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Stylistic Devices in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*

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Abstract

This paper discusses stylistic devices in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*. In the presentation of his story, the novelist makes use of literary devices which enrich readers' understanding and enjoyment of his subject matter. Satire, register, cliché, pidgin and proverbs are some of the devices. Others include: figurative language, irony and symbolism. These devices shed light on the characters and thematic focus of Okri. Findings reveal a society plagued by vices where the poor and the weak are at the mercy of the rich and powerful. It is a society struggling under the grip of one moral decadence or the other. In frowning at moral decay, the novelist recommends a morally balanced and egalitarian society devoid of corruption, thuggery, electoral malpractices and other moral vices that debase man. The researcher suggests a morally upright society for the good of all men.

Introduction

Literature presents life in a way to bring out the expected values in man. In Nigeria today, one reads and hears unbelievable and monumental stories of immoral and unethical behaviours of Nigerians. The media is inundated with stories of moral bankruptcies in economic, political, social and religious issues amongst our

countrymen and women. In contemporary times, the sanity of decent Nigerians is abused daily by what they see, hear, watch and read in the media concerning the persistent immoral attitudes of unrepentant Nigerians in their daily lives.

Unethical behaviour has since become the order of the day in Nigeria, manifesting in such vices as terrorism, militancy, religious and political crisis, rape, sexual promiscuity, embezzlement of public funds, lack of accountability and probity, assassinations, kidnapping, insurgency, political thuggery and godfatherism, etc. The list is exhaustible. Funds from oil and gas windfalls and excess crude incomes have not only made us lazy, but have increased corruption into the country.

Successive military and civilian administrations are yet to repent from embezzling Nigeria's oil and gas revenue. Each regime proclaims it will no longer be business as usual (an obvious indictment of a former administration for financial impropriety), only to be enmeshed neck-deep soon after in this "business" far deeper than the previous ones. In Nigeria today, there is also an upsurge in religious activities with Islamic and Christian sects increasing in number by the day. Disappointingly, one crime or the other is perpetuated not only in the larger society, but even in the mosques, churches and ministries.

Nigerian literary artists are not quiet over this situation. Our literature raises many issues of morality as represented in the works of Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Elechi Amadi, T.M. Aluko, Chimamanda Adichie and many others. This is also true of the writings of Ben Okri. His contribution in this regard in *The Famished Road* is examined in his stylistic devices. Okri condemns vices in the society using the devices discussed in this paper. Outside the storyline, his style sheds light on his discourse of moral decadence in the society.

The Famished Road

There are many stylistic devices employed by Ben Okri in *The Famished Road*. The devices enrich the novel and also enhance the readers' understanding and enjoyment of the story. Satire is one such issue of style. M.H. Abrams defines satire as "the literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn, or indignation" (320). For Hugh C. Holman, satire is "A literary manner which blends a critical attitude with humour and wit to the end that human institutions or humanity may be improved" (473). Roger Fowler states that "In it the author attacks some objects using as his means wit or humour that is either fantastic or absurd" (167). As a form of writing, satire disapproves or ridicules persons, customs, ideas or objects. It amuses while exposing vices, follies and stupidity. In applying humour, it derides and aims at waking men up to their responsibilities. The satirist among other issues, responds to the political and social events of his or her time.

In *The Famished Road*, Madame Koto turns out looking like a clown. Thinking she is making a fashion statement, she ends up being satirized. She is decked “in fantastic dresses of silk and lace edged with turquoise filigree, white gowns, and yellow hat, waving a fan of the feathers, with expensive bangles of silver and gold weighing her arms and necklaces of pearl and jade round her neck” (373-4). The ridicule continues: “When she walked all her jewellery clattered on her,... she painted her fingernails red. Her eyelashes became more defined. She wore lipstick. She wore high-heeled shoes... walking stick always in hand” (374). This posture makes her “resemble a great old chief from ancient times...” (374).

Okri also satirizes the attendants of Koto’s party during the celebration of her acquisition of new powers. Outside party stalwarts, “electricians and carpenters, mechanics and sundry workers arrived on the back of a lorry...” (450). This portrays a society divided along the line of class; a society of the rich exploiting the poor masses.

