploitative and competitive urban setting of Lagos. The geographical space of the city here becomes site of exploitation where both the politically empowered and the rising bourgeoisie exploit the masses to further their own ends. Hence the story can be read as a struggle of ordinary people in a cosmopolitan city which forces characters to succumb to systematic exploitation. Okri himself said about humans in one of his interviews, “We humans will always throw up our rebellion. We will always throw up our opposite. We will always throw up what questions us. We will always amaze and surprise ourselves. You tie ropes

around the human personality, you put boundaries around it and you put policemen all around and guns and we human beings we'll always find a way to subvert it." (Mo)

The narrative craftily utilizes the event of a traffic jam as a converging point for analyzing the relations among the political powers and proletariat. The protagonist of the story, Agodi, is a shop-keeper on the brink of bankruptcy. A series of misfortunes both tragic and comic happen to the protagonist in this story leading to his disillusionment. At the end Agodi emerges out of all his misfortunes as a successful entrepreneur starting a new church but also someone who is more sensitized to the suffering of others. Hence at the end he is able to get rid of the false ideological control the church exerts on him and is able to improvise a new religion which does not work to strengthen the economic base through the propagation of false ideologies but openly confesses the inseparability of religion and money. The religion at the end is less of an ideological force and more of a commercial one at the end of the story.

Hence the text lays bare the false myth that institutionalized religion helps create a moralistic society and exposes that institutionalized religion is not about God but social control. The religion in the story instead of combating large scale violence and corruption contributes to the status quo. In *An Introduction to the Sociology of Religion: Classical and Contemporary Perspectives* Inger Furseth, Pål Repstad discuss Marx's view of religion as a force which is "illusory because it reflects a reality that is based on social class relationships while it attempts to hide class interests...religion is merely a reflection of societal forces." (31)

The story, through the introduction of varied characters, sketches a hierarchical portrait of a materialist society on the basis of relative authority where one thing is bound to another in an endless chain of objectifying relations. At the top of this linear hierarchy is the head of the state who holds the destiny of the country in his hands. He has the power to switch over the mode of government from dictatorship to democracy; a measure he eventually takes not to benefit the state but to safeguard his own interests. "He had to think of his own safety as well as the entangled safety of his embezzlements" (31). He, with his embezzlements, drives up corrupt practices as his illegal ownership of property is a consequence of dipping into public funds. The traffic jam, condensed in the image of a millipede and representative of the congested and inefficient system of governance is a manifestation of policy neglect by him as the head ruler of

the state. He not only economically exploits the country but uses physical violence to coerce and control the public. His relation with the masses is one of coercion where he simply aims at exploiting them to further his own ends. This is manifest the way his escort thrashes out in every direction when his limousine is stuck in a traffic jam.

The escort here is part of a repressive state apparatus and a concrete manifestation of the monopoly of force exercised by the head of the state as only he has the legitimate right to use this force. It is composed of both the soldiers and police and is representatives of repressive state control aimed at directly dominating the masses. The police and the army here instead of acting as law enforcement agencies trying to create order and peace, simply add to the chaos of the traffic jam. “They kicked the metalwork of cars, pounced on lorry drivers, and beat up people who seemed to be obstructing the traffic in any visible or invisible way” (30). They are simply tools of maintaining state control and are not in the least committed to serving the masses. The police especially are completely ineffective in controlling the heightened crime in the city so much so that Agodi himself receives a letter from the robbers openly inviting him to call the police if he wishes to. Later when Ajasco’s henchman burglarizes Agodi’s shed the latter does not even consider reporting the crime to the police.

It is not only the military and police but also other law enforcing agencies that carry on with the exploitation of the poor. The chief among them are the customs officials who have seized Agodi’s smuggled goods and are asking for a huge sum of money in return for them. The contact man tells Agodi bluntly that the inspector is not happy with the amount of bribe he has offered and reluctantly gives him one more day to generate the desired sum of money. Agodi himself is not left with any choice but to double the prices of his good. This is the only way out for him as he has already taken enough debt from his wife and other relatives. At the end of this chain then are the masses that are exploited in a top-down fashion from the head of the state to a small time shopkeeper.

