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AN *ABIKU* NATION: DECOLONISATION OF NIGERIAN HISTORY IN BEN OKRI'S *THE FAMISHED ROAD*[1]

Bir 'Abiku' Ulus: Ben Okri'nin *Aç Yol* Adlı Romanında Nijerya Tarihinin Dekolonizasyonu

Taner CAN[2]

Abstract

Historiography has been one of the central issues of postcolonial studies. The dismantling of British colonies after the Second World War encouraged a vast body of new literatures in which the Western literary modes, particularly the novel, were aptly adapted to represent the distinctive cultural and national identities of the former colonies. In the early phase of post-independence, the early postcolonial writers generally reclaimed pre-colonial forms of history and culture in order to help the process of nation building. They idealised the national past in its pristine form based on local histories and endeavoured to prove that their societies do have a civilisation, equal or even superior to that of the West. However, starting from the 1980s, this proud nationalism gave way to a new understanding of national identity that seeks reconciliation between the indigenous and colonial cultures. Magical realism with its ability to juxtapose alternative perceptions of reality and history and more particularly with its affiliation to myths, folklore and legends provided postcolonial writers the cultural catalyst they were seeking to write alternative national histories. The aim of this paper is to analyse Ben Okri's use magical realism in his *Famished Road*, particularly the *abiku* myth to write a decolonised history of Nigeria.

Key Words: *Magical realism, postcolonialism, myth, decolonisation, national identity.*

Özet

Tarih yazımı, sömürgecilik sonrası dönem çalışmalarının en temel meselelerinden biridir. İkinci Dünya Savaşı'ndan sonra Britanya imparatorluğuna ait sömürgelerin dağılmasıyla birlikte, Batı medeniyetine ait yazın türleri – özellikle roman – eski sömürgelerde yaşayan yazarlar tarafından kendi ulusal ve kültürel kimliklerini yansıtmanın etkin bir aracı olarak kullanılmaya başlanmıştır. Ulusal bağımsızlıklarının ilanını takip eden yıllarda yazarlar, sömürgecilik öncesi tarihi ve kültürel miraslarına sahip çıkan eserler kaleme alarak, ulusal kimlik inşası sürecine katkı sağlamaya çalışmışlardır. Kendi kültürlerinin Batı kültürüyle eşit düzeyde ya da ondan daha üstün olduğunu kanıtlamak amacıyla kaleme alınan bu eserlerde, yazarlar çoğunlukla sömürgecilik öncesine dayanan ulusal tarihlerini idealize etme yoluna gitmişlerdir. Ulusal bağımsızlığın ilk yıllarında görünen bu mağrur milliyetçi yaklaşım, 1980'lerden itibaren yerini, yerel kültür ile sömürgeci devletlerin kültürleri arasında uzlaşma arayan, yeni bir ulusal kimlik anlayışına bırakmıştır. Büyülü gerçekçi yazım türü, farklı tarih ve gerçeklik anlayışlarını bir arada barındırabilme özelliği ve daha önemlisi mitlerle, folklorik öğelerle ve söylencelerle olan yakın ilişkisi nedeniyle, eski sömürgelerde yaşayan yazarların ulusal tarihlerini ve kimliklerini dile getirmelerine yardımcı olan anahtar bir rol oynamıştır. Bu çalışmanın amacı büyülü gerçeklik yazım türünün ve Afrika kültürüne ait 'abiku' mitinin Ben Okri'nin *Aç Yol* adlı romanında Nijerya tarihinin yeniden yazımındaki rolünü incelemektir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: *Büyülü gerçekçilik, sömürgecilik sonrası, mit, dekolonizasyon, ulusal kimlik.*

[1] Adapted from the writer's Ph.D. dissertation titled "Magical Realism in Postcolonial British Fiction: History, Nation and Narration"

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Introduction

As its very name suggests, magical realism has an ambivalent relationship with the concept of reality because it "works both within and against the aesthetics of realism" (Chamberlain, 1986: 17). It works within the aesthetics of realism since no matter that fantastic or supernatural elements are incorporated in the narrative, magical realist writing is always anchored in empirical reality. "In the magical realist texts [...]," as Lois P. Zamora and Wendy B. Faris observe, "the supernatural is not a simple or obvious matter, but it *is* an ordinary matter, an everyday occurrence – admitted, accepted and integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism" (1995: 3). Magical realism also works against the aesthetics of realism, for magical realist writers search for new narrative possibilities to reconstruct and redefine nineteenth-century realism. With its ability to juxtapose alternative perceptions of reality and history and more particularly with its affiliation to myths, folklore and legends, Magical realism provided postcolonial writers the cultural catalyst they were seeking to scribe alternatives to Western historiography. The aim of this paper is to discuss the functional role of African myths, particularly the *abiku* myth, and magical realism in composing a decolonised history of Nigeria in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1993).

