



Tug of Voice: Author Versus Narrator in Okri's *The Famished Road*

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ABSTRACT

The uniqueness of any writer's product is contingent upon the effective manoeuvring of relevant fictional methods to realise certain narrative objectives. This study aims at examining the point of view as a fictional method or technique available to Okri in *The Famished Road*. This is in order to demonstrate the extent to which he has applied it to discover meaning, effect or his vision of society. Therefore, the concept of narrative point of view, as well as, the issues of who tells the tale in the novel – the author or the narrator? – shall be considered. Also of importance in the study is the implication of Okri's point of view (the oscillation between the voice of the author and that of Azaro, the narrator) in this novel both as the manner through which matter is revealed, and also, as the weak link in the chain as regards his narrative technique.

INTRODUCTION

Novelists of acclaim apply literary innovation through linguistic creativity, proper selection of and the application of relevant fictional methods in the process of realising specific narrative objectives. They include: language, irony, plot and fictional structure, point of view and characterisation. The uniqueness of any writer's technique depends largely on the peculiarity of the manipulation of fictional methods. When a writer fails to effectively manoeuvre a particular fictional method at their disposal, the realisation of the narrative objective in that regard becomes an uphill task. Writers in the clan of Okri apply certain literary technique which helps them to express their world view. Of all the fictional methods mentioned above, Okri's point of view in *The Famished Road* form the subject of this study. Who tells the

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tale in the novel; the narrator or the author? A work of fiction, such as the one under review, can be complete only when there exists a crystal clarity in the application of the technique of point of view. Since form can successfully be manipulated by a writer to inform the readers, and manner can also be used to achieve matter, it, therefore, becomes necessary to find out the extent to which Okri has successfully or otherwise manoeuvred form and manner – the point of view – to achieve his narrative objective. In other words, this study seeks to find out how effectively or otherwise Okri's application of the fictional technique of point of view has helped him to express his vision of society in *The Famished Road*.

Set against other forms of writing, point of view as the telling voice, finds in fiction incomparable hospitality. As a narrative technique, it brings to mind the perspective from which the teller tells the tale. It is the voice we hear in the story, the tone and mood it adopts during the narrative, and the overall meaning, message or impression that it hopes to convey to the audience. Onukaogu et al (2011) see point of view as:

...the narrative position of the writer; the point from which he tells the story. Does he tell the story as if he is part of the story, as if the action of the story also includes and involves him? Or is he telling the story from... the narrative position of an "independent" observer or witness of what happened to others? (p.106)

This means that the narrative voice determines the thoughts, feelings, private history, reactions and responses of characters. It colours the presentation and moulding of characters. The setting, plot and fictional structure, and the themes of a tale are all conditioned by the thought process of the narrator. It, therefore, follows that no story can rise above the quality and thinking pattern of a narrator.

Anderson et al (1989) has similarly observed that:

When we speak of point of view, we simply mean the person the writer has chosen to see the story and to tell it as well. In broad terms, there are three points of view: omniscient, third person limited, and first person...The more you think of it the more you realise what a huge difference point of view makes to a story. (p.135)

The implication here is that the tone and mood, experience, level of education or ignorance, idiosyncrasy and prejudices, feelings and memories of different narrators can give a particular tale entirely various effects, meanings and messages. Lubbock (1968) points out that "The whole intricate question of method, in the craft of fiction, I take to be governed by the question of point of view – the question of the relation in which the narrator stands" (p.251). The truth in the above views becomes clearer when we consider the fact that the narrating voice in a story is not necessarily the

author but a representative whom he selects to ‘represent’ or reflect his world view through the tale.

Although detached from the story, the omniscient narrator’s position is comparable to that of a ‘god’ looking down on earthly characters and is able to tell everything about every character including how each one feels and thinks, their past, present, and future. The narrative voice in the third-person limited point of view on the other hand, focuses on the thoughts and feelings of just one character. The audience (reader) experiences the story mainly through the voice, feelings, memories and consciousness of only one character. The weakness in this point of view is that the audience is exposed to a great deal of the private history, reflections and responses of one character in the story, but would not be let into much about the others.

