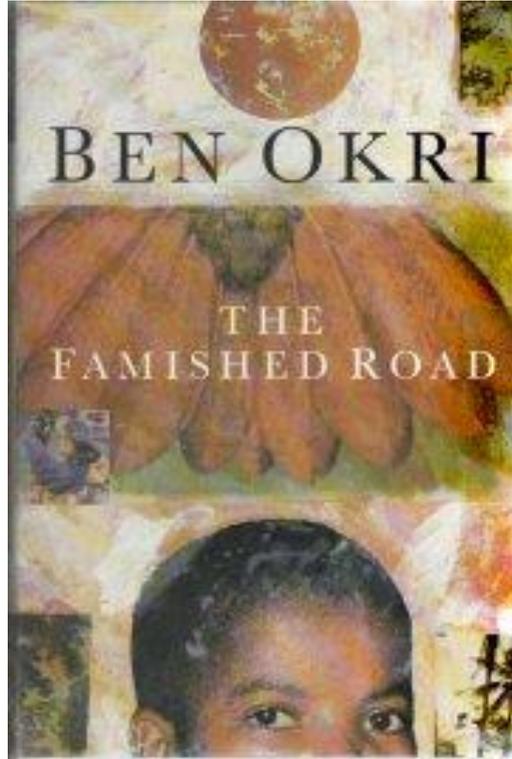


**Blend of Yoruba Culture and Magical Realism:
A Recent Prospect in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road***

K. Saranya & Dr. A. Selvalakshmi



Courtesy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Famished_Road

Abstract

Ben Okri describes a fantastically aesthetic world with reference to Yoruba culture, traditions and theory in the style of magical realism. Okri's ethnically mixed background is important when one is analysing all his fiction. His novels or works portray the essential link in Nigerian culture between the physical world and the world of spirits which is a part of Yoruba folklore. Ben Okri made it a world-wide theory of Abiku, which preferably points to Nigeria. By exploring these historical issues, it is found how Nigeria has been traumatized by the past myth and how the dispossessed are oppressed by the rich, at the same time his mode of writing is analysed, essentially, to display the myth and culture. Unique features of aesthetic development can be seen clearly in the writings of Ben Okri. He has received additional praise for his use of elements of Magical Realism, a western literary technique notably to uplift the detailed analysis of his writings. Okri prefers to talk about how reading has influenced his writings. He started by reading African, Classical and European myths and he continued reading from his father's library. It is found eminently that Okri has amalgamated a multi-cultural aspect of study right from his young age. This paper look into the unique mixture of the natural and spiritual world in his writing.

Keywords: Nigerian myths, Yoruba (Urhobo) culture, Ben Okri, magical realism, African folklore, Nigerian political problems



Ben Okri

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

Ben Okri - A Short Profile

Ben Okri (15 March 1959-) of Urhobo descent, from Nigeria 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 the spiritual world in his writings, combining western literary techniques with the elements of traditional African folklore and myth. He was born in Minna, Nigeria. His earliest years were spent in England and at age of seven Okri returned to Nigeria. For his academic growth Okri returned to England and earned his B.A in Comparative literature. Working as a journalist, he began writing essays and short stories. Unique features of aesthetic development can be seen clearly in the writings of Ben Okri. He has received additional praise for his use of elements of Magical Realism, a western literary technique notably to uplift the detailed analysis of his writings. Okri prefers to talk about how reading has influenced his writings. He started by reading African, Classical and European myths and he continued reading from his father's library.

Introduction

The powerful pen draws and records the breath-taking and awe-inspiring narratives and adds visions to conquer the human minds. The striking beauty of undiscovered enchantment is the outcome of his mighty pen. Spread across such remarkable level of quality in his writings, Okri has

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sharpened the aesthetic erudition consistently. Okri's remarkable ability in writing is prodigious because of the limitless and everlasting source of African 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 them in his works of art. Okri is critical of the political and economic problems that Nigeria has encountered in many aspects of life.

Nigerian writing has largely been inundated with some innovations and adaptations from the traditional literary field, largely of the oral form. Okri, as a story teller, attempts to pass on to the readers, what is good in his tradition and the traumatic experience of colonization and its effects on Nigerian culture. His writings endeavour to highlight the unique and novel potentialities of the African, especially the Nigerian experience, its rich culture and mythology.

The deep understanding involves a completely developed and rich content of knowledge focusing on the level of development. Deep understanding is not the endpoint of the result, rather it encourages and pursues growth and desires to know more. The present paper focuses on the mutual combination of Yoruba culture and Magical realism which cannot be removed from the literary diction of Ben Okri. The intrusion of culture in literature makes this focus of study a world-wide one. Culture is a contested phenomenon which is understood to mean different things, for different groups. It is the integrated pattern of human knowledge, beliefs and behaviour.

