



Critiquing the Postcolonial Nigeria in the Narratives of Ben Okri

Khum Prasad Sharma, PhD 

Department of English, Padmakanya Campus, Kathmandu, Nepal

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Corresponding Author: Khum Sharma, Email: khumpsharma@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores identity politics in the narratives of Ben Okri as they depict the Yoruba African myth. This study looks into the conditions of the culturally oppressed Africans in general and postcolonial Nigeria in particular that reframes the official version of colonial history. Myth offers reinterpretation and rethinking of the official colonial history in reclaiming the identity of the culturally excluded people with a variety of voices in response to the fictitious narrative. In line with this idea, I argue that the backdrop of postcolonial everyday life in Nigeria offers a chance to frame the topic of places more effectively. In order to comprehend and resolve the historical paradoxes and mysteries that are expressed in myth, magic and dreams, Thus, I analyze Okri's book from the postcolonial perspective, considering sociopolitical and historical realities. In fact, Okri combines politics and the idea of history together, using his idea of an "inviolable" African consciousness as to show the foundation of how history dominates all other aspects. To justify my argument, this paper aims to examine how Okri reassesses history and encodes African consciousness in contrast to Western epistemology. Using African myths as a third eye in Okri's novel, the paper also seeks to understand how Okri reimagines postcolonial potentials for his own Nigeria and, by extension, for the entire African continent.

KEYWORDS: Myths, history, identity politics, postcolonial identity

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1950s, myths and myth studies have remained key areas of interest for the writers and scholars from the postcolonial nations to express their contemporary situations at a global scale. The postcolonial writers and scholars have used this mode of narration to rupture and reterritorialize the socio-politico-cultural realities as magic realism remains, "the literary language of the emergent postcolonial world" (Bhabha, 1990, p. 7). Here, they employ textual hybridity as a vantage point and forward a "third space" (Bhabha, 1990, p. 211) for subverting the existing myth between the colonizer-

colonized to produce a new cultural context that rejects the hegemonic discourse created by the West. Each fictional narrative in the mythic tradition is, thus, grounded in the real historical and cultural context. The presence of myth, magic and dream is connected to the writer's belief systems and worldviews as a "postcolonial account of the social and historical relations of the culture in which they are set" (Slemon, 1995, p. 409) and a global phenomenon to present the realities of the colonized after independence. Most of the writers writing from the margin have set their narratives in the postcolonial contexts and written from the viewpoint of the oppressed people culturally and politically. Myth studies, thus, emerges in the societies through the transformation of oral to written narratives, depicting the colonial to the postcolonial and its aftermath.

Ben Okri challenges the realist conventions that have devalued the traditional: mythical, magical, ritual, pre-colonial orature and intertexts. Through his narrator, Okri uses myths and metaphors in the pre-colonial South African Yoruba mythology to unfold his native country. In other words, he presents both the political and spiritual realities of post-independent Nigeria after the colonialism, using myth and magic elements in the Yoruba cosmology as "a way to discuss alternative approaches to reality to that of Western philosophy, expressed in many postcolonial and non-Western works of contemporary fiction" (Bowers, 2004, p. 1). Like his predecessors, such as Tatuola and Achebe, he in his intent to preserve the Yoruba oral folklores in the narratives reposes his interest in restoring the kingdom. Okri (1992) examines myths and realities to reconstruct the political dynamics of the Nigerian society (cited in Ogunsanwo, 1995, p. 40). In his case in point, an alternative mode of narration truly projects the Nigerian people and the history of Nigeria outside the imperial sphere.