In *The Famished Road*, the key to Okri's magical realist vision is the myth of abiku, "the willful spirit child, who masquerades as human baby, only to recurrently 'die' and be re-born, causing grief and mischief among the living" (Cooper, 1998: 50). In the novel, Okri recounts the story of Azaro, an abiku child caught between the world of the spirits and the living. It is also the story of his poverty-stricken family and their neighbours living in the same ghetto, also referred to as the compound. They struggle to survive in a country that has recently gained her independence and is still suffering from the maladies of post-independence politics. Azaro's liminal existence as well as his magical powers, his ability to envision the past and the future in particular, affords Okri to open a window in the history of Nigeria for the reader to witness the different phases of the country's long history. Okri, as shall be seen in the pages to follow, still has a positive, if not celebratory, attitude towards the change and transformation introduced by the contact with the Other. His choice of an abiku as his narrator and protagonist is regarded by critics as an indication of his acceptance of the idea of cultural transformation and hybridity. John Hawley, for example, argues that Okri's "choice of a liminal figure like the abiku to serve as his spokesman, straddling both worlds and drawing power from both, summarizes his determination to imagine something new" (1995: 36). Sharing the same view, Brenda Cooper maintains, "Ben Okri's hope and goal in *The Famished Road* is to see with a new 'third eye'" (1998: 67). Magical realism functions as a literary catalyst in the text. Within the third space provided by magical realism, Okri combines the ancient indigenous traditions with the elements of Western modernisation, stressing the necessity to form a new hybrid identity in postcolonial cultures.

The novel opens with Azaro's detailed introduction to the myth of abiku and related beliefs. Azaro informs the reader that as they approach the moment of their incarnation, some spirits make pact that they shall return to the spirit world at the first opportunity. The ones who have made such vows are known as abiku, or spirit-children. He describes himself and his spirit companions as "the strange ones, with half of our beings always in the spirit world" (Okri, 1993: 4). Spirit-children have the ability to will their deaths. Those who break their pacts are assailed by their spirit companions with hallucinations and nightmares. They can only find consolation when they return to the land of the unborn. Abiku children have their own particular spirit tokens that bind them to the other world.

They hide their tokens, for if others find and destroy them, they cannot return to the land of spirits. Azaro is a rebelling spirit that chooses life on earth over his spirit existence. Hence, his spirit companions constantly try to lure him back to "the world of pure dreams, where all things are made of enchantment, and where there is no suffering" (Okri, 1993: 4). Azaro is fully aware of what is in store for him in the world of the living: "the rigours of existence, the unfulfilled longings, the enshrined injustices of the world, the labyrinths of love, the ignorance of parents, the fact of dying, and the amazing indifference of the Living in the midst of the simple beauties of the universe" (Okri, 1993: 3). He is punished for his refusal to return to the land of spirits by constant hallucinations. It is in one of these spiritual assaults that his parents come to the realisation that their child is an abiku, but since they cannot find the tokens that connect him to the world of spirits, Azaro oscillates between the two worlds. It is the interspace where the phenomenal world intermingles with dreamscape. Azaro has vivid dreams, foretelling the future, and he can see spirits interacting with the living in broad daylight. The result is a unique blend of physical and spiritual landscapes within a radically unpredictable textual context.

Okri writes in eloquent yet simple language since the whole novel is narrated from a child's perspective. Azaro's adventures are articulated within a limited constellation of characters and settings, including his home and his parents (simply named Mum and Dad); the shrewd, magisterial bartender called Madame Koto and her bar peopled with politicians and prostitutes; the forest surrounding the ghetto where spirits and other supernatural beings dwell. Life in the ghetto is monotonous. Nothing much happens except for the brief moments of rebellion and ensuing cacophony caused by the two political parties' struggle for dominance over the compound, namely the Party of the Poor and the Party of the Rich. Thus, it is mostly through the articulation of myths, folk tales and dreams that Okri manages to convey his magical realist view of Nigerian history.