Use of proverbs is another stylistic element of the novelist. According to Abrams, a proverb is a “short, pithy statement of widely accepted truth about everyday life” (10). For Alex Preminger et al, it is “A traditional saying, pithily or wittily expressed” (994). They reveal a people’s culture and are expressions of witty, matured and experienced people. They reflect the philosophic wisdom of our forebears. Bernth Lindfors suggests that proverbs “sound and reiterate major themes... sharpen characterization... clarify conflict, and... focus on the values of the society” (64). In addition, they imbue our speech with colour and beauty and the wisdom of the old. Okri laces the story of the novel with profound proverbs which add to the aesthetics of it.

In *The Famished Road*, Dad uses a proverb: “An evil wind keeps a man poor” (319) and another: “whatever we sit on will one day make us fall” (324). These are proverbs of caution. Another of his proverb concerns life: “There are many ways to be dead” (329). A spirit also tells Azaro: “You need to lose all your blood before you arrive” (335). There is therefore the need to persevere in life. “The ocean is full of songs” (338) speaks of hope, whereas “when people keep running, something keeps pursuing them” (362) is a proverb of courage. One must stand up to challenge his tormentor to bring the challenge to a stop. Afterall, “man can wander the whole planet and not move an inch” (436).

A religious proverb follows: “The Koran says nothing is ever finished” (477). As the tortoise puts it, “all things are linked” (483). Another proverb states that “The only way to get out of Africa is to get Africa out of you” (438). Azaro the spirit-child also speaks in proverbs: “those who seems to hold sway and try to prevent the turning of justice only bring it quicker” (494). We must therefore work harder to better our lot because “people who use only their eyes do not SEE. People who use only their ears do not HEAR” (498).

Figurative language is yet another stylistic device in the novel. Holman defines this device as an

Intentional departure from the normal order, construction or meaning of words in order to gain strength and freshness of expression, to create a pictorial effect, to describe by analogy or to discover and illustrate similarities in otherwise dissimilar things (223).

Figures of speech also referred to as tropes surprise and add something new to the way and manner language is used. Generally, they add to the beauty of language use and act as ornamental designs to language.

The story of Azaro begins with the imagery of the road in which life is compared to a river-road: “IN THE BEGINNING there was a river. The river became a road and the road branched out to the whole world. And because the road was once a river it was always hungry” (3). The insatiable and famished road refers to our country, Nigeria, with many predatory rulers who are never satisfied with their level of exploiting the people.

In further describing the road, Azaro narrates that “the road woke up” (9) and darkness was “filled with its attendants” (11). Dad “slept like a giant” (60), and is called a tiger: “They used to call him black tiger” (69), and a spirit tells Azaro: “you look like me” (67). The style of short sentences may be symbolic of the aridity of ideas on the part of the people concerning the solutions to the issues of their physical environment and in other worldly explorations.

A madman “stood up straight like an awakened beast” (84) and Azaro describes Koto as follows: “Madam Koto’s face was smudged like a washed-out monster, a cross between a misbegotten animal and a wood carving” (91). In reference to his love for alcoholic drink which made “his room stank on drunkenness and mud”, Dad is said to stand “in the doorway like a drunken giant” (94).

Northrop Frye traces the history of irony from Aristotle’s *Ethics* and sees it as a term which “indicates a technique of appearing to be less than one is, which in literature becomes most commonly a technique of saying as little and meaning as much as possible, or, in a more general way, a pattern of words that turn away from direct statement or its own obvious meaning” (40). Whereas Holman defines it as “A broad term referring to the recognition of a reality different from the masking appearance” (279), Fowler sees irony as “a mode of discourse for conveying meanings different from and usually opposite to the professed or ostensible ones” (101). According to him, “irony is thus an art of indirection and juxtaposition relying for its success on such techniques as understatement, paradox, puns and other forms of wit in the expression of incongruities” (102). Okri also makes use of this invaluable literary device to enrich

his discourse. The symbolism of the road is so important to Okri that he engraves it into his title.