In the first-person point of view, the narrative voice is one of the characters in the tale and, therefore, uses the “I”, first-person pronoun (Anderson, 1989, p.135-136). The snag about this narrative voice is that his inability and choice as regards information or insight, greatly affect the unravelling of the knots of the story. The fundamental question that goes through the mind of the average listener of the first-person storytelling voice is whether or not the narrator is telling the truth. Therefore, reliability or the absence of it becomes the central issue in listening to the “I” voice.

The second person point of view also exists. Here, the narrator seems to be interacting with the protagonist using the pronoun ‘you’. According to Onukaogu (2010):

...the narrative voice speaks to the central character about the character’s own experience...knows almost everything about the protagonist but does not arrogate to itself an omniscient status whereby it could tell about other characters...it is guided by the protagonist’s awareness of himself and the world around him (p.327).

This ‘you’ exchange between the protagonist and the narrator exclude others, that is, both the audience and the other characters. Similarly, Abrams (2005) observes that it is “the mode in which the story gets told solely, or at least primarily, an address by the narrator to someone he calls by the second-person pronoun ‘you’, who is presented as experiencing that which is narrated” (p.243).

Nwachukwu-Agbada (2001) has identified a storey telling perspective which he dubs objective/camera point of view. Here, “...the author makes no attempt to describe them [citizens populating the fictional world] nor to penetrate the recesses of their consciousness, nor to judge their actions and reasons for doing what they do” (p.29). The treatment given to the characters is at best skin-deep and cursory.

The central idea being proposed in this part of the study is that the narrating voice adopted by the author and the manner in which he

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manipulates this particular fictional method usually emphasise his narrative objective and, by extension, the overall message or meaning. In other words, a writer is provided the opportunity to show-case his vision of society which the fictional world in the story reflects by means of the pivotal technique of point of view. Through the storytelling voice, the writer's intended effect is delivered in snippets and snatches thereby sealing the blend between the means and the end, form and content, and between manner and matter.

Tug of Voice: Okri Versus Azaro

"We should attack now and take the land.... But the men who had gone with Caleb said, "No, we are not strong enough to attack them... (Numbers 13:30-31). Okri must have found himself in a similar situation as he battled to chose between himself (author) and Azaro (narrator) whose voice should relate the tale. The decision to allow Azaro the autobiographical privilege of unfolding his own history is noteworthy. This is because Azaro's characteristics as a spirit-child oscillating between the physical and the spiritual world enhance the narrative perspective. In the first place, in spite of the fact that Azaro narrates through the first-person point of view, he appears all-seeing and all-knowing. Azaro observes:

When I was very young I had a clear memory of my life stretching to other lives. There were no distinctions. Sometimes I seemed to be living several lives at once. One lifetime flowed into the others and all of them flowed into my childhood...I often found myself oscillating between both worlds" (Okri, 1996, p.7-8).

Azaro as a storytelling voice is boundless in time and space and displaying a spirit-like ubiquity and omnipresence. This in turn puts the details, tone and complexion of the entire story under his command. Secure in the driver's seat of his stream of consciousness, Azaro manoeuvres the reader, like a passenger, around both familiar and strange terrains with the dexterity and assurance of an expert.

In his omniscience position, he barges in on the secret feelings and inner reactions of other participants in the tale. During the party to mark his return, Azaro tells us that the old man's prayer and anecdotes "...fell like stones to the depths of our hunger"(42), "The spirits and the children gathered round...pointing and talking in amazed voices" (46), and "The photographer took five pictures in all and the ghosts kept falling at his feet, dazed by the flash" (45). He could invade other people's sub-consciousness. Hear him: "His [Dad's] thoughts were wide; they spun around his head, bouncing off everything in the room. His thoughts filled the space, weighed me down...were hard, they bruised my head. His magnetic attention misses nothing: "The smells of death, of bitterness, of old bodies, decomposing eyes, and old wounds filled the room. Then several eyes lit up the darkness...and

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from their breath came the bad food and hunger of the world” (442). Azaro thus doubles for Okri as the first-person’s narrator cum all-knowing channel for exposing every hidden stratum of reality in the environment, characters’ sub-consciousness, and the spiritual realm; past, present and future. Put together, all these enhance the author’s ability to express his artistic vision and worldview.

