

IDENTITY CRISIS AND THE SOCIAL REALITY OF MAGICAL THOUGHT: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF OKRI'S *THE FAMISHED ROAD*

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Abstract

The question of identity remains a controversial issue of post colonialism. One distinguishing characteristic of Nigeria's return to civil rule is frequent civil strifes, economic crises and conflicts. As a postcolonial novel, Okri's *The Famished Road* exposes the condition of identity crisis that emerged in postcolonial period. The language of the text gives elaborate explanation of anguished concern with existence and a desire for articulation of singular freedom. However, Okri uses language in its social context not only to reconfigure the nation - state as an *abiku* child but also to present the *abiku* phenomenon as the logic of history, time and beginning. Using Norman Fairclough's module of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) which examines language of texts to deconstruct the essential postulations of power, dominance and inequality that work harmoniously to give meaning to texts, the research reveals that violent history of Nigeria brings about identity crisis and existential angst, and that the empirical validity of magical thoughts are real in their consequences for individual lives and society. It concludes that as Okri asserts Nigeria's identity in his own terms and push back against western ideas of what Nigerian culture is, he nonetheless creates a new African identity that is not only political but also spiritual.

Keywords: Identity crisis, post colonialism, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), *abiku*

Introduction

Anti-colonialists' discourse and African literature are haunted by beginning, not as a narratological concept but as an epochal act of discontinuity from "imperial modes of agency and thought" (Bignall 2010:4). Thus for many African writers, the tragedy and malady of the nation-state in Africa is its failure to instantiate a radical beginning. This accounts for the persistence of the quest for alternative beginnings, visions, new identity and realities in African literature.

In *The Famished Road*, Okri interrogates anti-colonial notion of beginning and he reconceptualises time (of the nation) as a complex mixture of chaos, crisis, order, recommencement and transformation. However, the lenses through which Chinua Achebe analyzed the whole issue of how “things fell apart” with the arrival of the colonial white man is still prevalent in Okri’s *The Famished Road*. Put simply, the Nigerian world fell from without with the colonial pressures and from within with the collapse of the balance between the spiritual and the material. Many postcolonial writers have argued that colonialism put a knife on the things that held the colonized together and they fell apart (Ifowodo 2010: xxii). The experience of colonialism entails the experience of disjunctures, ruptures, fragmentation of physical boundaries and dissolution of identity. Rhit (2018) notes that it leads to a collision of cultures and values with scientific and technological advancements constantly threatening traditional belief systems. In his article, “On National Culture” Fanon describes the need of the colonizer to obliterate the past of the colonized thus:

Perhaps we have not sufficiently demonstrated that colonialism is not content simply to impose its rule upon the present and future of the dominated country. Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it. The work of devaluing pre-colonial history takes on a dialectical significance today (Frantz 1963:210).

The postcolonial subject suffers an identity crisis because he lacks a comprehensive sense of self. Robert Jay Lifton argues that:

The trauma of colonialism creates a radical altered sense of self, even a second-self different from the determined and traumatized self which supposedly recalls the original, pre-traumatic one. But because the colonized, in this traumatic state, cannot come to an accurate self-understanding, instability dogs his/her every effort to recapture the old self or to reconstitute a new one from the ashes of the traumatized one (Caruth and Lifton 1991: 164).

No doubt, colonialism invaded the communal life style of the colonized and the transition to an individual one it is argued, is the cause of the “ill-at-ease prevalent in colonized societies” (Rhit 2018:10). And the destruction of the old

ways leads to total sense of loss. The challenge leads to both spiritual and physical lack and disarray.

In the novel under study, Mum's speech seems to echo Frantz Fanon's when she speaks about the white man, "When white people first came to our Land; [...] they brought guns. They took our lands, burned 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" (Okri 1992: 282).