African mythology, particularly the abiku myth, does not only provide the necessary ground for magical realism to flourish in the course of narrative flow, it also earns the novel its postcolonial content. Margaret Cezair-Thompson terms *The Famished Road* a "decolonized fiction" because "the origin of the 'famished road' lies in myth, not history. And so the fate of colonialism in *The Famished Road* is that not only is it disqualified in its claim to be a devouring force, colonialism itself becomes devoured, as mythopoeia overwrites history" (qtd. in Faris, 2004: 158). In other words, Okri challenges the tenets of colonialism through his magical realist revision of national history that combines the mythic with the contemporary. In *The Famished Road*, myths and folk tales are not treated as authentic cultural artefacts, but as dynamic discursive agents providing commentary on the social and political problems prevailing Nigeria. There are two key myths that Okri recounts to unravel the themes of poverty and political oppression. These myths also help reveal the socio-economic conditions in which Azaro's family and other families live in the compound. It is thus fitting to explore at the outset the two complementary myths told by Azaro's parents.

The first is the myth of the stomach that explains how hunger descended into the world. As the family's financial condition worsens, they can only afford one meal a day. Mum and Azaro wait for Dad's return at night so that they can share what they have got for the day. When Azaro complains of hunger, Mum relates the myth of the stomach to divert his attention from his grumbling stomach. In the story, a man without a stomach annually travels to a distant land to worship at a great shrine. On his way to the shrine, he meets a stomach without a body which immediately jumps on him and becomes part of his body. Soon the man starts to feel hungry, the stomach orders the man to feed him, but

he refuses to eat, saying, "when I didn't have you I travelled far, was never hungry, was always happy and contented, and was strong. You can either leave me or be quiet" (Okri, 1993: 80). Azaro falls asleep before his mother finishes the story only to wake up to the bitter realities surrounding his family. Azaro's Dad, who has just returned from work, complains in a ghostly and exhausted voice that "[t]hey have begun to spoil everything with politics [...]. Now they want to know who you will vote for before they let you carry their load. [...] If you want to vote for the party that supports the poor, they give you the heaviest load. I am not much better than a donkey" (Okri, 1993: 81). The myth of the stomach told to a starving child and Dad's complaints about work describe Nigeria's economic and political dilemmas as an emerging independent country. Like the stomach in the story, political leaders in the emerging nation-state fasten themselves on the national wealth of the country. Consequently, it becomes almost impossible for the poor to survive, and the ghetto dwellers are condemned to live below the poverty line. Azaro describes the ghetto as "a world drowning in poverty," "eating the food of suffering" (Okri, 1993: 281, 326).

The second myth in the novel, the King of the Road, arises from a similar circumstance. As the political polarisation in the society gets worse, it becomes more difficult for Azaro's parents to earn their living mainly because they refuse to support the Party of the Rich. To punish the family, the landlord, a member of that Party of the Rich, raises their rent more than any other tenant in the compound. When Mum suggests that they should sleep on empty stomachs in order to afford the exorbitant rent, Azaro wants Dad to tell him a story because his mother's talk about food reminds him of his terrible hunger. This is when Dad tells Azaro the myth of the King of the Road, a giant with a huge stomach and an insatiable appetite who competes with other forest monsters for strange things to eat. But, "when the Forest started to get smaller because of 'Man', when the giant couldn't find enough animals to eat, he changed from the forest to the roads that men travel" (Okri, 1993: 258). People start to leave him sacrifices or he does not allow them to pass, and sometimes he eats them alive. When a famine breaks out because of the insatiable hunger of the giant, people decide to send a delegate to reason with him, but the King of the Road eats the delegation. Beset by his insatiable hunger, the giant starts to eat himself till only his stomach remains, which melts in the rain and becomes part of all the roads in this world. Dad ends his story with a warning for Azaro:

> *He is still hungry, and he will always be hungry. This is why there are so many accidents in the world. And to this day some people still put a small amount of food on the road before they travel, so that the King of the Road will eat their sacrifice and let them travel safely. But some of our wise people say that there are other reasons. Some say people make sacrifices to the road to remember that the monster is still there and that he can rise at any time and start to eat up human beings again. Others say that it is a form of prayer that his type should never come back again to terrify our lives. That is why a small boy like you must be very careful how you wander about in this world. (Okri, 1993: 261)*

The famished giant is an obvious symbol of greed and abuse of power. The context in which Dad tells the myth to his starving child makes it possible to consider the King of the Road in relation to the modern manifestations of greed, namely colonialism and abuse of power by the politicians of independent Nigeria. For instance, in her reading of the myth Felicia Oka Moh contends: "[t]he King stands for the archetypal predator who has such an insatiable appetite that he preys on everything and everyone for self-preservation. The road is famished because the rulers are monsters and oppressors. The

road becomes a symbol of the Nigerian nation which has unjust predatory rulers" (2001: 77).

