

# THE FAMISHED ROAD: BEN OKRI'S MAGIC AND REALITY

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Though black african literature in english is barely thirty years old, its maturity and authority is better judged in the wake of the international recognition its authors have earned. Among these, perhaps the most well known to spanish readers may be the nigerian Chinua Achebe, whose novels have been translated into more than thirty languages, and Wole Soyinka, the Nobel prize winning poet and playwright (1986). Yet others like Ngugi wa Thiong'o, J. M. Coetzee, Amos Tutuola or Ama Ata Aidoo can equally prove that the most stimulating and vigorous literature in english is principally coming from developing countries.

They can also prove irrefutably that postcolonial literary expression is an european-based linguistic model, whether it is french, english or portuguese, it is not a mere provincial or local variation of metropolitan european literature, but anti-hegemonic writing with its own character. Jean Paul Sartre already emphasized this in his famous essay, *L'Orphée Noire* (1948) in order to celebrate black and Madagascar poetry in french. A literature that assumes the differences between african and european languages and attempts to understand complex and varied associations and transformations that give shape to languages when they meet and conflict.

The most recent excellent example of postcolonial literature that reflects this conceptual universe (that of the Shakespearean native Caliban that extrapolates the sphere and scale of action laid down for him in Prospero's totalizing order) is *The Famished Road*, the last novel by the young nigerian Ben Okri, and winner of the most prestigious literary award in the UK, the Booker Prize, while the renown english writer Martin Amis was finalist.

This monumental and ambitious work (made up of three sections, eight books and seventy-eight chapters distributed in five hundred pages) belongs, on the one hand, to the tradition founded by Chinua Achebe in black african english literature, which draws on the mythology of precolonial aboriginal tradition.

On the other hand, with skill and daring, it creates a post-modernist narrative of rhetorical complexity and lyrical wealth that is quite unusual in black african english literature, and definitely distant from Achebe's frugal prose.

As far as traditional sources go, if Achebe refers to popular mythology and universe in detail, Igbo, Soyinka and Tutuola bring us into contact with the contradictions of Postcolonial society, which is subject to the exuberance and fantasy of the Yorubian metaphysical universe. Okri also reveals the sacred and profane world of nigerians. However Okri does'nt take on the traditions of the Urhobo, the nigerian people he belongs to, but those of the Yoruba, whose language he speaks and whose mythology and oral poetry he knows mainly through the plays and poems of Soyinka and the novels of D. O. Fagunwa, another nigerian novelist that Soyinka himself has translated into english. A tradition, therefore, that is a much derived as Okri's english one, not inherited, but assumed as a cultural construct.

Even the title itself of Okri's novel is taken from Soyinka's poem called "Death in the Dawn" (as Henry Louis Gates Jr. has pointed out):

*May you never walk  
when the road waits, famished.*





*TWINS SEVEN SEVEN: Blessed Hunter (in the mind of Atirelles). 1990.*  
Africa today. 122×244 cms. CAAM.  
Contemporary African Art Collection.

The metaphor of the road, as in Soyinka, is the central image on which the development of history's cyclic nature rests, condemning man to tread the path of his own existence fighting against evil and corruption, destined to repeat the errors of the past without experiencing that progress which redeems the world: "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".

Thus begins the novel. Its narrator and protagonist, Azaro, is an *ubiku*, a spirit-child that inhabits that slight region between the spirit world and the world of the living, toing and froing, reluctant to decide about life. Soyinka, once again, in the first volume of his autobiography tells us that an *ubiku* is a "child which is born, dies, is born again and dies in a repetitive cycle". And according to Gates, a yoruba proverb talks of a wanderer child: "It is the same child who dies and returns again and again to plague the mother."

Azaro was, in effect, one of those eternally recycled souls. During childhood he was a sickly child, "oscillating between both worlds" and "trying to reason with my spirit companions, trying to get them to leave me alone". One day, when he returned to his body he woke up in a coffin; his parents had given him up for dead and had begun preparations for burial. And since that day, as a result of his sudden recovery, his mother shortened his original name, Lazarus, to avoid any connection with him that Jesus raised from the dead. Azaro broke the treaty with his spirit companions because he "wanted to make happy the bruised face of the woman who would become my mother", conscious that he was exposing

himself to the constant persecution of his spiritual companions and to terrible hallucinations.