In the narrative it is not only the political and legal structures but also the ideological institutions like church that manipulate and coerce the masses. In the story the church preaches humility, patience and resignation- qualities that are of no practical value in real life. When Agodi accidentally spits on a woman and is abused by her; his attempts at being magnanimous by

praying for her only infuriates her further. Later when he is publically beaten black and blue by Ajasco Atlas, a thug cum wrestler, the narrator comments, “He blamed himself severely for not having turned the other cheek; at the same time he knew he wouldn’t be alive now if he had” (27). This clearly shows the inadequacy of the Christian doctrine of turning the other cheek in the practical world. Agodi’s attempts at trying to submit himself to self-legislation by religious reasoning go unsuccessful simply because it does not hold water in real life.

The story not only shows the loopholes of organized religion as an ideology that promotes passivity and injustice but also reveals it as a superstructure that politically imposes its belief systems on the people through reinforcement. Hence the narrative reveals the true face of organized religion which discriminates against the non-believers and works to strengthen only those who adhere to a man-made manifestation of a particular faith. Agodi is a member of the Church of Eternal Hope from which he hopes to get a small loan. “The Head Minister had explained how a church should also be a bank that keeps its members safe” (27). The church plays a double role in strengthening the status quo. It encourages passivity through its ideology and it also acts as a financial establishment working to strengthen the people belonging to its own faith. The Church of Eternal Hope also forms objective relations with people by classifying and discriminating them into members and non-members. Hence it clearly adopts a discriminatory policy by deciding to assist its members alone. However it does not end the classification here but bisects it further between those who conduct themselves appropriately and those who lack social propriety. Agodi after a mortifying encounter with Ajasco Atlas, a wrestler cum thug, where he is publically shamed by the latter knows that his chances of getting loan from the church are completely obliterated as the church only give loans in “times of absolute need and on the strength of conduct glorifying the church”(27). The church does not offer eternal hope like its name suggests. Rather it sells its services to those alone who can bring a good name to it.

The religion preached by the church does not make Agodi a better person in any way. His superficial religiosity is evident the way how he wishes to make a display of it. At the beginning of the narrative the reader is explicitly told that when Agodi kneels in a customary morning prayer he “feels cheated of an audience” as his wife and children have already gone to work.

A lexical analysis of the connotations of the word “conversion” reveals that Agodi uses conversion as a means of confrontation and persuasion rather than transition. When he gets into a verbal fight with a woman on whom he accidentally spits water he decides to preach her hoping a conversion might occur” (24). Later when he meets the contact man at the wharf he expects no leniency but still tries “conversion first” (33). In the girl’s case it is a means of retaliation and in the case of the contact man it is an attempt to coax him into lessening the bribe money.

The text paints a picture of a society that does not grow because of the control exerted by both repressive and ideological state apparatus. In this context the traffic jam, caused by the man in the street is a metaphor for the obstructed growth and progress of the state. The cause of the traffic jam is the man in the street. If the traffic jam is a metaphor for the obstructed growth of the state itself the man in the street is symbolic of the underdeveloped lower strata of society which is the cause of all this.

The state does not grow because the head of the state refuses to grow. Though his presence coincides with the man in the street in the same location he is separated from the rest of ordinary men in his bullet proof limousine and covered on all sides by the escort that he is not even aware of the latter’s presence. During the traffic jam the governor is attacked by some resistance fighters but is saved by the security that kills the attackers. This is a potential transformative moment for him where he could gain real insight by genuinely thinking about the public but instead of taking some constructive action he begins to analyze his own position with respect to the general unrest. In his effort to analyze the scenario separates the interests of the people from his own and ends up only thinking of saving his own skin and implementing self-serving measures.

In such an oppressive socio-political environment Agodi is conditioned by his circumstances to act in his own self-interest. The corruption around him is quite natural to his sensibility and he does not question the existing socio-political order. However as the narrative progresses Agodi becomes aware of the nature and function of superstructures of society in coercing the masses and weaving a vicious web of exploitation.