Although laden with myths, legends and folk tales, Okri's narrative never undermines the political reality of the society that it sets out to describe. As a defining characteristic of magical realism, Azaro's fantastic narrative is anchored in the socio-political realities of independent Nigeria. "What is curious [...] about Okri's text," Stephen M. Hart and Wen-chin Ouyang observe, "is the fact that – even while it fuses the magical with the real, and the animal with the human, the spiritual with the material, and the natural with the supernatural – it never loses its political relevance" (2005: 10). Sharing a similar view, Abubakar Liman describes *The Famished Road* as "a way of depicting the life of the poor in Nigeria who are caught between the urge to life, a better life and the difficulties of a system built on injustice and exploitation of man by man" (1977: 70). Indeed, it is a riot that triggers the unfolding events in the novel. One night a fire starts and burns the compound where Azaro's family live to the ground. The landlord forces the tenants to pay for the damage the fire caused. When the colonial police arrive at the compound, a riot breaks out. "That night," Azaro informs the reader, "our life changed" (Okri, 1993: 9). During the riot, Azaro is kidnapped by a group of witches. He manages to escape from them but only to end up in the house of a corrupt policeman where he witnesses the bribes collected and shared by the policeman and his gang. Assailed by his spirit companions, Azaro has the strangest nightmares in the policeman's house. Eventually, his mother rescues him and takes him to their new compound.

Okri reveals the exploitation of the poor by the rich through his vivid depiction of the life in the compound. The family is now crammed into a single room with almost no furniture. The detailed description of their room presents an index of the poverty of the inhabitants of the compound. A rope stretched between the walls functions as a wardrobe, and Azaro sleeps on a mat spread on the floor. The sanitary condition of their habitation is very poor. Fleas, mosquitoes and rats are part of every household. While Azaro's parents try to make ends meet, the election campaigns start to heat up. Politics is everywhere; Madame Koto's bar, the marketplace where Azaro's mother sells her provisions, the garage where his father works as a carrier reverberate with conversations about the burgeoning Nigerian independence politics. The communal interest in politics gradually gives way to a radical polarisation in the society along the lines of two parties and eventually leads to violence. Dad and his neighbours are subject to constant exploitation by the landlord. Despite the terrible condition of the houses in the ghetto, the landlord increases the rent and threatens the tenants with his thugs. Madame Koto, the mysterious bartender, starts to grow indifferent to the inhabitants of the ghetto as she negotiates with the members of the Party of the Rich. While most of the tenants seem to be less concerned, Azaro's Dad becomes an active political figure, trying to draw attention to the injustices in the society. He has once announced loudly that "some people have too much, and their dogs eat better food, while others suffer and keep quiet until the day they die" (Okri, 1993: 380). When pressurised by the landlord to vote for the Party of the Rich, he bursts out in rage, "[w]hat right has the landlord to bully us, to tell us who to vote for, eh? Is he God? Even God can't tell us who to vote for. Don't be afraid. We may be poor, but we are not slaves'" (Okri, 1993: 206). However, his effort is not enough to start a serious and purposeful political movement among the deprived masses.

It is not only the society that changes in the country, fragmenting into different political factions. The country itself also undergoes a dramatic change as new roads and buildings are constantly being built. With the advent of industrialisation, the forest moves away from the city as prefigured in the myth of the King of the Road. Magical realism is instrumental in Okri's treatment of the changes taking place in the country. In one of his

several solitary wanderings in the forest, Azaro discovers "a village of spirits" in the middle of a clearing (Okri, 1993: 246). With the serenity of the scene, he falls asleep. When he wakes up, he sees a construction machine destroying the village of the spirit. In another magical realist scene, Azaro foresees the things in store for Nigeria with an eye opened at the centre of his forehead:

> *I had emerged into another world. All around, in the future present, a mirage of houses was being built, paths and roads crossed and surrounded the forest in tightening circles […] The world of trees and wild bushes was being thinned. I heard the ghostly wood-cutters axing down the titanic irokos, the giant baobabs, the rubber trees and obeches. There were birds' nests on the earth and the eggs within them were smashed, had fallen out, had mingled with the leaves and the dust, the little birds within the cracked eggs half-formed and dried up, dying as they were emerging into a hard, miraculous world. Ants swarmed all over them. (Okri, 1993: 242)*

Here, Azaro subverts the Eurocentric view of history as a forward progression through his magical realist viewpoint that blurs the conventional boundaries. The natural world dies out as Western modernity makes its progress through the thick African forest. However, Azaro's vision goes beyond this mere criticism of the colonial idea of economic development. As mentioned earlier, the forest is inextricably linked with African cultural beliefs: it is the dwelling of spirits and other supernatural beings. The compound people are depicted performing religious rituals in the forests on several occasions. It functions as their shrine and spiritual sanctuary. Therefore, the destruction of the forest also suggests the destruction of African cultural heritage by the West.

Azaro's critical view of colonialism is further reinforced by his mother's account of the arrival of the colonising powers in Africa. Having encountered a white man (an engineer at work in the forest) for the first time, Azaro asks his mother in amazement to tell him a story about the white people. In her story, Mum subverts the colonial claim of introducing civilisation to the masses living in the distant lands of the world. She contends that when the white people first set foot on the African continent, they were, in fact, inferior to the blacks:

> *'When white people first came to our land,' she said, as if she were talking to the wind, 'we had already gone to the moon and all the great stars. In the olden days they used to come and learn from us. My father used to tell me that we taught them how to count. We taught them about the stars. We gave them some of our gods. We shared our knowledge with them. We welcomed them. But they forgot all this. They forgot many things. They forgot that we are all brothers and sisters and that black people are the ancestors of the human race. The second time they came they brought guns. They took our lands, burned our gods, and they carried away many of our people to become slaves across the sea. They are greedy. They want to own the whole world and conquer the sun. Some of them believe they have killed God. Some of them worship machines. They are misusing the powers God gave all of us. They are not all bad. Learn from them, but love the world.' (Okri, 1993: 282)*

Despite her final reconciling remark, Mum's story reflects an idealised view of Africa and the superiority of the black culture as prefigured in the Négritude movement. It retains the essentialist view of races as well as the established binaries between the coloniser and the colonised.

However, it would be a mistake to assume too readily that Okri advocates an essentialist view of African culture, following in the footsteps of the realist tradition of African literature. It is again through tales and dreams narrated by Azaro's parents that Okri reveals the crucial role of transformation and change in postcolonial societies. Later in the novel, Mum tells Azaro and his friend Ade, who is also an abiku child, a very strange, yet as she insists, a true story. One day while selling her provisions in the marketplace, Mum meets a white man who has been in Africa for ten years and wants to find a way to leave. She says she can help him in exchange for his blue sunglasses. However, she baffles the man with an enigmatic saying that she has heard from a tortoise: "all things are linked" (Okri, 1993: 483). Next time when Mum sees the man, she cannot recognise him as he has transformed into a black Yoruba man with magical powers. Seeing the incredulous look on her face, the man tells Mum what has happened after their first encounter:

> *When I left you, […] I became feverish in the head and later in a fit of fury over a small thing I killed my African servant. They arrested me. I sat in a cell. Then they released me because I was a white man. Then I began to wander about the city naked. Everyone stared at me. They were shocked to see a mad white man in Africa. Then a strange little African child took to following me around. He was my only friend. All my white colleagues had deserted me. Then one day my head cleared. Five hundred years had gone past. The only way to get out of Africa was to become an African. So I changed my thinking. I changed my ways. I got on a plane and arrived in England. I got married, had two children, and retired from government service. I was in the Secret Service. Then before I turned seventy I had a heart attack and died. They buried me in my local parish cemetery with full national honours […] Time passed. I was born. I became a businessman. (Okri, 1993: 483-484)*

Through this seemingly trivial magical realist story, Okri manages to provide insights into the identity crisis caused by the interaction of different cultures. Particularly the transformation in the white man's resolution from "[t]he only way to get out of Africa is to get Africa out of you," into "[t]he only way to get out of Africa was to become an African" demonstrates that it is only through acceptance and internalisation of certain aspects of the Other's culture that the subject may find comfort (Okri, 1993: 483, 484).