Okri uses Azaro’s spirit-child quality to bring together the two worlds of the intangible and the concrete. Azaro’s initial feeling of novelty multiplies curiosity and then, gives way to that of recognition and easy acquaintanceship. The reader is forced to adopt Azaro’s double-vision approach to appreciating both the environment and incidents. Commenting on this, Okri says, “I take very seriously the fact that Azaro is a spirit-child, [which]...means that every single thing in reality is new.... It was important that the readers have the same feeling of fresh bewilderment” (Qtd in Houpt 1992, p.38). For example, like in a paradox, Azaro says, “I woke up suddenly. I saw glimpses of wise spirits in a flash before I saw Madame Koto’s rugged face” (220). A second instance is when Azaro feels, “A strange shape, like the body of a mythical animal grown rotten on the path, burst into my mind. I sat up.... I looked about me and saw a lizard staring at me...” (219). Azaro’s spirit-human nature enables Okri to flood the entire work with instances of the grotesque made ordinary.

The author uses the first-person’s point of view to infuse his own personal beliefs, values and vision into the reader’s psyche. This is as the narrator-character develops with the plot and is exposed to slogans, aphorisms, wise sayings and proverbs which originate from Okri. Examples include: “Anything is possible, one way or another. There are many riddles amongst us that neither the living nor the dead can answer” (488), “Heaven means different things to different people” (329), and so on.

To conclude this section, note that Okri uses the omniscient nature of Azaro to freely comment on virtually every issue he intends to sell to the reader. He is also able to marry both the concrete and inconcrete nature of life through Azaro’s spirit-child quality, and finally, to preach his personal philosophies through Azaro’s experiences. All these narrow down to Okri’s vision of Nigeria as a nation. Nigeria as a nation is one of the “Things that are not ready, not willing to be born or to become” (487) in spite of the 1914 amalgamation, “...things for which adequate preparations have not been made to sustain their momentous births...” (487) such as the weak economy and corruption in high places, and “...things that are not resolved...” (487) for instance, the issue of unity, love and peace. Okri in comparing the Nigerian nation to an Abiku observes that “History itself fully demonstrates how things [in Nigeria] partake of the condition of the spirit-child...” (487), stressing that “There are many nations...and historical events that are of this condition and not know it. There are many people too...”(487) like Nigerians and their leaders.

Tug of Voice: Narrative Flaw

The huge quality of the work under review in the areas of excellent narrative skills and interesting storyline well-navigated to arrive at poignant effects is not in doubt. In spite of that, there are various narrative flaws. The author appears to have been so lost in the zeal to express his vision of the Nigerian society that he took some aspects of the narrator's angle for granted. His preoccupation with his chosen narrative paradigm seems to have a slight negative effect on his handling of the point of view. On account of this, there appears to be a tug of view between the author and the narrator and this, in effect, tugs at the validity of the fictional view. We posit here that just as in pottery in which only the potter's finger print (and not the face) is supposed to appear on the pottery, only the narrator's voice (and not the author's) is supposed to reverberate through out the narrating act.

The story-telling act becomes art only when the author has successfully effaced himself behind the narrator. In spite of the above, some authors unwittingly fall into the snare of inability to resist the temptation of intrusively tele-guiding the narrative act thereby watering down the genuineness of the narrator's point of view. On the other hand, Okri would have stayed completely away from assigning to Azaro some unsuitable roles in the narrative by strictly sticking to seeing only through Azaro's eyes, feeling through his heart, thinking through his mind. Where it was not possible, other opportunities open to Okri would have been to apply a combination of first person point of view, and a third person point of view, just as Achebe does in *Anthill of the Savannah*.

