

Spiritual Realm in The Famished Road by Ben Okri

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Abstract- Ben Okri is recognized as one of the most prominent first-generation Nigerian novelists, who has articulated the journey of Nigeria from colonial governance to independence. *The Famished Road* is a narrative that follows Azaro, a spirit child navigating through Nigeria. Azaro faces pressure to abandon the mortal world for the spirit realm. Azaro, who is identified as a spirit child, represents a figure of reincarnation, being born into the world repeatedly. There are two categories of spirits: the malevolent spirits and the benevolent spirits. *The Famished Road* opens with an exploration of the spirit realm and the spirit children. Azaro, an abiku or spirit child, resides in a secluded village in Africa. From the moment of his birth, he has been visited by spirits who invite him into their domain. As time progresses, he engages with the spirits, acting as a clairvoyant, even rescuing his family from a fire on one occasion. Azaro encounters numerous spirits that grapple with his father. In his novel, Okri gives voice to the animals, which serves as a reflection of *Spiritual Realm*. The Great Cat, presumed to be a Lion, manifests Azaro during moments of chaos and when he confronts life's riddles. The voices of Azaro's spirit companions entice and enchant him. The creatures inhabiting the forest abruptly transform into spirits. Okri's assertion extends beyond the notion that we all possess a spiritual essence.

I. INTRODUCTION

Ben Okri is recognized as one of the most prominent first-generation Nigerian novelists who has articulated the journey of Nigeria from colonial governance to independence. He has depicted the stark reality of a disordered, fragmented, and corrupt Nigeria during his era. In his Booker Prize-winning novel, *The Famished Road*, Ben Okri critiques the issues of corruption and violence, illustrating the grotesque socio-political landscape of neo-colonial Nigeria. This novel also highlights the divided national history of Ben Okri himself. He is a highly esteemed Nigerian author celebrated for his novels and short stories.

II. THE FAMISHED ROAD (1991)

The Famished Road is a narrative that delves into the myth of indigenous tradition, characterized by its "postmodern narrative of rhetorical complexity and lyrical wealth" (92). It stands apart from the conventional style of Black African literature written in English. Although Okri is rooted in the Urhobo tradition, he draws upon Yoruba mythology. His work is significantly influenced by the writings of Soyinka and D. O. Fagunwa. His use of English is perceived as a cultural construct. He narrates his stories employing postmodern traits alongside the art of storytelling. His vivid descriptions of nature are imbued with lyrical qualities, creating a realistic imagery for the readers.

The narrative follows Azaro, a spirit child navigating through Nigeria. Azaro faces pressure to abandon the mortal realm for the spirit world. However, due to his personal and familial bonds, he chooses to remain on Earth. The novel delves into the deep familial ties that are prevalent within the Nigerian community. Okri is also recognized for his references to the belief in an afterlife.

III. SPIRITUAL REALM IN THE FAMISHED ROAD

Okri utilizes the mythological traditions of the Yoruba people, which are not from his own tribal background, to develop his main character and first-person narrator, Azaro, who is identified as a "spirit child." Within Yoruba mythology, the spirit child, or abiku, represents a figure of reincarnation, being born into the world repeatedly. The various journeys through different realities render the abiku both wise and fearsome. In the case of Azaro, he opts to stay in the human realm, resisting the alluring calls of his fellow abiku to return to the spirit realm.

Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* is well-known for commencing in the spirit world, a realm where

Azaro and his fellow abiku experience an eternal joy, far removed from the constraints and grievances of humanity. In this isolated domain, governed by a king with a red beard, "there was much feasting, playing, and sorrowing" (3). The "sorrowing," as Azaro describes, pertains to the world of the Living, where the spirit children confront "love they had left behind" and "suffering they had not redeemed" (3). Due to the considerable "suffering" associated with traveling to the world of the Living and back, the spirit children are hesitant to part from their companions.

Spirits may manifest as human children, ghosts, angels, fairies, animals, or voices. Spirits originate from the bodies of deceased individuals. African cultures hold a profound belief in spirits and deities. There are two categories of spirits: the malevolent spirits that inhabit forests, bushes, and large trees, and the benevolent spirits that are believed to interact with people but are only visible to those possessing clairvoyance. Both categories of spirits are said to be drawn to marketplaces, where they engage in buying and selling like ordinary individuals. In *The Famished Road*. Occasionally, they take on human forms to deceive Azaro.

a. Spirits as children

The Famished Road opens with an exploration of the spirit world and the spirit children, detailing how they are selected to enter the physical realm from an eternal existence. The narrative is rooted in the mythical beliefs of West Africans, unfolding the story of the birth and tribulations of an abiku, a spirit child. The plot centers around Azaro, the spirit child, as he navigates the earthly challenges while being persistently called by his spirit companions to return to their realm. Throughout the novel, Azaro encounters obstacles stemming from his native background, political factions, the spirit world, and the dichotomy between society, dreams, and reality.