When Azaro spat at a man in Koto's bar, people blamed his behaviour on "the white man's way of life was spoiling the values of Africa" (Okri 1992: 240). It becomes clear from the quotations above that colonialism is a traumatic event which mars / destroys the individual's identity. As Fanon argues, colonialism is a traumatic event that causes damage to the mind of the colonized, and so to his/her self-perception. A trauma is "an injury to the body or mind, caused by a violent or catastrophic act or event, which shatters the existing frame of reference and defies ready understanding" (Ifowodo 2010:5). The collateral damage on the psyche of the postcolonial subject according to Rhit is absolutely valid to the psychoanalytic critic. Ngugi wa Thiong'o has the same view with Fanon when he speaks of the urgent need of decolonizing the mind.

This research, however, uses Norman Fairclough's model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) which proposes that "language is a part of society" (Fairclough 1989:18). And since CDA is concerned with social problems, Fairclough argues that language and society are related not in extended sense, rather they are related internally. Linguistic phenomena reflect social phenomena, and also the other way round. Language then, is "a social process" (Fairclough 1989: 19). What interests Critical Discourse Analysis is the more hidden and latent type of everyday beliefs, which often appear disguised as conceptual metaphors and analogies, thus attracting linguists' attention. Life is a journey, social organizations are plants, love is war, and so on (Lakoff, 1987; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, 1999). Critique regularly aims at revealing structures of power and unmasking ideologies.

Power is about relations of difference, and particularly about the effects of differences in social structures. The constant unit of language and other social matters ensure that language is entwined in social power in a number of ways. Language indexes and expresses power, and is involved where there is contention over and a challenge to power. Power does not necessarily derive from language according to Wodak (1999) but language can be used to

challenge power, to subvert it, to alter distributions of power in the short and the long term. Language provides a finely articulated vehicle for differences in power in hierarchical social structures. CDA tries to produce and convey critical knowledge that enables human beings to emancipate themselves from all forms of domination through self- reflection. So, it is aimed at producing 'enlightenment and emancipation.' It seeks not only to describe and explain, but also to root out a particular kind of delusion. So, Okri uses the tools of magical realism to describe and explain and equally root out a particular kind of delusion. He equally argues that magical thoughts and dreams are real.

Abiku and the Sense of Identification

The *abiku* myth as created by Okri in *The Famished Road* is a subtle re-examination of the aftermath of the colonial experience and a "re-visitation" of the identity of Nigerians. Okri argues in *A way of Being Free*, that "there can be no absolutes: no absolute good or evil; no absolute way of living. No absolute truth. All truths are mediated and tempered by the fact of living. Being alive qualifies all things" (Okri 1997: 54). This quotation proves the indeterminate and provisional nature of truth and reality. There is obvious identity crisis of the subject and as this identity cannot be fixed according to Rhit, it "indicates a resistance to the pure and homogenous identity and lauds the liberation of the subject from the narcissism that defines identity in terms of fixity and purity of origins" (Rhit 2018:11).

Abiku, an in-between subject, a child oscillating between the world of the living and that of the dead, has made several appearances in African literary works.

Soyinka's poem titled "Abiku" privileges the spirit world consciousness of the *Abiku* and sees its unattainable cosmic knowledge as being beyond humans in the real world and his play *A Dance of the Forest* (1960) employs a Half-Child/or *Abiku* who symbolizes the tragic nature of cyclic human history and which, unable to reach maturity, projects a sense of sterility that symbolizes the stillborn embryo symbolizing the newborn Nigerian state. Soyinka's *Abiku* is defiant and experiences intense pleasure and satisfaction, causing pain to its parents. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* equally uses *Abiku* called *Ogbanje*. His *Abiku/Ogbanje* Ezinma represents the way the idea of *Ogbanje* manifests itself in the physical world of Nigeria. There are no obvious magical occurrences in Achebe's novel unlike Okri's. The spirit world remains unseen in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*; it never crosses the borders between the world of the living and that of the spirits. *Abiku* takes a special place in the novels of Okri. In *The Famished*

Road, Songs of Enchantment, and Infinite Riches, the *abiku* child (Azaro) is the main character and the narrator. As Ato Quayson argues, Okri has "incorporated the distinct ethnographic and esoteric versions of the above-mentioned author's workings of the *abiku* myth into his narratives that produce a multiplicity of meaning" (Quayson 1997: 125).