Okri would have none of that. He would instead crawl into the mental space of the young and inexperienced Azaro and lead him by the hand in and out of many knowledge situations and thought processes, some of which are too big or unusual for his age, level of education and exposure. For instance, when Azaro makes some apt references to incidents in the *Holy Bible*, he does it in the style of a well trained, mature and experienced christian priest or philosopher. He describes one of his spiritual phases as "the heart of forgotten civilizations where Pythagoras came to learn Mathematics" (460). He paints a rather biblical picture of the great worry, unhappiness and suffering of the compound people in the face of the deluge that "...lifted off the roof of a bungalow..." As "The tenants wailed in the horrible voices of those who have been judged an damned, as if God had ripped off the cover of their lives and exposed them to a merciless infinity" (140). Azaro even gives a christian name to the photographer that covered the 'homecoming' party in his honour. Says he, "His name was Jeremiah. He had a wiry beard, and everyone seemed to know him" (45). Only an adult analytical christian mind (not a child's like Azaro) would precisely refer to the unfortunate incident in which the rice and meat could not go round as being "like the miracle of the multiplying fishes in reverse" (44).

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The proper application of linguistic items by a writer lends artistic validity and relevance to his work of fiction. Spencer (1978) argues that:

A writer's style may be regarded as an individual and creative utilization of the resources of language which his period, his chosen dialect, his genre and his purpose within it offer him.... within which he is working and upon which he is able to draw. (p.xi)

Okri's 'creative utilization' and proper application of linguistic items seem to have deserted him temporarily while assigning a very unsuitably high level of language proficiency in terms of diction and multi-disciplinary jargon usage to Azaro, a mere child.

The above is a total deviation from what the reader comes across in Chiamanda's *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Chimamanda creates an easy marriage between the progressive stage-by-stage development of the mental capabilities of the child-character, Ugwu and that of the steady progress in his English language proficiency. According to Onukaogu (2010):

Ugwu's physical and psychological progress as a bildungsroman character happens along the basic discernible lines....from a near-illiterate who struggles to understand his master's instruction in English to a bright teacher and author [who] ...felt a twinge of pride because he knew his aunty would have her eyes wide in wonder at the deep conversations he had with Master. And in English, too. (p.161-167)

"It is through his use of language that he [the writer] reflects his individual awareness of a given situation" (Taiwo, p.xiv). If the above assertion is considered strictly, then, the 'awareness' that reverberates through most of *The Famished Road* is Okri's. This is because while the voice is Azaro's, the language (diction, jargons, imagery and sound grammar) belongs to the author. The seeming tug between the author (Okri) and the narrator (Azaro) is worrisome. Many instances abound. "...the passionate chants of the muezzin roused the Muslim world to prayer" (114). "I seemed to scatter in all directions. I became leaves lashed by the winds of recurrence" (188). And "Watch your woman –o! There's a small boy here who wants to fuck!" (272). What the reader has here is an adult language in a child's mouth.

On page 487 in chapter twelve, Okri abandons, for the first two paragraphs, the first person's point of view of the narrator and adopts the third person's voice. Here, there is no doubt that the author has taken over the narration. The reader is provided with undisguised commentary on the significance of Azaro as a spirit-child, representative of the circular lives of individuals, civilizations, era, nations and existence in general. Says he:

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There are many nations, civilizations, ideas, half-discoveries, revolutions, loves, art forms, experiments, and historical events that are of this condition and do not know it. There are many people too. They do not all have the marks of their recurrence....They are perceived of as new (Okri, 1996, p.487).

Okri's reluctance to resist the urge to steal the show from the child-narrator, as it were rears up again here. At intervals, through out the tale, Okri's 'interruption' assumes the shape of very direct description, discussion and interpretation of events, setting and characters. This kind of novelist-narrator intermingling in the narrative act seems to suggest that Okri suspects that the reader may miss the point. The question is: whose point, the author's or the narrator's? Secondly, does the reader not possess the right to their personal inferences entirely different from those of either the narrator or author? This narrative pattern threatens the readers' independence.

In conclusion, the narrative flaws that exist in this work stem from the fact that Okri, as a novelist, finds it difficult to let go of the narrative act. To him, Azaro as a child-narrator still needs the adult guidance of the author. The outcome is the existence of a tug of voice between the hand holding the pen and the voice telling the tale. If, according to Anderson (1989), there is "...a huge difference point of view makes to a story" (p.135), Okri's manipulation of this narrative technique leaves much to be desired.

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