In *The Famished Road*, Azaro “Prayed for laughter, a life without hunger. I was answered with paradoxes” (6) and Dad states that “The only power poor people have is their hunger” (70). In another episode, “Dad, entering a grim mood, drank intensely and then suddenly began to sing beautifully” (45). Dad tries to cheat poverty in the following lines: “Dad plied the gathering with drinks, borrowing heavily...” (44). After Koto’s driver had an accident with her car, “In the distance she could be heard wailing, not about the driver, but about her car” (423). Politicians “want to know who you will vote for before they let you carry their load” (81). In his poverty, Dad borrows and shares with others after his sickness and the return of his son, Azaro, singing beautifully. Here, Okri reveals the moral decadence in the society.

In another paradox, “standing there, crowned in black light was a naked young woman, with an old woman’s face” (336). In reference to their condition, Dad enthuses: “We have sorrow here. But we also have celebration” (337).

Kola Ogungbesan writes concerning symbolism:

A work of art should speak for itself. Yet, because the more successful it is, the more symbolic it becomes, every work of art invariably carries more than one meaning. All the great creations of literature have been symbolic, and thereby have gained in complexity, in power, in depth and in beauty (93).

Okri decorates the novel with symbolism which goes a long way to confer deep meaning and high aesthetic value on it. One of the striking symbols revolves around the spirit-child phenomenon known in Yoruba mythology as Abiku which “are wandering spirits born only to die young and then return to be born again to the same mother... theirs is a rebellious nature” (Oladele Taiwo 166). They are spirit children who oscillate between the world of the dead and the living.

Azaro and Ade are the two abiku of the story. They inflict incalculable mental and physical torture on their parents and are prone to hallucination and fantasy borne out of their romance with the world. He reveals that his decision to stay in the world of the living is because he was tired of coming and going and forever remaining “in-between in the inter-space between the spirit world and the living” (5). He also decides to make his mother happy but champions pester him, reminding him of the need to return to their world. It is pertinent here to state that Abiku symbolizes Nigeria. Azaro’s experience is synonymous with the nation’s historical experiences. Like a child, a nation has the capacity for growth and development but ours as Okri suggests neither grows nor advances.

After birth, Azaro like Nigeria chooses to fight for existence. Though the status of nationhood was imposed on Nigerians by the colonialist, having become one nation, the people have continually resisted separation. Ade makes the fact point blank: “Our country is an Abiku country. Like the spirit-child, it keeps coming and going” (478). On his part, “Dad found that all nations are children... ours too was an Abiku nation a spirit nation”. It is “one that keeps being reborn and after every birth come blood and betrayals” (494). Azaro is like a nation that runs in the cycle of birth, betrayal and death. He however raises our hope as he concludes: “One day it will decide to remain. It will become strong” (478). Herein lies the author’s unwavering optimism in the eventual growth and advancement of our society.

The Road is also symbolic. The story begins thus: “In the beginning there was a river. The River became a road and the road branched out into the whole world. And because the road was once a river it was always hungry” (3). There are two possible reasons why the road has remained famished. The narrator explains that the stomach of the King of the Roads was washed off by the rains into the road and the King is the predator with insatiable appetite preying on everything and everyone for his own self-preservation. Again, outside the fact that our rulers are monsters and oppressors, the road is also famished because as Dad puts it, “we have no desire to change things” (451). Our nation symbolized by the road is not making any progress because the ruled themselves are not ready to bring about change maybe, due to the slave mentality left in them by the colonial master which represses positive thinking. The Mighty Green Road also stands for the unending “cycle of risings and fallings of hopes and betrayals” of our society (Moh 77). Generation after generation, we repeat the cyclic dance with more costly mistakes.

Traditionally, the road symbolizes the path of communal mode of transportation using the beasts of burden as the agents of moving goods and services. There are also workers and white engineers supervising the works on the road. It therefore becomes the harbinger of colonial presence in Africa as well as a mediator in the people’s bid to communicate with their gods – it is used as a platform of sacrifices to the gods, an abode where “witches and wizards, native doctors, sorcerers... wash off bad things from their customs and pour... diseases and bad destinies” (119).

