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The spiritual conflict in Ben Okris “*The Famished Road*”

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The Famished Road is the most rejuvenating novel by Nigerian Writer Ben Okri, this book to be the first one in trilogy follows with *Songs of Enchantment* (1993) and *Infinite Riches* (1998). Jonathan Cape has published this work in London in 1991. *The Famished Road* was awarded the Man Booker Prize for Fiction. To critically approach this with socialistic criticism more to analyse with protagonist, Azaro, an abiku or spirit child, living in an unnamed African city of Nigeria. The novel analyses with unique narrative style incorporating the spirit world with the real world, which has been classified by many authors as Animist Realism and others have labelled it as African Traditional Religion realism, while some simply it as a novel of fantasy literature. The novel explores the belief in coexistence of the spiritual and material worlds that is defining aspect of traditional African life.

Okri has taken three years to write this novel from 1988 living in Notting Hill flat and he said that writing this First draft of *The Famished Road* he acquired a kind of tranquillity which made something to change round about that time. In the

introduction to the 25th edition of 25th anniversary edition of *The Famished Road*, he said “The novel was written to give myself reasons to live. Often the wonder of living fades from us, obscured by a thousand things. I wanted to look at life afresh and anew and I sought a story that would give me the right vantage point. It is also meant to be a humorous book – from the perspective of the spirits, the deeds and furies of men are tinged with absurdity. Poverty compelled me to break off writing the novel in order to shape another, different book which would help keep me alive. This was a book of short stories and it forced compression on me.”

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The story revolves under a concern for protagonist a struggling child, Abiku or spirit child, from the Ghetto of an unknown city in Africa who has been constantly disturbed by his sibling spirits from another world who wants him leave this mortal world and wants him to come to the world of spirits, they send many emissaries to bring him back. An **Abiku** is any child who dies and is reborn several times into the same. Family; hence, the life-span of an **Abiku** is characteristically, very short indeed. *Abiku* refers to the spirits of children who die before reaching puberty; a child who dies before twelve years of age.

Azaro, the story's narrator, who has never lost ties with the spirit world is named after Lazarus, of the New testament. The story follows him as he tries to live his life, always aware of the spirits trying to bring him back. Azaro has more affection for his mother and father so he refuses to leave this mortal world.

The novel revolves under an unbelievable fact that from a young age, Azaro and his family knows he is a spirit child whose powers manifest in various ways, in his vivid dream where he was able to visualise his future, frequently interacting with the material world. On one occasion when he wakes up in a coffin after his parent thought he is dead, there is a spiritual ritual designed to sever a child's ties to the spirit world, but Azaro's parents cannot afford it. Okri has given picaresque of social concern for spirit child with socialistic criticism.

The life span of Azaro makes him to realize spiritual powers within him. One day, he has a premonition that prompts him to flee his family's compound, causing his parents to follow him. Having spiritual powers, the priest's hopes to harness his powers to themselves, but he escapes from them and goes to the police officer to make himself safest towards the mortal world but unfortunately the dead son of Police officer wants to possess him, being spiritual child

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his life endures with everlasting hardships wherever he go, he is not safe in the mortal world nor in the immortal world being insecure wherever he goes his life struggle survive never ends. Azaro's mother arrives just in time to rescue her son from police officer's son which makes him a part of relief. The family being struggled financially, Azaro makes friends with local bar owner Madame Koto who feeds the boy when his parents can't afford food. The Social concern to this child from Koto becomes self centred who wants to establish the bar in attracting all manner of grotesque spirits. Once the child flees from the place to escape from the spirits and gets lost and comes down with malaria. After his recovery Azaro makes himself connected with fetish, this causes the spirits to pursue him, after a few days facing more dangers of life, hoping to banish the malevolent spirits he buries the Fetish to make himself more reluctant to the mortal world to lead a comfortable mortal life.

Though he feels he has escaped from the immortal spirits, the mortal world of political parties doesn't make him to live at comfortable zone. When Koto's fortune swells, Azaro's family slides deeper into financial ruins, the father copes by spending more time at Koto's bar where he gets into physical brawls over political disputes. Okri has critically viewed the rich and poor status and their suffering where they beg and make themselves ruined with wrong

path because of poverty. The poverty of Azaros family has been total cause of Azaros mortal life where he can't withstand with his life's survival.

Life being more tortured with mortal beings, Azaro continues to be plagued by malevolent spirits, a three headed ghost who is angered by Azaro's refusal to follow him into the spirits world. Azaro's conflict for the survival towards the spiritual and mortal world is clear with his escapism from one world to another where he never finds peace and good living at anywhere. Once there, he angrily allows himself to become lost until finally, his parents manage to rouse him with the help of some herbalists.

The Famished Road is a hallucinatory story with striking imagery of both the spirit world and the real world. The world consisting of realistic slum and the spirit world and Tolkien explained it, a "fictive, invented world with its own creatures, geography, history, people", which requires coherence down to the finest detail and "great resources of inventiveness from its maker".