In his *The Famished Road*, Okri envisions the historical reality "informed by Africa's powerful tradition of oral and mythic narrative" (Gates, 1992, p. 3). The synthesis of the Yoruba myth of Abiku and the realistic tradition unravels the sordid realities of life in the ghetto. Examining the African people's belief system in perennial sufferings between death and rebirth, his narrative rewrites the history of Nigeria in opposition to the colonial history of the imperial Nigeria. In this regard, Okri (1992) offers a hope to the mass of poverty-stricken people of Nigeria and invites them to go against the corrupt and unethical politicians of the society, the business tycoons and landlords, who have meted out domination and exploitation over the masses to end the current political scenario. Ironically, his resistance and realization of his hope are both found in the same Abiku. As he explains it, the Abiku is a motif for pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial history, ". . . ours too was an Abiku nation, a spirit child nation, one that keeps being born and after each birth come blood and betrayals" (p. 567). The Abiku-child is an African word that means "little child." Azaro's choice of rejecting the natural life, death and rebirth cycle foreshadows the prospect that suffering in Nigeria would come to an end. Since it is based on the Yoruba beliefs, the magic in this literature appears more natural. Okri, here, shares the Abiku tradition and Azaro's original spirit, which are not imaginary or utopian only, but they are the real one.

AFRICAN MYTHICAL WORLDVIEW: A POSTCOLONIAL CRITIQUE

Okri resorts to the indigenous African mythical worldviews to critique the postcolonial Nigeria. In particular, it seeks to investigate the representation of the famous West African Abiku phenomena (the myth of a baby, who dies to be born again) and generally it aspires to undertake the political and cultural reading in his narrative. It attempts to find out the Abiku motif in its engagements in various issues that are grounded in the cultural and political domain and identity formation in Nigeria. Carrying

out the Abiku motif and its engagements with various issues, he tries to express the cultural nationalism and identity formation.

In the narrative, the Abiku children of *The Famished Road* are depicted as they have been “lingered in the world, seduced by the annunciation of wonderful events, went through life with beautiful and fated eyes, carrying within us the music of a lovely and tragic mythology. . . . Our minds are invaded by images of the future” (Okri, 1992, pp. 4-5). These optimistic lines carry out the prospects of Nigerian self-governance in 1960 after the independence from the colonial rule as the Nigerian people had a commitment and belief that they could transform the existing conditions of Nigeria into a leading nation. But in the years that followed independence, a number of factors—including lack of leadership, political, economic and organized corruption leading to injustices shattered the dreams and optimism of the nation for a promising future. The national independence of Nigeria has brought a shock from which she was never able to recover as, Azaro rightly states, “being born was a trauma from which I never recovered” (Okri, 1992, p. 8). Into a vicious cycle, the national scenario of Nigeria resembles the depiction of Azaro symbolically where the situation could not improve rather be continued in the same line.

The story of Azaro, a little Abiku boy, is set on the brink of Nigeria's independence and is told from his point of view in Okri's book. A literal definition of an Abiku is a spirit kid who will repeatedly be born to the same mother but will die as an infant. The Abiku myth describes a cycle of life that includes birth, death and reincarnation, and connects with the cosmos. The Abiku people in their ritual offerings live beyond this mundane world in the shared belief system of rebirth in the cosmic space. In the novel, Okri's narrator unravels the Abiku people's desire to live outside this real world: “with passionate ritual offerings, our parents always tried to induce us to live. They also tried to get us to reveal where we had hidden the spirit tokens that bound us to the other world” (Okri, 1992, p. 5). In that sense, the spirit-child Azaro in his cosmic experience contrasts from the real world Abiku children. These children live in the physical world of Nigeria, which has been ravaged by the Western imperial power. Unlike other Abikus, Azaro fights tenaciously to survive in the face of his family's hunger, illness and brutality. He is in touch with the spirit companions living in the urban ghetto with the family.

Okri (1992) considers Nigeria an Abiku child, but necessarily like the traditional ones, but a resilient Abiku who persists to remain alive “somewhere in the interspace between the spirit world and the Living” (p. 5). Azaro prefers life to death and refuses to be kept alive by rituals performed by his predecessors for spiritual connections with the super souls. Myths are often associated to the national cultural identity in any culture. Many people tend to regard myth as a story or narrative about the gods or legendary heroes. This generalization is also true to some extent, but there are myths that deal with these characters. There are some others that deal with some natural phenomena. Again, there are still many others, which neither deal with gods nor with nature, but they deal with some rituals.

