



On The Threshold of Moral Crisis: Poetics of Good and Bad Characters in *the Famished Road*

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ABSTRACT

Ben Okri in *The Famished Road* creates a depiction of his grotesque characters within the ambience of magical realism as to delineate them into good and evil camps. This paper argues that Okri's characters in *The Famished Road* are sublime. Consequently, Okri created a polarization of the characters. The paper further establishes that some of the characters are human beings like Azaro's parents, while others like the photographer, Madam Koto, and the beggars are situated within the esoteric proclivity. Equally in the novel, there are gods and spirits who occupy the supernatural world, and who constantly maintain links with human beings in various guises.

INTRODUCTION

The Famished Road, a book comparatively lengthy, fore grounded on magical realism, displays the close form and episodic richness of a complete mythical cycle, in which events full of terror or grotesque,, comedy are crowded in its pages. In the novel, Okri casts an incantatory spell over his readers with the presentation of his characters which are polarised along the concept of good and evil. Ben Okri in *The Famished Road*, premised his pre-occupation on the transition of Nigeria from the evil to good:

We have entered a new age. We must be prepared. (498)

Strikingly present in the narrative technique of Ben Okri is the concept of orality. Throughout *The Famished Road*, one constantly comes, across oral narration. According to Ato Qua[^]son (1995), Okri premised his style on traditional conceptual resources. This implies that the realm of traditional orality is far from stable, and the relationship of literary writing to oral traditions is often one of a discursive and strategic engagement, despite the fact that Okri is not a Yoruba man, but it is pertinent to observe that it is impossible to read Okri without remembering Amos Tutuola who had earlier

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written extensively on Yoruba trado-magico concepts, which were later taken up and transformed by Okri, since it is increasingly evident that Africans operate multiple ethnicities all their lives, this becoming more pronounced when they are brought up in cosmopolitan, environments such as Lagos, Accra or Nairobi.

Yoruba culture, which forms the literary constituency of Okri, when studied closely, reveals a rich and variegated picture. The first thing to note is that in Yoruba traditional culture the oral traditions are far from homogeneous and are in a constant process of transformation. Each of the major Yoruba groupings has an active relationship to the various oral genres that circulate among them and it is perhaps best to speak of a model of discursive dialogism governing both the genres and the uses to which they are put. The processes of this dialogism are inscribed within the heart of the totality of the culture itself and emerge in the relationship between past and present, between human beings and spirits, between genre and genre, between speaker and speaker and between the traditional resource base and the literatures written in both English and Yoruba.

In the view of Charles Nnolim:

Instead of recording events in a chronological narrative sequence, Okri rather presents the reader with a canvas crowded with scenes, ideas, discussion: The rendering is therefore poetic, since it is managed and advanced through images, dreams, artistic visions and projections, fantasies and enthusiasm which flash through the brains of the protagonist. (173)

Okri's recourse into the Yoruba mythology further reverberated in the observation of Abiola Irele:

In Yorubaland we have the extraordinary situation where the vast folk .. literature, alive and vigorously contemporary, remains available to provide a constant support for new forms - for the literate culture developing within the language itself as a result of its reduction to writing, as well as for the new popular arts that sociological factors have brought into being, particularly the so-called "folk opera"; and beyond these, to provide a source for the new literature, in English, the language through which the modern technological world made its entry into the awareness of Yoruba people and constituted itself part of their mental universe. (175)

Abiola Irele posits further that, perhaps the most remarkable feature of the evolution of Yoruba culture over the past century or so has been the way in which it has been able to afford a stable institutional and spiritual ground work for the transformation of collective life and feeling for the individual within this culture,, at the critical moment when western civilization introduced an element of tension into Africa societies. Yoruba culture has played an integrative role in the process of acculturation which all African

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societies have undergone, in such a way that this process can be seen today as one largely of adaptation, the adjustment of the native culture with the foreign, the harmonization of two ways of life into a new entity.