Okri uses his creative prowess to project the *Abiku myth* and its metaphysical dilemma as a perfect metaphor for the crisis in Nigerian/African history. So Azaro as an *Abiku* has an uncanny ability to die young and be born again but he empathizes with his parents, has compassion for them, and decides to stay back to satisfy, please and give them happiness.

The Nigerian Nation as an *Abiku*

Ben Okri in *The Famished Road* x-rays the plights of Nigerians who after imperialism and colonialism still continue to struggle and groan under the problems of neo-colonialism and inept leadership. He reveals the mood of disillusionment which is a seemingly permanent feature of the postcolonial African experience. Due to corruption and inept leadership, Nigerian rulers have betrayed the hopes with which the new nation approached independence.

Okri skilfully manipulates language in analysing the *abiku* myth in order to portray the realities of the present-day Nigerian society and institutions. Since independence, Nigeria has witnessed a lot of political, economic and identity crisis and instabilities from one political government to another. These crises can be likened to the spirit-child or *abiku*; and its incessant coming and going, as it is the case in *The Famished Road*. All these are directly connected to the Nigerian nation and her historical background. Azaro deconstructs the riddle thus:

The spirit child is an unwilling adventurer into chaos and sunlight, into the dream of the living and the dead. Things that are not ready not willing to be born or to become, things for which adequate preparations have not been made to sustain their momentous births, things that are not resolved... They keep coming and going till their time is right. History itself fully demonstrates how things of the world partake of the condition of the spirit child (Okri 1991: 487).

Abiku keeps coming and going till their time is right (1991: 487). The postcolonial nation and the subjects must both struggle to transcend the nightmare of colonial history in Africa. Azaro struggles in his own way to

traverse and overcome this identity crisis and nightmare, at the same time, he struggles to step over the threshold or liminal stage into maturity.

His passage through the Lacanian mirror stage was incomplete since the mirror had cracks resulting from the trauma caused by colonialism. The acquisition of a coherent identity was not automatic as the image was unclear. The work to repair this cracked mirror is what he is attempting to do in his own way. Azaro is successful in holding off the spirit world's influences (2018:53).

The duality which characterizes Azaro's turbulent identity and by implication the dreamed nation Nigeria according to Rhit (2018) is a signifier of what Claude Levi-Strauss has called "the free- floating signifier," a signifier that resists fixity, constantly "wandering" wishing to "stay" yet unable to do so, at least in Nigeria's turbulent times. Azaro that feels the evil effects of colonialism experiences ambiguity through indeterminate and traumatized state. From his dual existence and magical thoughts, he is confused about his identity and believes that there is another being inside him.

Referring to those people who grapple with the challenging social realities in the modern world, Okri says that "Exile is a fleeing from one dream to another one. In the process we change, we metamorphose, and our new shapes are never settled" (Okri 1997:54). This reflects identity crisis and the fluid conceptions of self-articulation for singular freedom. The issue of identity makes Okri's *abiku* trilogy, particularly *The Famished Road* an interesting reading. Unlike his predecessors, his concept of *abiku* marks all births as moments of exile. The *abiku's* traumatic dual nature and unsettling movements reflect the complexity of postcolonial identity. As Azaro observes, "to be born is to come into the world weighed down with strange gifts of the soul, with enigmas and an inextinguishable sense of exile" (Okri 1991:5). Okri believes that birth is haunted by memory which echoes Foucault's assertion that "what is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity" (Foucault 1984: 79). Rhit (2018:14) observes that Azaro is similar to the postcolonial migrant because he embodies this disparity. "He is haunted by memories of the spirit world and attuned to histories and memories of countless births"(Fernandes 2008:135). Hence, Okri does not only place his protagonist Azaro in the service of identity or national history but also "enacts through him a way of being in the world that celebrates the turbulent spaces of encounter. He accomplishes this

not through narrative plot alone, but by transforming himself and his works into signs of the *Abiku*" (Fernandes 2008: 135). Ade, one of Azaro's spirit-child companion attests, "Our 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" (1991:7).