Mum, as Azaro calls her, works in the market selling what she can and under constant threat and bullying from the Rich Party political thugs, and Dad works loading heavy sacks of salt or cement. What they earn isn't enough for the rent, and they are pursued by landlord and creditors.

Towards the middle of this novel which really has no plot as such, Dad discovers a spontaneous vocation for boxing and thenceforth proclaims himself spokesman and defender of the poor. His boxing victories over his human and spiritual adversaries improve the family's economic situation considerably, yet they land him as well at death's door. The political situation is also unbearable: on the eve of independence from white rule, his colonial nation is divided between the Party of the Rich and the Party of the Poor, that rival for popular support giving great parties and showering promises of schools and employment in the midst of police raids, mutinies and electoral meetings.

Apart from Azaro and his parents there are few main characters in the story. The only one that appears with a proper name in *The Famished Road* is Madame Koto, the owner of the local bar, famous for her palm wine and pepper soup. Both maternal and menacing, Madame Koto is a friend of the political thugs, the Rich Party politicians and the prostitutes. Thanks to those good contacts her bar is the first to have electricity and she is the first to own a car in the district.

The other characters, the landlord, the creditors, neighbours, the international photographer, the blindman, the her-



balists, the beggars, appear like ghosts of various kind. The only others with a name are Sami, the boxing bets collector, and Ade, another spirit child, Azaro's sole friend (in the second part of book five, well into the second half of the novel).

With images from Azaro's daily life and from that of neighbours in a small community located in the outskirts of the city, and with imaginary vignettes of great verbal wealth and inventiveness, Okri describes to us the violence and physical intensity of poverty, the corruption and political unrest of the real world. Hunger and appalling filth, relieved by bloody mutinies and loutish drinking parties. The inhuman conditions of labour, houses infested by myriad rats. Simultaneously, as if between the real world and the fantasy world neither frontiers nor distinctions existed, in a constant oscillation, Okri takes us to the spiritual world that irrupts in the shape of monsters and mutants, ancestors and spirits, elves from neighbouring woods and unborn beings.

In a fluidity which dissolves the limits between past and present, mental and physical reality, between political facts and collective fantasies, social reality and personal hallucination, Okri transforms the stock children's novel into a metaphor of modern Africa's frustrated hopes, using its magic and mythical traditions. Okri's pessimism ferments, as does that of Soyinka and Achebe, with the narrative's strength and originality, and that becomes in itself transformed, into the metaphor of the indomitable desire of who tries to break the predestined cycle of death and rebirth. The result is an exuberant and rambling narrative, with a complex and relaxed epic structure, as unique and magical as that of Gabriel García Márquez.

At the end of the novel, and through Ade, (the spirit child friend of Azaro), Ben Okri reveals the terms of that metaphor which he condenses and which he refers to in this sensational novel:

"The spirit child is an unwilling adventurer into chaos and sunlight, into the dreams of the living and the dead. Things that are not ready, not willing to be born or to become, things for which adequate preparations have not been made to sustain their momentous births, things that are not resolved, things bound up with failure and with fear of being, they all keep recurring, keep coming back, and in themselves partake of the spirit-child's condition. They keep coming and going till their time is right. History itself fully demonstrates how things of the world partake of the condition of the spirit-child".

And further ahead, in the closing pages of the book, Ade continues:

"It shocked him that ours too was an ubiku nation, a spirit-child nation, one that keeps being reborn and after each birth come blood and betrayals, and the child of our will refuses to stay till we have made propitious sacrifice and displaced our serious intent to bear the weight of a unique destiny."

After all, even among the living, Azaro's father reminds him that:

"We are freer than we think... We can redeem this world... human beings are Gods hidden from themselves. My son, our hunger can change the world, make it better, sweeter."

Ben Okri was born in Nigeria, in 1959. As a child he lived in London and returned to Nigeria when he was seven, on the eve of the Biafran civil war. He published his first novel, *Flowers and Shadows*, in 1980, when he was 21 years old. In 1987 he received the Commonwealth prize for Africa with a collection of stories, *Incidents at the Shrine*, and the Aga Khan prize awarded by the northamerican magazine *The Paris Review*. Another selection of stories, *Stars of the New Curfew*, received the general praises of northamerican criticism. Okri currently lives in London.