The integrative role of Yoruba culture in the situation of contact created by the advent of western culture is fully reflected in the work of the Yoruba writer, not only at the level of content analysis of individual works, which reveals the working-out of the process, but more significantly in the pattern of evolution established by the inter-connections between the various levels of literary expression in Yoruba land.

The appropriation of folk tale, fable and folk in *The Famished Road* is suggestive of the fact that the world of the African folktale and legend is a world of myths developed in order to embody human needs and goals and, making them, vehicles for symbolic figures and common predicaments which are then handed down from generation to generation.

In the structure of the novel there is an incessant cosmic struggle that is everywhere manifested; in the spirit realm, in human history, and in the lives of individuals. As the summary of the action of the novel has implied, such cosmic struggle is personalised in the novel in the struggle between Dad (good) and madam Koto (evil). In the life of the "good" individual, progress is marked by the raising of consciousness and the attainment of ever higher states of enlightenment, bearing fruit in social action that will change society for the better. This notion is reiterated in the following passage:

While Dad ranged (he spheres crying for justice, Madam Koto sucked in the powers of our area. Her dreams gave children nightmares. Her colossal form took wings at night and flew over the city, drawing power from our sleeping bodies. (495)

This passage vividly demonstrates that such struggle is in the metaphysical realm rather than in the physical form.

Okri's genius in *The Famished Road* can be felt in the description of the Weird, spirits. For instance, in the description of the goddess of the Island in the following passage:

She was an image with a beautiful face and eyes of marble that glittered in the sun. All around her feet were metal gongs, kolanuls, kaoline, feathers of eagles and peacocks, bones of animals and bones too big to belong to animals. In a complete circle ground her were white eggs on black saucers. Her mighty and wondrous pregnancy faced the sea. At night the eyes of the goddess shone like moonstones. The sea-wind, streaming through her raffia hair, produced a haunting melody. (13)

This description of the eyes of the goddess is a brilliant instance of Okri's easy use of the paraphernalia of contemporary life to give sharpness and immediacy to his imagery. The comparisons with marble metaphorically and

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moonstones are equally effective, in his description of Azaro's transcendental wanderings:

The trees were running away from human habitation. My eyes became charged too and I saw people with serene bronze, masks emerging from trees. I saw a bird with a man's hairy legs flying clumsy over the branches of the rain-tree. An antelope with the face of a chaste woman stopped and stared at me and when I moved it disappeared among the luxuriant bushes. (243)

This reveals Okri's mastery of a description of the journey into the sub-conscious, into that spirit world of "waking reality". Okri taps the radical roots of the metaphor of the social body to challenge the versions of reality which normalise the civil society of oppression. This is typified by his condemnation of the purview of the Christian churches and Christians in their disposition to socio-political situations around them. For instance, the hypocrisy of the church leader is revealed. (315, 316)

Okri has evolved in The Famished Road a decorum where the image structures perfectly suit the subject of Africa, especially Nigeria's depravity, in the areas of bad governance, poverty and visible hopelessness. Okri's portrayal of the beggars, Dad's misfortune, the wide-gap between the rich and the poor - the new index of history is the subversive imagery of dreams or trance of Dad who describes his hallucinations as messages and warnings from the ancestral world, where he had journeyed briefly. Dad in his trance, saw:

Our people drowning in poverty, in famine, drought, divisiveness and the blood of war. He saw our people always preyed upon by other powers, manipulated by the western world, our history and achievements rigged out of existence. (492)

In this context, Okri establishes a contradictory 'triangulation' between the tradition; its evocation and its denial. The writing evokes a dominant representation with its attendant forms of aesthetics and naturalism, only to expose its capacity for misrepresentation, failure and delusion. Mythical discourses are scrutinised, parodied, dissolved or rendered objects of play Okri's voice emerges from that oppositional encounter with a history of misrepresentation to present the "hidden history" of social violence.

Okri distributes his characters into two camps according to the individual's disposition to the physical and the metaphysical worlds. An individual's relationship with his fellowmen and nature determines to a great extent, whether such an individual would be situated within the ambience of good or evil.