Culture embodies language, ideas, beliefs, customs, taboos, codes, institutions, tools, techniques, and works of art and so on. Culture consists of shared values, beliefs, knowledge, skills, and practices that underpin behaviour by members of a social group at a particular point in time. It is the creative expression, skills, traditional knowledge and resources. Likewise, literature and culture lead the path to a discussion in depth. One among the factors is the writing techniques that replicate the cultural study of a writer.

The Famished Road

At this point, it is quite essential to set right the outline/summary of the selected novel *The Famished Road* to ignite deeper understanding. The chosen novel *The Famished Road* is set at the historical moment before the Nigerian independence. *The Famished Road* records the adventures of Azaro who is an abiku or spirit-child. This abiku is a form of Yoruba myth (According to the mythical belief, the abiku originated in Yoruba myth, 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).

Azaro decides to stay among the living, to face the hard life and rejoice with the loved ones. His parents represent, like so many of the working poor in Nigeria, who struggle to make ends meet. Entire families live a hand-to-mouth existence in most terrible poverty. As the narrative progresses the spirit companions of Azaro call him back to join the spiritual world and relish the life by staying in the other world. The reality and fantasy amalgamate with one another throughout the novel. Throughout the discussion it will be obvious that Okri's authorial viewpoint is vast and difficult in nature, that he offers a mixed message and takes on an arguable outlook.

Symbolic Mixing of Myth and Magical Realism

Based on the relation between the cultural patterns, one of the finest techniques to be discussed in *The Famished Road* is the method of Archetypal approach. According to this technique, it is obvious and is understood that the reader must pay attention to carefully look at every detail to

understand this approach. Generally, it is featured with the study of magic and religion, tracing numerous myths and beliefs.

Moreover, these significant features can be dealt with a single psychological term such as 'collective unconsciousness'. This was highly recognized by the pioneer of archetypal critics Carl Gustav Jung. He believed that civilized man or uncivilized man preserves consciously or unconsciously the pre-historical areas of knowledge and articulates them obliquely in myth. And myth is a message within our human kind that is carried over generation after generation. This is the attitude on the part of the characters in the novel towards their world. In this regard the characters in *The Famished Road* do not try to explain the magical things that happen in their surroundings. They simply accept them; they also collectively get impressed and influenced by the happenings and incidents like the myth of abiku.

Moreover, the followers of Yoruba have great fear towards life and death. This is particularly due to the Africans who very firmly believed in reincarnation. They strictly maintained their hope that after death their soul would search for its new birth and find its living. Immediately after the birth of a child, certain physical characteristics or gestures of that child may indicate that such an ancestor of the family is reborn. Okri was much oriented with these supernatural systems in Nigeria and familiarized these to the readers throughout the world.

Despite the thematic, narrative and linguistic diversity of his novels, it is possible to see a common sensibility or approach as the basis of the fiction. Okri's works frequently focus on the political, social and economic conditions of contemporary Nigeria with its rich source of culture. His tales depict the problems which beset his homeland, particularly poverty, famine and political corruption. He further examines the relationship between the natural and spiritual world in his writings with the elements of traditional African folklore and myth. The necessary ground work is carried out in the novel to make one understand the study better.

Okri has given exclusively in the selected novel the myth and traditional belief of abiku. The literal sound of the term abiku is a mystery to non-African readers. The first impression that the reader arrives at on finishing *The Famished Road* is the cognitive sense of the nature of the novel. The reader on the completion of the novel arrives at an aesthetic confusion.

Okri made it interesting to the readers by revealing the influence of Yoruba community's culture and tradition, especially through the introduction of the term abiku. Abiku is a word that refers to children who keep oscillating between both worlds. Both worlds here refer to the world of the living and the world of the dead. Postcolonial reference is found in the setting of the novel. Ben Okri made it a world-wide the theory of abiku, which preferably points to Nigeria. The protagonist Azaro utters from his own words his nature of being an abiku,

We made these vows in fields of intense flowers and in the sweet-tasting moonlight of that world. Those of us who made such vows were known among the Living as abiku, spirit-children. Not all people recognised us. We were the ones who kept coming and going, unwilling to come to terms with life. We had the ability to will our deaths. Our pacts were binding. (*The Famished Road* 4)

The reader can further develop his thoughts through the author's words in the novel. The abiku phenomenon is quite popular in West-African oral tradition amongst the different ethnic groups of Nigeria, particularly the Yoruba. Due to its dual phenomenon, very few Nigerian and other West African writers have drawn on this

rich cultural resource as the way to express their national identities. The protagonist chooses the earthly life filled with harsh realities to dwell here on earth. Through this Azaro attempts to fulfil the social obligation towards his community. He explains the reason for choosing earthly life over spiritual life:

May simply have been that I had grown tired of coming and going. It is terrible to forever remain in-between. It may also have been that I wanted to taste of his world, to feel it, suffer it, know it, to love it, to make a valuable contribution to it, and to have that sublime mood of eternity in me as I live the life to come. But I sometimes think it was a face that made me want to stay. I wanted to make happy the bruised face of the woman who would become my mother. (*The Famished Road* 6)

The Road

At the creation of this novel, ‘the road’ in the title travel through the ancient world of the spirits and is conceptualized within traditional mythology. Azaro’s father, takes the role of storyteller, and tells him about his grandfather. Azaro’s father tries to rejuvenate the memories of the good values of the past. And in the manner of going back to past values, he highlights that “our old people are very powerful in spirit” (*The Famished Road* 70) and sadly that “We are forgetting these powers. Now, all the power that people have is selfishness, money, and politics”. (*The Famished Road* 70) In the Yoruba-African point of view, evil is comprehended as originating from spiritual beings other than God. According to the dictions of Okri, part of this cosmological explanation is a personification of evil itself.