Okri's characters express themselves through the Abiku myths. Living by myths of their indigenous cultural heritage, the Abiku people as shown in the novel connect the sacred and profane, and celestial and terrestrial: “It may simply have been that I had grown tired of coming and going. It is terrible to forever remain in between. It may also have been that I wanted to taste of this world” (Okri, 1992, p. 6). The modern reconstruction of the Abiku myth brings people outside this historical reality of binary of the western colonial ruler and the non-western colonized. The Abiku people's desire to live in the distant time and space, beyond the imperial period, embodies the mythic space with the real African identity. Though history itself has produced an increasingly rational

and disinherited mind of modern humans, it truly invokes a non-rational, mythical memory and humanmade record of their intuitive conception of themselves. The Abiku myths with shared underlying universal structures unify the African people beyond their colonial history.

Okri's mythic representation of Abiku in the novel has become a part of shared national agenda of the Nigerian people in particular and the natives of the colonized world in general. Reinventing the Abiku myth, he documents the African consciousness. The Abiku myth “dwells upon certain inviolate area of the African consciousness such as the resilience of spirit, the elasticity of aesthetics and the capacity of dreaming” (Wilkinson, 1992, p. 86). The African people unfold their shared consciousness through myths since their history has been ravished by the modern imperial power. The Africans share their mythic experience with the people of the entire colonized world because their sufferings resemble other people’s hardships in the rest of the world. Their colonial experience is mythological in the sense that the entire human race has been suffering under the imperial rule. In the novel, Okri’s characters, going beyond the material world, live in the mythic space without the colonial assault.

The Abiku story is a well-known aspect of the oral tradition of West Africa among Nigeria's various ethnic groups, particularly three groups known as the Yorubas, Igbos and Igos. Because of their popularity, many Nigerians and other West African authors rely on the rich cultural shores to express and regain their national identities that have been undermined. Okri (1992) writes, “Our country is an Abiku country. Like the spirit child it keeps coming and going. One day it will decide to remain. It will be strong” (p. 547). This indicates Okri's symbolic association of the Abiku myth with his nation.

In post-independent Nigeria, Okri's Abiku is more realistic in relation to the African Yoruba tradition. Okri chooses different ways of Abiku representation to unleash from the colonial authoritarianism in literature vis a vis searching for the origin or the African self, remaking the history of Nigeria. Following the conscious attachment to culture, Okri is also an example of what a critic of repute calls him “a postcolonial aesthetic of cultural hybridity because it explores the liminal border between diverse cultural traditions” (Bhabha, 1990, p. 25). Okri demonstrates in the narrative how these various cultural traditions may survive inside the new hybrid forms. He also demonstrates his enormous genius and knowledge of contemporary writing tendencies like realism, modernism, and African mythology. Okri's style is appropriately described as “engaging lyrical and intriguingly postmodern” (Gates, 1992, p. 3), which also demonstrates the experimental nature of Okri. His characters experience a process of awareness transformation throughout the book by fusing myth and reality.

Okri (1992) also reflects on important human qualities including love, hatred, loneliness, pain, death and faith. He moves fluidly between the present philosophical thought and the description of specifics of everyday realities while addressing these common problems. His deep personal perspective refers to “an unwilling adventure into chaos and sunlight into the dream of the living and the dead” (p. 558) and produces a spiritual but not sentimental environment, and his rich lyrical language reveals his capacity to continuously explore new literary forms. He experiments with oral forms, particularly those of the Yoruba culture, mixed realism, modernism and other movements with an African flavor. Okri examines both to “struggle and transcend the nightmare of history” (Quayson, 1999, p. 66) as colonialism and its supreme legacy in Africa. The protagonist struggles in the narrative to traverse and overcome the nightmare.