In *The Famished Road*, Okri groups the following characters in the good camp: Azaro, Dad, Mum; the Photographer and the Beggars. While Madam Koto; the blind old man and the spirits are in the evil camp. Ben Okri in *The Famished Road*, presents Azaro as the protagonist of the novel.

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Through Azaro, Okri is able to embark on an excursion in to the world of surrealism, and also through Azaro other characters are discovered.

Azaro is an extra-ordinary person who by virtue of being an abiku or a spirit-child could drift easily into another world even while he is still conscious. For instance, Azaro exhibited this spiritual feat, when he was at home with his parents one evening, and while watching Dad smoking a cigarette, suddenly the scene becomes transformed into Madam Koto's bar:

I watched the bright point of his cigarette in the dark and it eventually lulled me into Madam Koto's bar. Dad was there. The bar had moved deep into the forest and all her customers were animals and birds. I sat on a bench which was really the back of a goat and I drank off the back of a bull. A massive chicken without feathers strode into the bar, sat next to me, and ordered palmwine and pepper soup. Madam Koto didn't want to serve the chicken, but Dad said. "Serve him". (59, 60)

This passage reveals Okri's illustration, of the manifestation of the fantastic as part of everyday reality. Azaro as can be seen in the passage serves as the metaphysical conduit for the realisation of the supernatural throughout the novel. Having died once and "resurrected" at the point of being buried, his parents name him Lazarus. But this name with its strong biblical echo brings jeers from his colleagues and has to be often mellowed to the more African-sounding Azaro. So Azaro begins his life's journey assailed by other beings from the spirit world, hears voices night and day beckoning him to return to that world of "fauns and faeries", where "tender sibyls, benign spirits, and the serene presences of our ancestors were always with us in the radiance of their diverse rainbows". (4)

Azaro wanders through his multiple worlds, he is also firmly anchored in a physical, material worlds; in which the harsh ephemeral of the daily life of the poor has a very strong impact. A riot breaks out in the neighbourhood and Azaro's father is arrested by the police while his mother loses him in the melee. She sets out in search of her husband and son, a journey which takes her through hospitals, mortuaries and police stations and finally to a herbalist. This scene can be seen in:

Along the main road she put me down in order to tighten her wrapper. In full preparation for the worst, when a caterwauling mass of people came pounding towards us. They ran right between us. They separated me from my mother. (11)

This sense of physical displacement is matched by a spiritual displacement of another kind for Azaro. He wanders through the bellies of roads into the covens of spirits and witches taunted at every point by his solicitous spirit companions, he gets lost in market places where normal human beings mingle and trade with:

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Men upside down with baskets offish on their backs, women who had breasts on their backs, babies strapped to their breasts and beautiful children with three arms. (15)

He is pursued by spirits who notice that he recognises them, and he is finally taken in by a police officer and his wife who claims him for the son they lost in a road accident.

In the police officers house - a modest middle class, Nigerian home with the "Christ is Head of the Home" logo framed on the wall. Azaro is fed, but they keep him locked in for fear that he might escape. They call him by their dead child's name and dress him in his clothes. But the wandering spirit of the dead child is restless and haunts the home. Azaro sees him everywhere in the house - at the dining table, in the kitchen, the rooms, and sometimes even attempting to take over Azaro's body. In the house, the venality of policemen exemplified in endless bribe taking and sharing assumes a bizarre ritualistic aspect. As the policemen gather to share the bribes under the watchful frame of the "Christ is the Head of this House", motif, they take oaths and swear while birds and spirits hover around them:

With a deep chanting that altered the air in the room, the police officers made the figures rise. The faint lights showed them up to be policemen in uniforms. They took up the chanting in low tones. Then they stretched out their hands and linked them across the table. When the men sat down, the officer remained standing. (22)

Azaro is equally endowed with clairvoyance, this immensely helps him in avoiding dangers and untimely death and this also helps him to extend the protection to his mum:

As a child I could read people's minds. I could foretell their futures. Accidents happened in places I had just left. One night I was standing in the street with Mum when a voice said: "Cross over". I tugged Mum across the street and a few moments later an articulated lorry plunged into the house we had been standing in front of and killed an entire family. (9)

This spiritual power however leads Azaro into many problems, especially his relationship with Madam Koto, where by virtue of having an unusual insight, he is able to encounter many spirits some who punished him, and the majority who are able to identify him with such power and who are always resentful and outrightly antagonistic at Madam Koto's bar:

Madam Koto went out to serve them. While she was out a very tall man and woman came in. Their legs were very long. The rest of their bodies were quite short. They had small heads and eyes that were so tiny that it 'was only

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when they came near me that I could perceive their pin-point brightness.
(107)

Azaro, being a spirit-child could disappear sometimes. For instance, during the period of Dad's boxing training sessions which are usually conducted in the evenings, Azaro during this period develops the spirit of wanderlust, which often makes him walk up and down the road which usually turns into a river at midnight. In such circumstances, Azaro discovers that he could not see far; this would eventually make him pass into the darkness. He would begin to look for himself. He would become a dark ghost which a wind could pass through. Azaro is often jostled out of this esoteric quagmire whenever a light, shines on him. and he would be transported back to the front of his house, without Dad knowing what has happened, due to his concentration on his boxing training. (354)

Okri in *The Famished Road*, is able to create a concept of mutual relationship between Azaro and Dad. Dad is the closest person to Azaro, despite the occasional differences between the two which are usually borne out of Azaro's wanderlust and spiritual exuberance, which are subsequently condemned by Dad through whacking of Azaro once in a while. In *The Famished Road*. Okri presents Dad as a daily labourer whose job as a "load carrier" involves carrying heavy sacks on his head all day long and transporting them from truck to stall or vice versa like a human donkey. The wage is barely enough to survive on and he runs into all kinds of trouble because of his political views:

Dad was still staggering, like a boxer under the onslaught of too many blows, when the loaders dumped the second bag on his head for the second time. For a moment Dad stood perfectly still. Then he wobbled. His muscles twitched erratically. The bags were very huge and compact. (148)

Dad, the son of the priest of the God of Roads is almost primeval in nature with a legendary past, a seething temperamental mass of energy, volatile in his moods, alternatively tender in his gauche manner and tempestuous in his rages. After a long arduous day he returns home with very little, except his pent-up frustrations. Almost as a daily ritual, he takes his bath, his meal and settles down to a bottle of ogogoro and cigarettes. The image of Dad sitting with his legs stretched out on the centre table, with his dirty, smelling boots beside his chair, smoking his cigarettes while a mosquito coil further fumigates the room, stands out like an ideogram in the novel. Then on a particularly frustrating day at work, an importunate creditor makes the mistake of taking away the table as ransome for a debt. Dad returns from work and goes through these usual motions of bath, meal, ogogoro and cigarette. Finally he lifts up his legs to place them on the table, only to find them suspended in mid-air. Hell broke loose in the neighbourhood.

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Dad had been a champion boxer in his home village, and as his frustrations mount, he resumes his practise. His boxing sessions become gradually more demented and he gets into all kinds of fights until he finally confronts a boxer from the spirit world who wears an immaculate white suit. This boxer bloodied him thoroughly before his son and his abiku friend - Ade, came to his aid. They wheel out the sinister, blind old man whose music on the accordion had aided the mysterious boxer; then they ask Dad to stain the man's white suit which is the source of his strength. Dad complies and succeeds in defeating the mysterious boxer who then disappears. After this contest, Dad falls into a coma, lasting several days until he is nursed back to life. In his coma he drifts through the worlds of the gods, the spirits and the unborn and he is given an unflattering vision of his people's history. This is contained in Dad's words:

My wife and my son, listen to me. In my sleep I saw many wonderful things . Our ancestors taught me many philosophies. My father, Priest of Roads, appeared to me and said I should keep my door open. My heart must be open. My life must be open. Our road must open. A road that is open is never hungry. (497)

In *The Famished Road*, structurally, Okri in its long section one made Azaro the protagonist, torn by his abiku consciousness between the desire to rejoin the spirit-companions in the other world, while in the shortest subsequent sections Dad takes over as protagonist and does battle with various malevolent other-worldly visitants, Azaro having slid in to the role of an onlooker. It could be supposed that Dad had become marked-out for destruction by these supernatural foes, because in the first section he wrested Azaro out of the control of the spirit world by having performed over him the sacrifice that tied him to life. This solidarity in assistance between Azaro and Dad, implies an unequivocal symbiotic relationship which permeates the novel.

Equally of significance in *The Famished Road*, is the presentation of Mum, Azaro's mother. Ben Okri continues with the chain of the camp of good in Nigeria's transition from the lowest ebb to greatness with the presentation of Mum as a street hawker who walks the street all day trying to sell a few groceries and provisions. Despite her various travails, she has a stoic, silent strength, which helps the family through rough periods. She moves between selling her wares and buying the services of a series of herbalists who she needs to keep her abiku son and her volatile husband. She survives hanging on tenuously through the persecutions and perversions, the turmoil and the crisis and the heat and the pathetic 'dailiness' of her life:

Mum was so terrified that she left instantly, gathered all the money she had saved from her trading, took some off Dad and borrowed the rest. The

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herbalist went on to tell her that I was being held by a man and a woman who either wanted to keep me as their own child or sacrifice me for money. (30)

At the end of *The Famished Road*, she was the only member of the family with her feet on the ground, concerned about the need to do something materially to relieve their poverty:

There's not much money in the house, mum said. "You haven't been working". (500)

In alliance with the force of good epitomised by the trinity of Dad, Mum and Azaro is the photographer. His life has a strong historical dimension blended with elements of the mystical. The forces of history and social circumstances determine and govern his life in a very real sense but he is also transformed by Okri and the strongly oral culture of his community into a figure of myth and mystery:

The camera fell from the photographers hands. I heard people screaming inside the camera. The thugs jumped on the camera and stamped on it, trying to crush and destroy it. And the people who were inside the camera, who were waiting to become real, and who were trying to get out, began wailing and wouldn't stop. (173)

In *The Famished Road*, the photographer rises from being a local figure of ludicrous antics who takes pictures of neighbourhood parties and children to a kind of chronicler of the nation's history:

The photographer's pictures had been given great prominence on the pages of the newspaper and it was even possible to recognise our squashed and poverty-ridden faces on the grainy newsprint. (156)

By taking photographs of the poor and oppressions inflicted on them by the rich, he falls foul of the authorities and is hunted by thugs, the secret police and associates of powerful politicians. He also acquires magical powers appearing at nights and disappearing at dawn, travelling to other continents and other planets. His photographs provide Azaro with his first lessons in the history of black people, and he also gives him a magic potion with which they are able to eliminate all the rats in their room:

When you wake up tomorrow all the rats will be gone. I will finish them off I will use my powerful medicine and my secret charms. (233)

When he finally disappears, there is a hint that he has dissolved into the elements and a blinding flash of lightning becomes something like a celestial photograph.

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In the view of Toni Kan Onwordi (1997), the photographer symbolises a biblical Jeremiah, who is representative of illusion and reality. In *The Famished Road*, the photographer is constantly hounded, haunted and hunted by agents of oppression. This re-echoes the role of the photographer in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *The Incredible And Sad Tale of Innocent Erendinra and Her Wicked Grandmother*. In the novel, the photographer is there telling us that "music does not appear in pictures"; the photographer motif is further pursued by Salman Rushdie in *The Satanic Verses*. The photographer is there recording the exchange between Mahound and the angel of the film. The Motif of photographer is efficiently explored by Okri in *The Famished Road* as an ingredient of aesthetic pluralism which subsequently makes the novel distinctive.