Okri seems to sustain his double vision throughout the novel by looking at the same issue from different points of view. Thus, the white man's story in Africa is counterpoised later in the narrative by an account of Dad's nightmare. To underscore the interpretative power that dreams and visions have in African culture, Dad reminds Azaro that "[a] man can wander the whole planet and not move an inch […]. My son, I dreamt that I had set out to discover a new continent" (Okri, 1993: 436). However, he dreams the continent away because it is inhabited by white men dressed in strange clothes. When he dreams again, Dad finds himself on a strange island where the inhabitants are all white and treat him badly, but this time he does not stop dreaming. He finds it difficult to live on the island because people are afraid of his different colour. Dad undergoes a physical transformation in order to accommodate himself to the island. He shrinks the continent in him and then turns white (Okri, 1993: 437). That both the white man and Dad have to undergo transformation in order to come to terms with their identity signifies postcolonial societies' urge to (re)construct their national identity as a fusion of two cultures. In her reading of the two magical realist scenes explicated above, Brenda Cooper draws a similar conclusion, stating that they can be seen as Okri's "love of change and celebration of the transformations arising out of interactions with other cultures" (1998: 74).

In *The Famished Road*, Okri brings together a multitude of views on colonialism, but the idea of transformation, as reflected in the tale and the dream narrated by Azaro's parents, is a leitmotif. Okri sees cultural transformation and transgression as part and parcel of postcolonial societies. Thus, he searches for new and more fruitful ways in which the new hybrid culture, originating from colonialism, may contribute to the present predicament of Nigerian society. In an interview, Okri reveals, "I am interested in affecting consciousness. I do not have time for idle exercises on colonisers and so on. It seems to me defeatist. I am much more interested in transforming consciousness, which goes beyond colonialism" (qtd. in Oliva, 1999: 182). The idea of transformation is presented in relation to the world of spirits or through the devices of dream and vision in the novel. Azaro's description of the spirit king presented at the outset of the novel is instructive in this respect:

> *He [The spirit king] had been born uncountable times and was a legend in all worlds, known by a hundred different names. 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, and the transformation of love into higher realities. (Okri, 1993: 3-4)*

As the excerpt above suggests, the cycle of death and rebirth brings spiritual wisdom and arcane knowledge. The idea of spiritual transformation dominates the last part of the novel, where Dad decides to become a boxer to make some money from bets. He trains dementedly all hours of the day except when he works and sleeps. He punches at flies, jabs at mosquitoes and flying ants, fights with his own shadow and spars with the air. Dad is like a champion boxer, fighting with "imaginary foes as if the whole world was against him" (Okri, 1993: 353). Through his incessant trainings and matches with party members and spirits, he undergoes a spiritual transformation. In three near death experiences he has after the matches, Dad is symbolically reborn. Each has a different significance.

Dad's first match is against the spirit of a deceased legendary boxer called Yellow Jaguar, who miraculously appears out of the blue and challenges him. The match provides Dad with his initiation into the world of spirits. During the match he undergoes a magical transformation: "[…] I saw how Dad was transforming. He was going back to simple things. He was going back to water, to the earth, to the road, to soft things. He shuffled. He became fluid. […] I felt a great strange energy rising from him" (Okri, 1993: 357). The primordial energies he has evoked help Dad knock out Green Jaguar, who disappears into the earth with Dad's fatal blow. The bout with Yellow Jaguar leaves Dad "in a state of shock between agony and amnesia" that lasts for six days (Okri, 1993: 359). They have to feed him pap "as if he were the biggest newborn baby in the world" (Okri, 1993: 359). He sleeps for long hours, day and night, drooling and passing gas indiscriminately. On the seventh day, Dad rises miraculously from his bed. He is symbolically reborn "with fresh energies" (Okri, 1993: 363) and develops "interesting powers and a kind of madness" (Okri, 1993: 364). This is a spiritual rebirth as well as a physical one, for he has now acquired a new vision since to enter the world of spirits is to negotiate with their primordial wisdom: "'I am," he confides in Azaro, "beginning to see things for the first time. This world is not what it seems. There are mysterious forces everywhere. We are living in a world of riddles'" (Okri, 1993: 388).