THE INTERSECTION OF HISTORY, MYTH AND POLITICS

Divided into three sectors and eight books, the story in Okri's narrative is told by Azaro, an Abiku child in the first-person narrative technique. The use of surrealistic dream images such as the stream of consciousness techniques combine the techniques of realism, modernism, myth and magic realism that make this narrative richer in fictional writing. Okri's narrative exposes dynamics of politics and dream. In contrast to the Western interpretation of dreams as a personal manifestation, he investigates the impact of latent ideas into mytho-poetic domains on the waking world in the narrative. Legend works with history and dream operate with the unconscious in the Freudian line of psychoanalysis.

In *The Famished Road*, the circular movement between dreams in the subconscious mind and ghetto realities in the conscious mind flashes magical. At one point, Smith (2000) recounts the condition of fractured experience of dreamer: "Dislocated cultures, people dispersed and diminished through slum settlements, political violence, greedy extraction of natural resources; all appear to have their ultimate impulse in a mythical spirit world" (p. 45). Power struggles, as in Okri, manifest in dreams like reality. Moreover, the cultural violence gets reflected in the ghettos and back again in a realistic manner that blurs the line between consciousness and the unconscious.

In addition, a powerful interaction between the Western and African literary and cultural traditions is created by a juxtaposition of reality with myth and folklore. Okri positions himself for a new phase of aesthetic and literary development by focusing his experimental energies on an investigation of African models rather than the ones from Europe as Gerard (1970) notes:

The novel came to Africa as a new genre, an alien to traditional art . . . The novel as a literary genre is the outcome of a particular form of civilization, the promises of which are entirely with those of African cultures . . . it focuses on private emotions motivations and experiences which traditional Africa seldom consider worthy of formal literary treatment. (p. 35)

Okri's novel is an African narrative with indigenous consciousness that brings into account a serious issue of Abiku myth with deep socio-cultural and political implications. It makes it postcolonial, multicultural and experimental both in form and content.

Through the African mythical tales, Okri critiques by his predecessors who began the celebration of literary nationalism that has been greatly emphasized by the innovative authors like Achebe and Soyinka. The narrative in Okri's *The Famished Road* opens with the traditional verifying details that provide for the historicity of Azaro, the narrator-protagonist, as an Abiku spirit child. Thus, he establishes the African way of presenting and viewing reality in a certain magical way and accepts the supernatural element as part of daily life, which is the Afro-centric style of viewing the world. Abiku is a historical belief grounded in the Yoruba cosmology by many African authors like Soyinka and Clark. But their Abiku is sadistic. Likewise, Okri's (1992) Abiku wishes to live with his parents as he claims, "[I]t is terrible to forever remain in-between" (p. 6). Consequently, his re-contextualization of the Abiku myth is concerned with the complexity of myth itself as well as with the complexity of the Abiku's plight.

Okri skillfully reworks on a well-known African tale. The narrative becomes gradually balladic in the sense that "modes of narration informed by Africa's powerful tradition of mythic and oral narrative" (Gates, 1992, p. 3). Okri, according to Ogunsanwo (2005), purposefully examines and explores the Abiku ontology, "by means of mythical narration Okri clears the space for the quintessential texture and structure of African folkloric narrative, which response to the need to clear oneself a space" (p. 42). Thus, the

narrative technique captures the essence of Azaro's innate metaphysics or extraordinary consciousness embedded in the cultural dynamics of West Africa. Here, Okri (1992) "often finds himself oscillation between two worlds" (p. 8). Ultimately, the narrative avoids the boundaries between the reality and myth, history and fiction, and the reality and art in the novel. His Afrocentric and mythopoetic worldview stand him as a postcolonial author who wants to rewrite the history of Nigeria. At the same time, his character visits the spirit and the human, the eternal and the temporal, and the primitive and the modern, which respectively deftly weaves together with two worlds, two kinds of time and two historical periods. As a result, his Afrocentric and mythopoetic consciousness strongly supports his experimental mythical narrative.