In *The Famished Road*, Okri's masterly control of the world of fantasy as rightly observed by Doyin Iyiola (1991) can be realised in the development of the characters situated in the evil group in the novel. In the evil group Okri develops the following characters: Madam Koto, the blind old man, the numerous malevolent spirits and the politicians, hi the characterisation of Madam Koto, the witchy/bitchy proprietress of the local bar, Ben Okri reinforces the historical time with the development of Madam Koto's bar from a palm wine shack to a modern beer salon complete with electricity and an elite clientele; she is still seen as a witch with a lot of magical powers. Spirits play around bottles of beer and plates of pepper soup:

They said of Madam Koto that she had buried three husbands and seven children and that she was a witch who ate her babies when they were still in her womb. (100)

As she moves from being the big, busty, no-nonsense woman who beats up a customer who refuses to settle his bills and empties a keg of palm wine on him, to the overdressed, made-up modern woman who owns a car, she hangs on to various uncanny rites which emphasize her other worldly powers:

She came to the fire and threw some ingredients into the cauldron. The soup made a curious hiss, almost of protestation. ... Madam Koto said to the soup: "Be quiet!". (102)

Okri in *The Famished Road*, presents Madam Koto as an epitome of evil. Madam Koto thus stands for the lusting after earthly wealth and power. David Jowitt P&fS| sees in Madam Koto the: *Capitalistic impulse that is ready to trample on the lives of others and to abandon all morality in the selfish pursuit of its aims, and for the flash values of urban and western culture, symbolised by the car she acquires. (20)*

Ben Okri's development of the blind old man in *The Famished Road*, evokes trepidation:

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The old man who had been blinded by a passing angel ... His teeth were more or less brown and his mouth was like a wound. (313)

The blind old man remains a scourge throughout the novel. Ben Okri portrays him as the conduit for sending out negative waves, especially during the numerous boxing contests of Dad with Yellow Jaguar, Green Leopard and the tall man in a white suit; his presence at these contests is for diabolical purposes. The blind old man succeeds in perfecting his evil machinations with his accordion. For instance during the boxing contest between Dad and the tall man in a white suit:

The blind old man kept chuckling. Whenever Dad mounted another futile attack the blind old man would make a curious sound, a dissonant croak, distracting and discouraging Dad. He did this many times. Soon the celebrants took up the dissonant croak as a sort of dampening anthem. (472)

In *The Famished Road*, the old man's spectacle provokes a grisly and bewitching imagination which adds much to the dramatic interest and humour of magic realism in the novel:

The old man - blind, chewing his mouth - waved his cane in the air. ... The blind old man, cocking his head, moved his face in one direction and then another. Green liquid leaked out of his eyes. (319)

In this novel, Okri's illustration of the politicians typify the ruling class, the politicians are morally and psychologically reckless; they could get anything they want through intimidation of the masses, blackmail and outright political chicanery. For instance in *The Famished Road*, an incident of the politicians brutality is recorded when a trader was harassed because she does not belong to the politicians' party:

If you don't belong to our part you don't belong to this space in the market. (168)

In the spirit world, Okri develops the body of the spirit: ghomid, incubi, and midget demons as important characters who usually came to Madam Koto's bar. Some of these spirits are ascribed human activities by Ben Okri, and they usually meet at Madam Koto's bar. This is suggestive of the magical and ritualistic affinity between them and Madam Koto, who in reality, constitutes the source of her negative powers; this view is reiterated by Azaro in the novel:

The world is full of riddles that only the dead can answer. When I began to go to Madam Koto's place I understood why the spirits were curious about

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her. ... She was often digging the earth, planting a secret or taking one out.
(75)

Ben Okri's presentation of the beggars in *The Famished Road*, depicts man's futility against the forces of nature which go a long way to shape everyman's destiny. The beggars in the novel are hopeless and neglected by their immediate physical society. This hostility against the beggars can be realised in their neglect at Madam Koto's bar by the politicians and the party thugs. The beggars are fearless and Okri endowed them with bravery and resilience:

The beggars brought a ferocious unbending force in to the bar. They imbued everything with their smells. One of the younger beggars, who had no legs and moved on low crutches of uneven lengths, climbed up on table where most of the clientele were gathered. ... the thugs and warriors of grass-roots politics were afraid. (430)

Dad in *The Famished Road*, is favourably disposed to the beggars; he organised them and gave them a sense of belonging:

Dad appeared wiji the beggars who had come to our room the other night ... Dad led them up and down the road. He tried to organise them to clear up the rubbish, to sweep the road, to paint the stalls, to plant flowers near the gutters. ... The beggars cleared the rubbish from one end of the road and dumped it at the other. (448)

In *The Famished Road*, Ben Okri progresses to mythical pre-occupation in the presentation of his characters. There are discernible tendencies in Okri towards a surreal and magic world. Surrealism tends to transcend the limitations imposed by reality and incorporates unabashedly dream-like qualities of life through the association of ideas and experiences synthesized by the conscious and unconscious minds.

Okri's polarization of his characters in *The Famished Road*, along the forces of good and evil constitute what has been described by David Jowitt (1993), as a mystical philosophy. It is also a philosophy of dualism, embracing several dichotomies: good - evil; light - darkness, knowledge - ignorance, freedom - slavery and so on. Progress is-marked by the replacement of evil by good, darkness by light. This implies an incessant cosmic struggle that is everywhere manifested; in the spirit realm, in human history, and in the lives of individuals. For instance, this notion is foregrounded in *The Famished Road* with Dad's opposition to Madam Koto's spiritual and political manoeuvres. Dad in being situated in the good camp, stands for humanist, egalitarian, and communitarian values as well as a sensitivity to the natural world which have their roots in pre-colonial African society and are to be further endangered rather than being revived in the post-independence era. The false values as typified by Madam Koto in her diabolical activities manifest in her witchcraft and negative ritualistic

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engagements, situating her in the evil camp. These false values are collectively symbolised by the Jackal - headed masquerade, described at one point as a "totemic political masquerade"; while their political expression is "the party of the rich" of which Madam Koto is a fervent supporter.

In *The Famished Road*, Okri also endows his characters in the good camp with magical intuition. For instance, Azaro's family undergo spiritual transformation. Dad's falling into a state of coma and his subsequent vision of the history of the black people with his attendant consciousness, can be described as Okri's way of making Dad undergo both physical and spiritual rejuvenation that would prepare him to attain an enviable spiritual and mythical height which could be used as a mystical weapon towards checkmating the spiritual excesses of Madam Koto and her negative spiritual associates.

Okri reinforces this spiritual endowment in Azaro's developing consciousness; the issue at stake of course has a transcendental significance; the struggle is between good and evil. This can be seen in Azaro's view:

That was when I understood that conflicting forces were fighting for the future of our country in the air, at night in our dreams, riding invisible horses and whipping us, sapping our will while we slept. (495)

Okri moreover continues with this view in *Songs of Enchantment* which should be read as antimediate sequel to *The Famished Road*, mum was made to fall into a long sleep, and in Ben Okri's magic fiction, this always signifies the attainment of a heightened magical state of consciousness. Ben Okri, in the situation of Dad, Mum, Azaro and the photographer in the good camp of Nigeria's transition from hopelessness to hopefulness tends to establish that the forces of good have to hold fast to the 'difficult light'¹, and to transcend themselves and become the legendary hidden heroes who transform the destiny of people and nations for the better. The struggle for social and political justice must go on; but the pre-condition of its ultimately successful outcome is the constant moral renewal of the individual. The imperatives thus entailed, will appear to many of us as those demanded by religious faith. But however, they are presented, they constitute a fundamentally hopeful programme for action, which is based on realistic premises.