As evidenced by his rhetorical question to Azaro, "Maybe you have to overcome things first in the spirit world, before you can do it in this world, eh?" (Okri, 1993: 364), the boxing match with Green Jaguar prepares the necessary ground for Dad's long and painful transformation. His second match is against a man of the Party of the Rich named Green Leopard, "a legendary personage, the most feared fighter, and terroriser in many of the ghettos" (Okri, 1993: 393). Before the match, Dad promises that he will beat Green Leopard and disgrace the philosophy of the Party of the Rich (Okri, 1993: 396). Dad knocks Green Leopard out after a gruelling fight. His victory is succeeded by a three-day period of recuperation. Azaro's mother, Madame Koto and a reincarnated herbalist perform a ritual together to call his spirit from the Land of the Fighting Ghosts. When he wakes up, Dad tells them about his delirious dreams, how he has fought malevolent spirits. He is, thus, reborn a second time, bustling with energy. If Dad's first symbolic death and rebirth brings him a spiritual awakening, his second charges him with a humane and political vision. Dad starts to talk about "becoming a politician and bringing freedom and prosperity to the world and free education to the poor" (Okri, 1993: 408). Despite his illiteracy, he spends most of the money he has made from the bets on books. In the evenings, he has Azaro read them for him. When they hear Dad's promise to save the poor from starvation, the beggars in the neighbourhood begin to gather in his garden, saluting him as their leader. He grows the strange habit of keeping the door of his house open as a political gesture in Gandhian style. He does not work as much as he used to. As part of his political campaign, he visits the compound people asking for votes for the party he intends to start soon. In his speeches, he urges them to see what possibilities the future holds. When the crowd does not respond as enthusiastically as he expects, he starts blaming them for "not thinking for themselves, […] their sheep-like philosophy, their tribal mentality, their swallowing of lies, their tolerance of tyranny, their eternal silence in the face of suffering" (Okri, 1993: 420).

Explaining the reason behind his interest in politics, Dad remarks, "[i]deas, dreams, my son, […]. Since fighting the Green Leopard the world has changed. The inside of my head is growing bigger" (Okri, 1993: 433). His equation of dreams and ideas as mental faculties is an expression of African heritage where there is no rigid distinction between scientific thinking and mythic belief systems. They both help people to understand social and political realities. Many of these sentiments are echoed in the story of Dad's transformation. Dreams and visions precede action in *The Famished Road*. Thus, towards the end of the novel Dad exhorts Azaro to trust dreams as a guiding principle in life: "We can redream this world and make the dream real" (Okri, 1993: 498). Moreover, he explains his political projection for the future in a utopian dream,

> *He [Dad] conjured an image of a country in which he was invisible ruler and in which everyone would have the highest education, in which everyone must learn music and mathematics and at least five world languages, and in which every citizen must be completely aware of what is going on in the world, be versed in tribal, national, continental, and international events, history, poetry, and science; in which wizards, witches, herbalists and priests of secret religions would be professors at universities; in which bus drivers, cartpullers, and market women would be lecturers, while still retaining their normal jobs; in which children would be teachers and adults pupils; in which delegations from all the poor people would have regular meetings with the Head of State; and in which there would be elections when there were more than five spontaneous riots in any given year. (Okri, 1993: 409)*

Dad's dream represents magical realism's desire to articulate change and transformation through its utopian impulse. With his third and the last match with an anonymous man,

referred to as "a man in a white suit," Dad's transformation is completed. "[T]he third transformation," David C. L. Lim maintains, "marks the ultimate traversal of fantasy and metamorphosis of the very kernel of his being" (2004: 86). Devastated physically, Dad drifts into restless dreams once again, in which he searches for answers to the suffering in his community. In his dreams, he comes to the realisation that "all nations are born children; [...] a spirit-child nation, one that keeps being reborn and after each birth come blood and betrayals, and the child of our will refuses to stay till we have made propitious sacrifice and displayed our serious intent to bear the weight of a unique destiny" (Okri, 1993: 494). As Dad's explanation suggests, if the nation is to survive, she is to transcend the threats against herself. Azaro's liminal existence, thus, turns into a metaphor for the Nigerian nation. His unrelenting choice to stay alive metaphorically stands for Nigeria's struggle to form and sustain her national identity. In keeping with Dad's epiphanic illumination, the reader is invited to reconsider the events in the novel, particularly the family's struggle to keep their son alive in the face of extreme poverty and socio-political corruption under a new light.