Okri, in *The Famished Road*, deals with history, politics and culture from the postcolonial context in the second half of the twentieth century. He raises a subjectivity through the historic consciousness for the formation of identity politics in the postcolonial Nigerian world. In order to draw upon the Yoruba myth of Ogun, Okri questions the "colonial subjugation" (Faris, 106) to express the contemporary socio-political and cultural effects of colonialism. He then manipulates the magic realist lens to fight against imperial, colonial and neocolonial forces, including social, political, economic and cultural corruption, and to provide change and improvement in the post independent Nigeria. Okri, thus, merges both myth and magic in the literary traditions of Africa, Europe and Latin America with a philanthropic and universal vision through the local.

Okri's novel is a powerful exploration of the intersection of history, mythology and spirituality in the lives of ordinary people. The novel is set in Nigeria during the period of military dictatorship, which portrays the struggles of the people in the face of political and social upheaval. One of the main ways that Okri reflects on history in his novel is through the portrayal of different generations of characters in the narrative. The protagonist, Azaro, is a spirit child who is able to see and communicate with the spirits that inhabit the world around him. Through his eyes, the reader is able to witness the experiences of different generations of Nigerians, from those who lived through the colonial era to those who are struggling to survive in the face of modernization and political oppression.

Another way that Okri reflects on history in his novel is through the use of mythology and spirituality. The novel draws heavily on the Yoruba tradition of storytelling and mythology, which portrays the spirits and gods of this tradition as active and present in the lives of the characters. Through the use of mythology, Okri is able to show how the history of Nigeria is intertwined with its cultural and spiritual traditions, and how these traditions continue to provide a source of strength and resilience for the people.

Overall, Okri's novel remains a powerful reflection on the ways in which history, mythology and spirituality intersect to shape the lives of ordinary people. Through the portrayal of different generations of characters and the use of mythology and spirituality, Okri is able to show how the legacy of colonialism and slavery continues to shape the social and economic structures of Nigeria, and how people are able to resist and challenge these structures through their own acts of creativity and resistance.

The purpose of Okri's unique sort of myth is identical to the purpose of Azaro's third eye, which unexpectedly protrudes from the middle of his forehead and improves how he sees the outside world. His novel makes an effort through its third eye to liberate the human mind from all restraints, see the world from a fresh angle, unearth buried information, emphasize social and political reality and record history. The novel examines a turbulence of African history roiling the nation and its people, reflecting the

traumatizing state of Nigeria on the verge of independence. It exposes scandalous events including Nigeria's failure as an independent nation state, including poverty, famine, brutality, corruption, militarism, dictatorship and internal neocolonialism.

CONCLUSION

Okri's primary themes shift to myth, history and politics as he moves his narrative from the horrific environment of postcolonial Nigeria to hopeful hopes of the future. They are interconnected in Okri's worldview and serve as the book's unbreakable organizing principles. According to him, if history represents human suffering, then the best cure for the woes of the Nigerian and African peoples is myth. He emphasizes "inviolable" African consciousness, which Western colonialism could not harm for millennia, rejecting the overemphasis on colonialism in postcolonial studies. He directly mines the depths of Yoruba mythology, folktales, stories and beliefs in order to untangle the energies concealed in the mythic and spiritual components of African past. The Yoruba myths of the Abiku child and the road are used to explore the postcolonial Nigerian society: Azaro and Ade, as spirit children, serve as the representations of Nigeria and, by extension, of Africa, while the road becomes a metaphor for Nigeria's (and, by extension, of Africa's) survival struggles. Okri makes an effort to delve into the origin stories of Africa and impart moral lessons to the continent's inhabitants through these myths. Africans have lost their touch with their culture, history and sense of self, which has resulted in a certain apathy for their own African identity. But the African people might also quench this thirst by rediscovering the imaginative and spiritual possibilities that lie dormant in the unbroken African psyche.

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