Okri took inspiration from the supernatural elements of Yoruba oral narratives. Both in *The Famished Road* and the following two novels within the trilogy *Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches*, there is a move towards a mythical causality that reconceptualizes modes of characterization and the relationship between environment and characters. The trilogy abandons archetypal character psychology as conceived by realism. His works are found to have the indigenizing of form and content. The enigma of arrival is something Okri omits from his creative work, and he prefers to give focus to Transnational and Transcultural motifs, many of which are Pan-African in nature.

Narrative Style

Okri’s language has been described as simple, lucid and image-laden. His use of language indicates two things that he has a great mastery over the English language and his indigenous language. The former reference is explained by the fact that he has spent and studied, most of his life in London. At the same time, he asserts his belonging to Africa in his choice of local words.

In explicating the narrative style additionally in its ethnic and aesthetic environment, magical realism contributes the most favourable literary branch to react to the cultural predicament and determine the extended contemporary postcolonial society. For instance, the presentation in the enchanting (magical)-realist narrative of both colonial and postcolonial treatises, intricate in the language clash, reveal many of the troublesome correspondence prevailing between colonizer and colonized in postcolonial scenario. This conduit to the exploration of hybridity is a predominant motif in the existing task of intellectual and ethnical decolonization.

Magical Realism

Okri makes use of the magical realism with multiple realities and references, he explores the impact on the vice versa element which is fiction on reality and reality on fiction that makes the various races of readers to draw attention to the social milieu that takes place in and around Nigeria.

The magic in this text looks more natural because it springs from the Yoruba belief system. Azaro's spirit-child status is not unjustifiable, but real in the eyes of the author and the readers who share the abiku-belief. However, the condition may be, the writer uses his new genre to offer more than a depiction of current conditions in their individual countries. It also aims to provide strategies for better action as well as hope for their people with regard to change. Okri suggests a vision through his narrative mode to the culture-bound society.

The Style

This segregation of style is used to investigate the resources of language, further used for the following observation. Yoruba mythologies have provided multi-dimensional source for the Nigerian writers. The definition of Magical Realism to understand is simple:

Magical realism, magic realism, or marvellous realism is a genre of narrative fiction and, more broadly, art (literature, painting, film, theatre, etc.) that, while encompassing a range of subtly different concepts, expresses a primarily realistic view of the real world while also adding or revealing magical elements. (Wikipedia)

Commonly seen things become much more interesting and gripping when they are imbued with mere supernatural elements and magical settings. Magical realism is a mode of storytelling which surprises the readers in a realistic context. In general, culture differs from nation to nation, but magical realism suggests that one culture can be described at the global level with the aid of this medium. In this magical realist convention, the events are filled with richness of unexpected reality. The mundane settings are depicted as such with an injection of fantasy in it. Magical realism can be said to be the higher part of reality. Therefore, the writing art of Okri comprises the magical realism mode of writing to elevate the cultural study a better one.

Conclusion

By incorporating African oral devices in his narratives, Ben Okri aims to reclaim Nigeria's seat at the global cultural rendezvous. In other words, he calls the world's attention to Nigeria's incommensurable contributions to past and present global cultures. This effort, he hopes will make Nigeria and Africa a full and respected participant in the political, cultural and economic exchanges of the world. Thus, it is believed that this thought is an antecedent to the social upheaval of his native land. Today, the academic and the non-academic community are becoming more and more interested in Yoruba culture. There is more and more research being carried out on Yoruba cultural thought, while more books are being written on the subject.

The remarkable view of using magical realism and Yoruba theory by Ben Okri is that he employs the mode not only because he wishes to repeat the folkloric mythologies from their cultural community, but also to promote the depth of understanding of the present circumstances and scenario in which his words were written. With the conclusion of this paper, the spirit is one with the suffering people's struggle against corruption and exploitation. This gives an entry into higher transformation of realities with special emphasis on vision. The skilful ability of Okri to bring out the society's responsibility at a high level has made him an aesthetic and intellectual theorist through his forceful writing.

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K. Saranya, Research Scholar
saran92ponmani@gmail.com

Dr. A. Selvalakshmi
Assistant Professor
selvalakshmi.masc@yahoo.co.in

Department of English
Sri Sarada College for Women (Autonomous)
Salem-636016
Tamilnadu
India