It should however be noted that Azaro is not the only abiku child in the novel. Madame Koto is pregnant with three abikus, and there is also Azaro's friend, Ade. In explaining the metaphoric function of abikus in the novel, Brenda Cooper notes, "Nigeria is not only the wicked abikus in Madame Koto's belly, it is a combination of Azaro and his alter ego, Ade, the sweet ethereal spirit child who is determined to keep dying and returning to his spirit companions" (1998: 91). Ade and Azaro have different dispositions to life. While Azaro sees himself as a "spirit-child rebelling against the spirits, wanting to live the earth's life and contradictions", he observes that "Ade wanted to leave, to become a spirit again, free in the captivity of freedom" (Okri, 1993: 487). Ade is optimistic that his beleaguered country shall break the cycle of social, economic and political problems. He conceives that "[o]ur country is an abiku country. Like the spirit-child, it keeps coming and going. One day it will decide to remain. It will become strong. I won't see it" (Okri, 1993: 478). But, the survival of the nation will not be easy. Through his prophetic vision, Ade foretells what the future holds for Nigeria,

> *There will be changes. Coups. Soldiers everywhere. Ugliness. Blindness. And then when people least expect it a great transformation is going to take place in the world. Suffering people will know justice and beauty. A wonderful change is coming from far away and people will realise the great meaning of struggle and hope. There will be peace. Then people will forget. Then it will all start again, getting worse, getting better. Don't fear. You will always have something to struggle for, even if it is beauty or joy. (Okri, 1993: 478)*

Despite his optimism, Ade does not rebel against the relentless cycle of the abiku like Azaro, which turns him metaphorically into a foil for the nation. Comparing the two abiku children's disposition to life, Abiodun Adeniji concludes that "[t]he decision of Okri's Azaro to stay is [...] a ray of hope for the nation. At the first level of signification, it implies the survival of the nation in spite of the many problems besetting her" (2006: 204). Adeniji goes on to argue that Okri's positive reconstruction of the abiku myth is a "paradigm shift" from the literary image of the spirit-child who torments his parents by his or her constant coming and going between the worlds of the living and the dead as depicted in the works of Fagunwa, Tutuola, Soyinka and Clark-Bekederemo (204-205). In the same vein, Brenda Cooper maintains that "[t]he hope of the novel lies in Azaro successfully repudiating the abiku within himself and thereby, denying the inevitability of that mythical, Tutuolan road with its hungry waiting monster [...] Here Okri appears to contradict earlier reservations and to assert passionately the possibility of change" (1998:

92). This paradigm shift epitomises magical realism's capacity to provide new ways of seeing the indigenous cultures. The magical realist novelist returns to the indigenous past only to recreate anew by incorporating the mythical with the modern in the third space.

The abiku, as a metaphor for the nation, is also an explicit indication of the relationship between magical realism and postcolonial writing. In her article titled "Transfiguring: Colonial Body into Postcolonial Narrative," Elleke Boehmer explores the function of art as a means of giving voice to the silent or the silenced in postcolonial societies. For Boehmer, self-representation of "the colonial body" has become "one of the key distinguishing features of the postcolonial" since it serves as a counter-discourse to the colonizing powers which, in their authoritative rule, seized the sole right of representing the colonised masses in their political and literary narratives (1993: 272). Boehmer observes that "in postcolonial nationalist discourses of the last number of decades, images of the scrutinized, scored subject body have become the focus of attempts at symbolic reversal and transfiguration. Representing its own silence, the colonized body speaks; uttering its wounds, it negates its muted condition" (1993: 272). In *The Famished Road*, Okri manages to combine the abiku myth with the political realities of postcolonial society through his magical realist writing. Azaro speaks for the nation. His will to live in the face of poverty and political oppression represents the nation's determination to preserve its independent existence. The deliberate ambiguity created in the text instils in the reader the possibility of seeing reality from a different point of view. The evident conflation of the mythic and the realistic in *The Famished Road* does not only provide the necessary textual space for magical realism to flourish but also helps challenge the Western concepts of identity and progress, as they are constantly destabilised. His use of magical realism, particularly his articulation of the abiku myth, also coincides with his view of African aesthetics, which he contends, "is bound to a way of looking at the world in more than three dimensions. It's the aesthetic of possibilities, of labyrinths, of riddles [...] of paradoxes" (Wilkinson, 1992: 87-88). Ben Okri employs magical realism in *The Famished Road* to reinvest in the Nigerian cultural heritage in order to generate a narrative that resists the monological understanding of Western historiography.

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