From the foregoing, it can be affirmed that Nigeria is saddled with political and economic crises that disrupt its unity. Azaro himself asserts that, "Being born was a shock from which I never recovered" (1991:7). But having been born, he fights with death. As a corollary, the Nigeria nation never chose to be a nation. The status of nationhood was somewhat imposed on the divergent tribes. But having become a nation, it has resisted any attempt at secession.

Dad finds out that all nations are children: "it shocked him that ours too was an abiku nation, a spirit-child nation, one that keeps being reborn and after each birth come blood and betrayals" (1991:494). For an Abiku child to stay and live his normal life on earth, the parents will need to consult herbalists and make expensive sacrifices. As Dad discovers "the child of our will (the nation) refuses to stay till we have made propitious sacrifices and displayed our serious intent to bear the weight of a unique destiny (1991:494). Azaro's parents would have willingly made whatever sacrifices required of them, but they are poor and cannot afford the sacrificial items. Panic measures are taken whenever he falls ill, which do not satisfactorily solve his problems. But in the case of Nigeria, the people have not "displayed a serious intent to bear the weight of a unique destiny" by addressing once and for all the problems besetting it as a nation. Rather than tackle the major problems which threaten the peaceful existence of the nation, the leaders adopt interim measures which do not necessarily and satisfactorily solve the problems. And so, the nation continues its rhythmic existence of birth (hope), betrayal and death (bloodshed). Azaro's experiences in the world of the living is also a symbol of the nation's experiences.

The Social Reality of Magical Thought

Scholars have spoken of "the social reality of magic"; that as an institution, it is "a total social fact" (O'keefe 1982: xvii). Magic has been seen as a stabilizing force beyond the individual sphere. O'Keefe (1982) observes that magic provides a social rallying point which works to concentrate group effort and produce a group feeling. It has also been suggested that the capacity for magical thought may be an important prerequisite for human creativity. Again, literary and artistic representations have been regarded as historically derived

from and essentially analogous to magical practices. Not only that both actions are mimetic, "both the artist and the magician strive, by means of thought or imagination, to shape reality according to their wishes"(Benyei1997:155). Subbotsky equally states that, far from being primitive or immature forms of consciousness, the magical realities constructed in dreams, art or children's play serve to organize and enrich everyday reality, capturing aspects that escape rational construction. Given that magical thought seems to inhere in human thinking, he advocates turning a vice into a virtue: "Since beliefs in magic and object non-permanence cannot (and should not) be ultimately eradicated from children's minds, they must be given a certain place and even cultivated, rather than just declared false and forgotten" (Subbotsky 2011: 140).

So magical thinking is seen as an inevitable and even indispensable element of human thought. Although there are obviously, positive aspects of magical thought, it is crucial that magic should not be mistaken for absolute and self-evident truth because its potential for domination can be taken for granted, and its positive effects come to bear, only if it is recognized as a human construction. As O'keefe says:

In a secular age when the ego is cramped for breath, magic can seem releasing, it can remind us of the transcendent and miraculous in everyday life which we are inured to ignore [...] Magical revivals today consist partly of new vocabularies to remind us of the transcendent all around us. But the transcendent is nothing more or less than the remarkable social-symbolic realm which we ourselves partly make, and every magical victory is potentially alienating by mystifying this. [...] If the bureaucratic net of modern life so tightens that individuals are socialized to helplessness, they will try to build pseudo-communities of escape through religious cults, and to regain the illusion of having an effect, through magic [...] But if, on the contrary, social thought and collective action rediscover the miraculous in our symbolic social universe - the possibility of continuous self-creation of our individualities and our world will remain self-constituting and engaged (1982:506-507).

The Famished Road as a magical realist text evaluates the human propensity for magical thought and its ambivalent potential. Moreover, novelists have the ability to respond to the human craving for a world that makes sense, a world that can be explained and at least potentially controlled, and this has caused people of all times and in all places to cast their knowledge in a narrative form.