The story hence explores the growth of Agodi not only in material terms but in his consciousness. The narrative does it by paralleling the transformation of Agodi to the biblical

event of Saul's conversion. In fact time and again references are made to Saul's blindness as the protagonist of the story is reminded of him. Saul was a Pharisee in Jerusalem who decided to persecute Christians and wipe them from the face of the earth. On his way to Damascus to abolish the new Christian church he was visited by Jesus Christ in the form of bright light. The light told him not to persecute Christians any more. Saul was struck blind by the brightness of the light and did not eat or drink for three days. Afterwards he converted and became a strong adherent of Christianity.

Agodi too has a revelation but the instrument of this revelation is not some holy spirit but a penniless pauper. The man in the street comes in his wretchedness, "the man who had come in didn't have on a pair of trousers; and his underpants were in very bad condition. The man was very thin and his face was angular. His hair looked as if it had never been intended to be combed. He was so wretched that Agodi screamed" (29, 30). The narrative here subverts the biblical narrative of Saul by undermining the power of the instrument of revelation. Whereas Jesus is concealed in the form of light, the poor man is revealed in his nakedness. The narrator calls this man "the man in the street" someone who does not own a thing and is literally dispossessed.

Just before the man enters the shed Agodi has a vision. "he saw people lying at street corners, scratching themselves, he saw the youths who grow angrier and then sooner or later turn to armed robbery; he saw those who are executed at the beach; and he saw the children who put a piece of wood into their mouth and die four days later by their own innocent hunger" (29). The entry of the man in the street is a physical manifestation of the plight of the homeless and the hungry about which he just had a vision. This encounter with the man in the street in all its awkwardness and unease brings about an awareness of the injustice in the world around.

Throughout the story Agodi is engaged in a continuous struggle to prevent his financial doom. However all his efforts go down the drain. In the end Agodi is left with nothing. His shed is robbed. His goods are sold at the wharf and his wife goes back to the village with the kids. He rebuilds his shed but nobody wants it. He vanishes for a month and when he comes back he proclaims that he has achieved vision in the forests of the city. The church Agodi establishes after his return is more of a business venture as he has cards printed for his office. However his

church, unlike the Christian church, openly declares that God and money are “inseparable” (36). Moreover it is not the poor but powerful like Ajasco Atlas who are seen visiting it.

Hence at the end Agodi has begun to see through the system and his own place in it. He thereby takes on a very ambivalent position, at once challenging the established system and building a new one in its place. That is, he does not totally opt out of a capitalist system but manifests signs of a waning false consciousness by being more aware of the man in the street whom he gets used to watching from his office across the street. This change in his character is brought about by his adversity as through his own vulnerable position he is able to relate to all who are dispossessed. It is only when he himself goes through adversity and is dispossessed of both his property and his dear ones that he feels a connection with the man in the street which earlier baffled him as when the man enters his shed Agodi tries to hit him with a spanner.

More than that, out of this adversity he emerges as someone more open to the new possibilities of life. His church is a direct outcome of this as he becomes more creative and decides to establish a new church. This creative enterprise is a direct outcome of his having realized his class position. Since his suffering has revealed to him the mechanics of an exploitative politico-religious order he refuses to be exploited by it but at the same he creates a new space for himself where he can strengthen his own position financially and otherwise.

This metaphor of growth and regeneration is also evident in the animal imagery which serves to foreshadow and throw light on the major events in the story. The chief animal image in the story is that of a lizard. In the beginning of the story Agodi kills a lizard in his frustration.

The lizard is a symbol of ill-omen in African mythology. In a myth of the chameleon and the lizard the latter acts as a harbinger of death. The chameleon was sent by the African god Uhlukunkulu to announce to man that he would never die. However on its way the chameleon stopped to eat something. The lizard instead hurried back to man to tell them the news that they would die. As the lizard reached man earlier it established the mortal nature of man who accepted its word way before the chameleon reached them. The lizard here becomes a sign of Agodi's metaphorical death as a struggling shopkeeper. But the image is given a fresh slant because in this case death is not the end but a new beginning as it leads to the growth of his consciousness. The same holds true for the animal image of an earthworm. Both earthworms and

lizards sleep through winters and hence are a sign of death and rebirth. Similarly both regenerate oneself even if cut off and hence represent Agodi's regeneration not only as a successful business man but someone whose consciousness has evolved from being a passive to one that sees through exploitation and undermines it without actively working against it. That is why his church does not target the already powerful people like Ajasco Atlas.

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