Okri generally, in his articulate portrayal of his characters situated in the two camps of good and evil, strikingly recalls his exploration of the magical world which emphasises that the *The Famished Road* is written within the purview of magic realism.

Okri's shifting of his characters between the world of reality and the spirit world, as contained in Azaro's numerous transcendental journeys to the spirit world, Dad's journey into the spirit world after the boxing contest with the

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tall man in a white suit; mum's prayers and dreams; the photographer's invincibility; madam Koto's ritualistic practices provoke constant evocations of several dimensions of reality. This view is further reiterated by Harry Garuba as an attempt by Okri in the description of his characters and unusual activities and scenes which they constantly get involved in as:

An objective world and another of magic and ritual and spiritual presences derive from a habit of animist thought which imbues every object with a spiritual essence. (23)

It is important at this juncture to note that Okri's earlier works: *Flowers and Shadows*; *The Landscapes Within* and *Incidents at the Shrine*, often dwell on the seamy subjects of life and the characters that people his works are a veritable Dickensian cast of artists, pick pockets, drug peddlers, dope addicts, and other sorts of crooks and criminals. This notion is reinforced in the words of Harry Garuba, who surmised positively that:

In this world of harrowing reality, Okri moves his characters between, the objective world of fact and the subjective world of hallucinating and dream. He is able to do this without too much of a sense of disjunction because the characters are often under the influence of drugs and other herbal medicines, or are sometimes so locked up in their own frustrations and dreams that their View of the world is luridly coloured by the power of their own subjectivity. (23)

In *Flowers and Shadows* and *The Landscapes Within*, whose titles are taken from the artistic preoccupation of his protagonists, Jeffia Okwe and Omovo respectively, show that Okri is one we may term a writer of sensibility whose forte gives tongue to the complex inner world of the feeling and memory of his characters. He is a writer of subjectivity, for the reaction of his protagonists to the world around them is what occupies centre stage in the two novels.

Okri's method in these two novels, which are his earlier works in the observation of Charles E. Nnolim (1989), is to create main characters whose experience is vicarious and whose lives, seen through their experience (not action), are incomplete and restless, because they are characters of sensitivity: artists in their calling, proclivity and tendency; painters and water-colourists; poets after a fashion. His protagonists in these earlier works are largely unable to function anywhere else but on the simple plane of sensibility as they are brought face to face with brutality or death. Although Jeffia rescues a puppy (in *Flowers And Shadows* and Omovo saves an abandoned baby (in *The Landscapes Within*). As a sensibility, Jeffia or Omovo reacts in an identical fashion to experience. Instead of acting and influencing events, Okri's protagonists in these earlier works, respond to experience mainly through artistic recreation of these experiences. However, in *The Famished Road*, Okri has graduated progressively into mythical development of his

characters in the realm of magical realism, virtually all the characters wield considerable influence on the cosmic.

With this literary feat, Okri has become a "myth maker," perhaps in keeping with what Niyi Osundare (1992) calls the "mythocentric style".

In conclusion; Okri in the development of his characters makes use of certain ingredients which blended by a confident and distinctive authorial voice to produce in *The Famished Road*, a coherent and convincing work of art. The main ingredients are: an urban African setting that is scarred by poverty, corruption, and other familiar forms of underdevelopment; the infusion into this of a sharply contrasting magical and apocalyptic super-reality on which Okri built his immense powers of description; the naive but insightful point of view of the abiku-child hero Azaro, who narrates the series of bizarre events that involve, besides himself, stoical "mum", pugilistic "Dad", the fearsome but enigmatic Madam Koto, and a few other characters of the neighbourhood; and a heady ferment of mystical philosophy, ultimately optimistic, which is enunciated mainly by Dad and can be traced to such varied sources as Plato, Buddhism, the I Ching, the Bible (especially the Book of Revelation), Gnosticism, Sufism, Freemasonry, Blake, Goethe, Nietzsche, Yeats and naturally, African cosmologies, especially those incorporating myths of reincarnation and recurrence such as is featured in the oeuvre of Soyinka.

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