Azaro, an abiku or spirit child, resides in a secluded village in Africa. From the moment of his birth, he has been visited by spirits who invite him into their domain. Yet he consistently declines their calls, cherishing his family and his desire to stay with them. In his early years, he was taken by spirits and found himself awakening in a coffin, leading his parents to believe he had perished as his spirit had temporarily departed to join the other spirits. Lacking the means for the expensive ritual that

would liberate him from this burden, he gradually learned to manage it more effectively. As time progresses, he engages with the spirits, acting as a clairvoyant, even rescuing his family from a fire on one occasion.

Due to his unique encounters with the spiritual realm, Azaro offers his community a profound insight into the essence of the human soul. He posits that every individual possesses untapped depths and connections to all elements of the natural world. Consequently, one can access the entirety of collective human experience simply by striving to comprehend their own consciousness. This principle gains importance in the context of Azaro's father's nightly struggles with ominous spiritual forces, as he battles through various ailments, injuries, and inexplicable bouts of depression. He is a spiritual warrior who has grasped the rational significance of dreams by allowing the consequences of his slumber to manifest.

b. Spirits as Humans

One day, Azaro's father makes the decision to pursue a career as a professional boxer. Always inclined towards violence, he comes to the realization that he simply enjoys fighting. He trains with great intensity. Meanwhile, his family falls deeper into debt. In assisting his father, Azaro encounters numerous spirits that grapple with his father. He manages to frighten them all away, but not before his father sustains serious injuries. Throughout the village, he earns the moniker of the Black Tyger. In a monumental battle, he triumphs over the legendary Green Leopard but subsequently falls into a coma for several days.

A final match is scheduled in front of the entire village, including affluent citizens, but the opponent resorts to cheating. Azaro's family, banking on a wager that his father will emerge victorious, identifies a man in the audience who persistently disrupts his father. Once the distraction is eliminated, Black Tyger fights with great courage, ultimately defeating his adversary. He removes the mask of the man in the white suit, revealing a ghostly, inhuman visage that terrifies the entire crowd. For three days following this event, Azaro's father continues to battle evil spirits in his dreams. Upon awakening, a new tranquility envelops the household. Azaro senses that the spirits are finally at peace.

The spirits that inhabit Azaro's mind exert such control over him that they continue to influence his existence. The dominating spirits lead him perilously close to ruin. At one point, Azaro observes that the spirits are wandering “amongst the fruits of the earth and sea” (16). His father is unable to evade a similar destiny. He expresses, “I am beginning to see things for the first time. This world is not what it seems. There are mysterious forces everywhere. We are living in a world of riddles” (388). Azaro is uncertain of his place in the world and the identity he must carry forward. At one juncture, spurred on by the spirits, Azaro shatters his elderly neighbor's window, resulting in the neighbor demanding compensation for the damages. Furthermore, Azaro's actions provoke his mother's anger, resulting in her administering corporal punishment to him.

c. Spirits as Animals

In his novel, Okri gives voice to the animals, which serves as a reflection of Spiritual Realm. Azaro, too, possesses the ability to comprehend the language of these creatures. One night, while resting in the shrine house, he was abruptly awakened by the sound of gongs. Okri skillfully merges the spirit realm with fantastical elements and stark reality, akin to sugar coating a bitter pill. During his time lost in the forest, Azaro's curiosity leads him to ponder the origins of the spirits and their activities in the marketplace. He decides to pursue a baby spirit resembling a squirrel, which was dragging a large sack (TFR 19). However, the spirit vanished unexpectedly. Shortly thereafter, he encountered a giant turtle nearby. These elements are intricately adorned. Peering through the mask, he observed new spirits roaming the forest. He also beheld a prehistoric dragon, possessing the body of an elephant and the face of a fierce dog. Okri artfully intertwines spiritual themes with political commentary, illustrating the corruption present in society.