Azaro also realizes another symbolic significance of the road as “ways and philosophies” (457). This means that roads are a repository of human destiny. To the three-headed spirit, the road is equally a great shaper of human destiny. He speaks of it thus: “It leads to heaven and hell. It leads to worlds that we don’t know about” (326).

Koto is also a representative being. She symbolizes the exploitative class who “sucked in the powers of our area” (291). She belongs to the rich class and derives her affluence, joy and power by pauperizing the masses. The corrupting influence of her wealth and power are portrayed together with her inner spiritual decay and moral

decadence. Like Koto, Nigeria is also obese. She is large, grotesque and unwieldy. She sucks the blood of the young the same way the blood of youths are wasted today in Nigeria for material and other gains.

Dad is yet another symbolic character. He is depicted as the conscience of society, championing the cause of the poor and the downtrodden in the society, represented by the beggars and the compound people. He symbolizes the few in our society with human feelings who crave for justice and equity. He encourages the oppressed: "Human beings are dreaming of wiping out their fellow human beings from this earth. Rats and frogs understand their destiny. Why not men, eh" (498).

To change the situation, he espouses revolutionary tendencies. He becomes a symbol of revolution against his landlord, politicians, Koto, animals, thugs, spirits, etc. who he engages in boxing bouts and the society generally, which maltreats the beggars. Unlike his contemporaries who carry a lot of moral burden, Dad fights injustice, poverty, corruption and deprivation. He takes his anger to the boxing ring and fights with Yellow Jaguar, Green Leopard and The Man in White suit and beats them all. Okri uses him as a stereotype character who struggles against the political and economic system. He forms a party for the poor and ghetto-dwellers and urges the beggars and his neighbours to keep the streets clean. In using him as an agent of social change, the novelist suggests that social change must be collective.

Mum symbolizes the suffering woman. She contrasts with Koto and possesses great moral virtues. She is morally upright though decayed economically, the opposite of Koto. Beautiful in her youthful days, she is transformed into an ugly city woman by suffering, lack and hunger. In another contrast, Mum directs her violence against the forces of oppression such as the police whereas Koto's violence is for the intimidation of the compound people and other less privileged people. Like her husband, she fights and beats up three thugs that harassed her. In her poverty, she takes over the feeding of the beggars brought home by her husband. She tells Helen, one of the beggars: "We are too poor to be wicked and even as we suffer our hearts are full of goodness" (444). She displays the spirit of brotherliness and warm-heartedness which the rich lack.

The symbol of the Old-Man-Child portrays the vision of the nation. Azaro identifies this being with a face that was both a hundred years and child-like and he looked like somebody carrying the heaviest riddle in the world. The beautiful Boy-King is capable of growth and has the resilience and energy of the lion, capable of a fulfilled life but corruption and ineptitude on the part of government has transformed him into an ugly old man. His rich resources, a "palace of turquoise mirrors" (245) has become an anthill. The man-child, symbolic of our society has become famished, a wasteland where nothing positive grows. Like the Green Road that was never completed, the nation is moving without advancement or progress. The blacks have

continued with the exploitation, deprivation and oppression of the people learnt from the white imperialist.

Jeremiah the photographer symbolizes the artist. He takes photographs during the celebration of Azaro's recovery from illness thereby adding colour and aesthetic to the event. He also covers political rallies with his snapshots including the incident of the rotten milk and the riot session which led to the arrest and detention of the masses including himself. As a prisoner of conscience, the people accord him a heroic welcome and he becomes an instant celebrity when his photographs appear in the newspapers. He is not just a photographer, but, a recorder and preserver of social realities. He is a potent voice of the oppressed, brave enough to take photographs of the corrupt and dubious activities of politicians and the rich. His camera becomes his instrument of war.

Arising from his harassment of the government, he is haunted down by thugs and manhandled, bleeding from the wounds inflicted on him by party thugs. The landlord joins in harassing him and ejects him from his house, turning him into a wanderer in his land typical of most social crusaders and civil rights activists. He also targets the rats in Dad's house and exterminates them because they kept chewing away their lives.

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