Like magical thought, narrative has been regarded as an anthropological trait of the most fundamental order.

The teleological nature of narrative, postulated already by Aristotle, ensures that all its constituent elements are meaningful, for they all contribute towards a certain outcome. We can also compare magic and narrative in terms of their social and psychological effects. Characterizing magic as a form of "social action", O'keefe has emphasized the power of magic to change reality, albeit through means other than its practitioners' belief:

Magic is real action. Something really happens, often something violent, usually something of consequence. People are shaken, influenced, healed, destroyed, and transformed. The social situation is altered. Magic is not mere illusion just because its efficacy depends on beliefs in illusionary entities [...] It is important to demonstrate that it is effective social action in order to show that the phenomenon is real (1982:25).

In Okri's narratives, Azaro and Ade (the spirit children) have supernatural abilities and powers which Dad for example, does not have. And these help them to express themselves and communicate meaningfully. In the novel, we witness the interaction and hear the dialogue between Azaro, Dad, Ade, Koto and trees, lizards and brooms. For example, Azaro understands the language of animals and inanimate objects, and Okri uses this symbolic information to express that these are relative possibilities in Africa, where it is possible for people under certain circumstances (magical) to turn into animals or objects and could as well commune and communicate with them. In *The Famished Road*, Azaro informs us that:

The clock was still. I saw the yellow bird in the shadow behind the ancient mother. It was bound and its feathers kept twitching, its eyes shining in the niche. I became aware of the cobwebs on my face. A fly droned behind me. Then it flew around and settled on the nose of the pregnant goddess. The clock made another noise, startling the fly. The turtle kicked. The bird fretted. I looked at myself in the blue mirror and couldn't see my face. I became afraid. At that moment the ancient mother in wood spoke to me (1991:291).

With mimetic magic, Azaro is able to transform himself into fauna and flora. There is a basic assumption that magical thought is a vital resource in dealing with situations and phenomena for which no rational scientific explanations or means of control are available. According to Malinowski, magic "supplies

primitive man with a number of ready-made ritual acts and beliefs, with a definite mental and practical technique which serves to bridge over the dangerous gaps in every important pursuit or critical situation" (1992:90).

At the lexical level of analysis of the text under study, linguistic tools employed have shown that the theme and the main preoccupation of the novel are magic, myth, and mystery which altogether constitute their wider cultural context detailing the implications and consequences of identity crises. The author has equally used the lexical tokens of flora and fauna to develop the theme of the supernatural linking them to the effects of colonialism and the realities of postcolonialism. We have instances and examples of these where the attributes and qualities of humans are given to inanimate and non-human entities. Okri, however, uses animal imagery and usually achieves the unconventional reality through the dislocation of the normal collocation patterns. And this can be seen in such expression as "the river became a road" (*The Famished Road* 1991:1). Also, he uses stylistic devices of pathetic fallacy, personification, paradox, hyperbole, synaesthesia to create magical mystery. The general outcome and effect is that the style exerts limits on language and affects the reader's conception of reality. Okpanachi and Bello (2015) accordingly observe that:

The discourse patterns and processes therefore disturb cause-effect and consequently deconstruct the margin between spheres of existence. Thus, the transition in the consciousness of Azaro is constructed as an alternative reality for the reader in the cosmic sense of dream. Azaro, thus can shuttle between the world and the hereafter (2015:173).

Okri has used *Abiku* and its cyclical nature to make social and political comment on Nigeria where history repeats itself with foolish obstinacy without the nation learning her lessons.

Conclusion

Okri has used linguistic resources to encode the existential realities of his society and vividly paints a picture of anomalies, identity crisis and disjuncture by conceptualizing the Nigeria nation as *Abiku*. This study reveals and concludes that the nation can be salvaged and living conditions improved if the leaders and citizens are willing and ready to "bear the weight of a unique destiny" by addressing once and for all the problems bedeviling it as a nation. Okri's narrative ideology awakens and reasserts the lost national consciousness and equally rejects and queries Western demeaning and demonization of African spiritual and cultural values and practices.

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