The great cat, presumed to be a lion, manifests to Azaro during moments of chaos and when he confronts life's riddles. Azaro characterizes the King of the spirit world as, “a wonderful personage who sometimes appeared in the form of a great cat” (3). Whenever he finds himself in trouble or facing challenges, he is safeguarded by the King of the spirit world, who takes the form of a cat. Okri underscores the significance of the great cat myth

within his narrative, depicting the cat as a regal figure.

d. Spirits as Voices

The spirit companions communicate with Azaro in various forms, sometimes remaining invisible, utilizing a ‘voice’ throughout the narrative. In *The Famished Road*, the voices of Azaro's spirit companions entice him, stating, “Then they showed me images ‘Come back to us,’ they said. We miss you by the river. You have deserted us. If you don’t come back we will make your life unbearable” (9). The spirit companions' voices captivate Azaro, especially when he experiences separation from his parents for the first time: “They were the twilight voices of my spirit companions, luring me to the world of dreams, away from this world ... a world where I would never be lost” (21-22). While spending time with his father at the palm-wine bar, a ‘voice’ instructs Azaro, “Shut your eyes” (342) to shield him from the spirit's fiery red gaze, prompting a dialogue between them.

Azaro finds himself enchanted by the voices of his spirit companions. “My spirit companions, their voices seductive beyond endurance ... when I saw a black cat ... came to a well ... I saw the black cat its eyes glowing like luminous stones” (58). The black cat diverts Azaro from death and he is saved by Madame Koto. These entities play a crucial role in the protagonists' journey in Okri's narrative. Spirit companions frequently appear, urging Azaro to return to the spirit realm, yet he resists due to the love he feels for his parents, especially after witnessing their struggles to raise him. These spirits also manifest to Azaro's father during his final moments, but he battles against them and is aided by herbalists. He is transported to the dreamland, where he confronts the spirits sent to reclaim Azaro's life.

e. Spirits as Fortune Tellers

Whenever Azaro finds himself in peril, the spirits provide him with warnings and insights into the future. In his childhood, he possessed the ability to read the thoughts of others and predict their destinies with the assistance of these spirits. One night, while standing on the street, a voice instructed him: “Cross-over” (TFR 11). This was a warning from the spirits, urging Azaro to tell his mother to cross the street. Moments later, a large lorry crashed into the house they were standing in front of. The lorry accident could have resulted in the deaths of

both Azaro and his mother, but they were spared due to the warning from the spirits.

Through the spirits, Okri illustrates that the future is likely to be fraught with challenges. He cautions that individuals must be prepared to confront difficult situations at all costs. The spirits also forewarn Azaro about the impending darkness that threatens to envelop the nation. Upon entering the forest, Azaro encounters a duality of adventure and magical forces. The supernatural elements are intertwined with a sense of adventure.

f. .The malevolent spirits

The creatures inhabiting the forest abruptly transform into spirits. Azaro also perceives peculiar stones that are warmed by his feet. In the forest, Azaro discovered a mask; he picked it up and placed it on his face. Upon donning the mask, Azaro glimpsed an alternate reality. Azaro states: When I gazed through the mask, I beheld a different realm. Beings were present everywhere in the darkness, and each spirit resembled a sun. They emitted a radiant environment (Murari 38).

Okri effectively illustrates how spirits frequently present riddles to Azaro. He employs supernatural elements as a means to instill social consciousness, revealing the more sinister aspects of society. He emphasizes the impact of corrupt politicians, a greedy populace, slavery, racism, and famine on society.

Azaro was often sidetracked by the spirits that enticed him into the woods, leading him to become lost. He frequently spent his time at Madame Koto's bar. She regarded him as fortunate due to his connections with the spirits. A magical ornament was suspended by Madame Koto above the entrance of the bar. Consequently, numerous unusual patrons began to frequent the establishment. Azaro observed an incomplete figure resembling blind men, as well as half-man and half-animal spirits within the bar. Azaro's father engaged in a final confrontation at Madame Koto's bar with a spirit man dressed in a white suit known as 'Black Tyger'. The clash between Azaro's father and the spirit man was fierce. Azaro's father was nearly beaten to death. He subsequently battled the malevolent forces in his dreams and ultimately triumphed over them. The characters in *The Famished Road* fluctuate between the realms of reality and the spirit world. Azaro's

spirit companions consistently beckon him back to their ethereal domain.

Azaro frequently faces challenges due to his spirit companions, "who are striving diligently to draw him back into their realm. They play pranks on him, abduct him, and leave him in bizarre and unfamiliar environments" (Murari 38).

CONCLUSION

In a discussion with Jane Wilkinson, Okri proposes that every individual can be perceived as an abiku. His assertion extends beyond the notion that we all possess a spiritual essence. He also implies that Azaro's refusal to accept his situation is intertwined with the inherent human desire for greater fulfillment in life. However, Azaro's reaction is not merely one of revulsion and horror. He advances this tradition by presenting the unique viewpoint of a spirit child as the storyteller.

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