Okri's descriptions of real, relentless poverty with slum are detailed and bare-faced, with no evasion or 'vaseline on the lens' and readers have direct experience of slum living will recognize this factuality without material resources

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with no money- a hand to mouth existence. It goes on with reality of if you don't work you cant eat and you are in a never ending cycle of poverty. Totally it depicts the life of people who are one step a beggar with nauseatingly stinky disease or disability. The writer makes the reader to understand what true poverty is, and how ugly and crazy it is with people, which is more apt today as Okri writes poverty does not change and it keeps its inhabitants in a cycle of despair. Only change is permanent in this world. All this changes is the spirit, it provides the chance that people might escape the famished road as the title goes or perhaps as migrants or refugees, escape the country altogether.

Okri descriptions on spirit world are sublimely beautiful place, or state of being, with richness, delights and pleasures that are never ending. Spirit child choose to leave the spirit world by becoming human and being born and may choose to dies and return to the spirit world.

The *Famished road* A recurring theme, amongst the very many, is that of the road – or many roads. The title refers to the myth that Azaro's father tells him about the "King of the Road", who was always famished:

“He ate the trees, the bushes, the rocks, the sand, and he even tried to eat the earth. Then the strangest thing happened. He began to eat himself. He ate his legs, and his hands, and his shoulders, and his back,

and his neck, and he ate his head. He ate himself till only his stomach remained...What had happened was that the King of the Road had become part of all the roads in this world. He is still hungry, and he will always be hungry...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.”

The road, and travelling the road to find the end of it, is a metaphor for never-ending hunger, and trying to find the end of hunger. One thing is constant in Azaro's world, in Okri's Nigeria –hunger, the search for food, the preparation of food and the need for food, day by day.

Okri's novel is hard going, all eight sub books within the 519 pages, unlike reading science fiction or fantasy, where we know dealing with something that is not real, his world is concrete, real and pretty much as things are in Nigeria amongst the poorest of the poor.

Okri's extraordinary imaginative resourcefulness in the selection and accumulation dramatizes Azaro's experience of disgust, which is often existential, not political. In the market, for instance, he can hardly bear the sight of the merchandise on display:

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There were stalls of goods everywhere. And filling the air with the smells and aromas of the market place, the rotting vegetables, the fresh fruits, the raw meat, roasted meat, stinking fish, the feathers of wild birds and stuffed parrots, the wafting odors of roasted corn and fresh-dyed cloth, cow dung and sahelian perfume, and pepper-bursts which heated the eye balls and tickled the nostrils. And just as there were many smells, so there were many voices, loud and clashing voices which were indistinguishable from the unholy fecundity of things. (*Famished Road*, 161).

Azaro is not aware of the road of life, he is also horrified by human faces and voice. In his first sexual arousal, he is amazed at his own human impulses as the woman pulls him roughly "against her groin and intoxicating smells staggered me like a new kind of dangerous wine" (*Famished Road*, 272). His defensiveness is predictable where he deals with crises by describing the event purely clinically.

Okri's portrait of Azaro established the Yoruba folklore with music filled paradise of Azaro's spiritual home, of the mazed, labyrinths and lonely crowds which are the backdrop of daily life with intolerable poverty and misery in city slums, that of disgust and anguish as existential to the human condition which reflects the folklore of many lands with west African tradition of political novel and

contemporary world literature. The Writer had insight into sensibility of protagonist which appears to have influenced with the study of absurdist and existential traditions in England and France showing astonishing capacity for the hybridization and synthesis of literary traditions.

The structure of the novel is with Azaros positive presentation with love of unearned pleasure which is disconfirmed at the end of the story. The first chapter of the novel is with full of images of spirit children as they frolic on the frolic on the shore with "fauns, fairies, and beautiful beings" and that "tender sibyls, benign sprites, and the serene presences of our ancestors" bathe them "with divine rainbows." "Wondrous spirits danced around us to the music of gods, uttering golden chants and lapis lazuli incantations." But even in these opening pages, these deep ecstasies are distanced and criticized as being self-indulgent and possibly deceptive. For we are told that spirit children "disliked the rigors of existence," that they are "unwilling to come to terms with life" and live in "a world of pure dreams"(*Famished Road*, 3-6). This warning suggests that the narrative will show the reader in due course a more satisfactory human ideal.

The tragic moral development of Azaro from the love of indolent to the discovery of the ideal of creative living, learns to love his parents to bear his share

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of the burden of their struggling life. Azaro developed in bonding with his mother while she had a fever and suddenly when she has lost her consciousness. "Grief threw me to the floor," Azaro says, "and I thrashed about and wailed because I thought Mum had died" (*Famished Road*, 57). The structure of novel with the deepen relationship peaks in the middle of the story.

Okri indeed deals with supernatural powers that like of Spirit children throw stones; a three-headed monster abducts Azaro; and the forests are full to bursting with spirit dwarfs, hunchbacks and antelopes. But they do not shape the major situations, influence character, or determine the overall structure and meaning of events. In this regard, *The Famished Road* is unlike any of the magical fantasies of Tutuola or Fagunwa. Azaro's development is the process of his coming to maturity emotionally, morally and intellectually and this process is triggered by the growth of his powers of bonding, affection and sympathy. Soon after his encounter with the human beast of burden, Dad appears on the scene burdened with an even heavier load. Azaro reports how deeply he suffered when Dad is insulted and how he followed him at a distance "grieving for the cuts and wounds on his arm" (*Famished Road*, 149). As Azaro wakes up to the sanctity of human affection, his spirit companions turn against him, threaten, blackmail, and

kidnap him. He escapes and returns to his parents. But when he breaks a neighbour's window pane in an effort to ward off his friends, Dad and Mum both cane him mercilessly. He suffers a relapse.

The art of *The Famished Road* is an art of oblique forms. Nothing is named anonymous and the names can deceive. It emerges slowly and shyly as the reader questions the form and the interpenetration of motif, symbol, rhetoric and characters. The slow awakening of realization removes the film of familiarity from the truth and we see it new as a revelation and a pleasure.

Okri throws light on the imaginative freedom exercising in picking and choosing and combining motifs and symbols with many cultures. There are mystical ideas with spiral stairs with the cycles of astrological transformation in the course of the Great year. The powerful incantations guide Azaro's soul safely up the winding stairs, where some readers believe it as the renewal of love in the family restoring Azaro's confidence in living.

One of the finest characteristics of Azaro's language is Cognizance with the moments of heightened consciousness. The language is marked with synesthesia, hyperboles and extravagant tropes of fancy which dwells on gestures with emotions and atmosphere which liberates the reader's unconscious to imagine the facts, with appropriate emotions. The style with

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expressionism suggests imagery of many folk narratives. Azaro illustrates what happens on the first night of political terror in ghetto: "The dead joined the innocents [Azaro says], mingled with the thugs, merged with the night and plundered the antagonists with the cries of the wounded. The dead uttered howls of mortal joy and they found the livid night a shrine glistening with fevers." (*Famished Road*, 180).

Okri's literary affinities in *Famished Road*, are elective affinities. The writer having love of Yoruba oral traditions that has been worked briefly with his deeply stirred imaginative truth of the Yoruba god of the road, but his literary appetite is catholic, which seems likely that Dame Iris Murdoch's ironic and anti-Sartrean first novel *Under the Net* is one of the test with different traditions which were in Okri's mind as he wrote *The Famished Road*. The episode in which Azaro enters Madame Koto's secret sanctuary is probably based on Jake's experience in Anna's theatre closet where he finds her clothes and theatrical gear in disarray. Azaro's long search of Mum in the market is probably based on Jake's search for Anna on the banks of the Seine and in the Tuileries. But Jake eventually wearies of Anna and her songs. He realizes that the fascination is an infantile longing. He takes a job and begins an adult life. At the end of the story, he hears Anna's Circean voice for the last time.

The final episodes of *The Famished Road*, with its long speechifications, its comic inflations of episode and descriptions and its millennial prophecies are the most likely parts of the narrative to cause misunderstanding. The latter day storms of monsoon rain have fallen. The gods and ancestors of the ghetto have processed across the night sky recalling ancient sanctities and rekindling dying hope. Dad has defeated the ghost of capitalist tyranny and in the three days of his temporary descent to the House of the Dead, he has undergone shamanic initiation. Azaro is uttering prophesies about the coming of the Great Year of Ptolemy and Anaximander. Even Mum has stories to tell about the transmigration of souls and the unreality of time.

Azaro recalls the voices of his spirit companions during his last conversation with Ade. He is unmoved. He too is awake to the challenges and delights of adult life. One of the great merits of *The Famished Road* is that Okri takes possession of, re-creates and transfigures the materials, which he uses so completely that the novel does not remind us in any way of his various sources. But his themes are serious late twentieth century concerns. He is new and astonishing only on account of the audacity, humour and poetic vitality which he brings to bear as he tests the creative limits of what we might perhaps describe as African spiritist discourse.

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At the end of the story, Azaro is a new person. He remembers the enchanting song of the sirens but he is not moved by it. He now wants, as Dad's slogan phrases it, "to be a man" carrying his part of the burden of the world. In Dad's last fight, Azaro is an able second standing in Dad's corner, shouting useful instructions to him and in the critical moment of the fight, he takes the significant initiative of seizing the Old Sorcerer and wheeling him out into the night. His closing words: "I wanted the liberty of limitation, to have to find or

create new roads for this one which is so hungry, this road of our refusal to be"(*Famished Road*, 487)

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