

Supernatural elements in ben okri's *the Famished road*

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Abstract

Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* portrays post-colonial Nigerian society. Various corrupting forces that hinder the growth of the nation are realistically portrayed in the novel. Social evils like racial discrimination, slavery, poverty, and famine are brought to lime light by Okri who skillfully reveals the stark reality by shadowing it with the supernatural elements. The young spirit child Azaro narrates the story. The story fluctuates between the real world and the spirit world. Though the narrative glides from illusion, hallucination, dreams, spirit, superstitious beliefs, the real crux of the novel lies in bringing out the stark reality of Nigerian society. Okri uses supernatural elements as a tool to implement social awareness to show the darker side of the society. He highlights how society is affected with the corrupt politicians, greedy society, slavery, racism and famine.

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1. Introduction

Ben Okri is one of the best known of the first-generation Nigerian novelists who has described the process of Nigerian transition from colonial rule to independence. In his works Okri has experimented with new literary forms, different styles such as mixed realism, modernism and oral literary technical forms, especially those of Yoruba culture. Okri started as a social realist by expediting postcolonial themes.

The Famished Road is the first in a trilogy, which tell the story of Azaro's narrative which is continued in *Songs of Enchantment* (1993) and *Infinite Riches* (1998). Okri brings his own experience of racial discrimination in his works. His experiences are reflected in his novel *The Famished Road* (1991) where Azaro and his family struggled due to political malpractices.

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To escape from the corrupt forces like poverty, lack of education, child labour, exploitation, Okri has used supernatural elements as a technique in Azaro's world. Okri makes the animals to speak in his novel which is also an aspect of supernatural elements. Ben Okri uses this type of method to address some of the difficult and meaningful themes. He addresses politics, suffering, and hunger and gives it form of a political slant. The use of reality and fantasy makes *The Famished Road* an excellent supernaturalistic element in fiction.

Spirit is a supernatural being existed in reality world. It is often used metaphorically to refer to the consciousness or

personality. Spirits may be in the form of ghost, angel or fairies. Spirits comes from the body of the deceased person. African people have a strong belief in spirits and gods. There are two types of spirits: the malevolent spirits that inhabits forests, bush and big trees and the benevolent spirits that are believed to mix with people but only visible to those with clairvoyance. Both types of spirits are said to be attracted to the market place, where they come, buy and sell like normal people in *The Famished Road*. Sometimes they appear as humans in order to mislead Azaro.

Whenever Azaro is in trouble spirits warns him and foretell the future. As a child he could read people's minds and foretell their future with the help of spirits. When Azaro was standing in the street, one night a voice said: "Cross-over" (TFR 11). It was the spirits that warns Azaro to ask his mother to cross over the street and a few moments later an articulated lorry plunged into the house in which both were standing in front of it. Lorry accident might kill Mum and Azaro but they were escaped by the warning given by the spirits.

Okri makes the animals to speak in his novel which is also an aspect of supernatural elements. Even Azaro is able to understand the language of animals. When Azaro was asleep in the shrine house, he suddenly woke up by hearing the noise of gongs. Okri has amalgamated the spirit world; the fantasy elements with stark reality like a sugar coating on a bitter pill. Azaro was lost in the forest. He was curious to know where the spirits are from and what they were doing in the market place. He chooses to "follow a baby spirit with face of a squirrel, who dragged a great sack" (TFR 19). But the spirit suddenly disappeared from the place. After a while he noticed a giant turtle beside him. The turtle says,

'Why are you shouting?'

'I'm lost.'

'What does that mean?'

'I don't know where I am.'

'You are in the under road.'

'Where is that?'

'The stomach of the road.'

'I want to go home.'

'I don't know where your home is,' the turtle said, 'so I can't help you. (TFR 20)

The conversation between the Azaro along with cat, turtle and spirits create an awry atmosphere far away from the realism he intends to highlight. Azaro was saved from forest and taken to police station. The police man reminds his son by seeing Azaro, so he took him to his house. Police officer's wife bathes and dressed him like her son. Later Azaro came to know that their son has dead by road accident. He stayed there for several days. Azaro says, "I listened to all sounds of the house. They were voices everywhere. I heard the air whispering, the walls talking, the chair complaining... insects gossiping (TFR 25). Spirits warns Azaro to escape from police officer house because they planned Azaro to give sacrifice to their own son. Ghost is another characteristic feature of supernatural elements. When Azaro lost his way home, he was allowed to stay in police officers house. Azaro was haunted by the spirits. He says, "When I blinked, I saw ghosts around the police officer and his wife. They were all over the room. The ghosts were tall and silent and some had weak beards.... A ghost, existing as only a pair of milk-white legs, balanced on the head of the woman" (TFR 30). The police officer's dead son tried to take over Azaro's body to live with his family. But he was escaped from spirits. Azaro feels the world is full of riddles as the spirit world is enigmatic. Azaro is unable to unknit the mysteries of life. The spirits, ghosts and demons represent the traditional supernatural beliefs of the people while politics represents disparity between rich and the poor highlights postcolonial condition. Okri uses supernatural element as a technique to give voice to the anti-social activity of the corrupt forces in society. Along with realism Okri has intertwined spirit and ghost as percepts in order to make impossible things appear possible in his fictional atmosphere.

Okri through the spirits tries to show that future is going to be difficult. Okri warns that the people should be ready to face difficult situation at any cause. Spirits also warn Azaro about the darkness that is going to engulf the country.

When Azaro enters the forest, he experienced a dual nature of adventure and magical forces. Supernatural quality is bejeweled with adventure. Azaro meets different people in the forest.

The forest was full of mirages from which I could not escape. I dragged myself along on the ground. The man kept on coming. I grew so scared that after a while I turned and dragged myself towards the old man to find out what he wanted. I became frustrated at the slowness of my pace. When I got to the skull, I picked it up, and threw it at him. He vanished and a wind blew hard through the trees and the voluminous air was full of leaves whirling and fruits and seeds falling. I dragged myself on till I came to a palm tree. Trying to escape it, I hobbled towards the houses on the rim of the forest. But they too were a mirage. (TFR 282)

The living creatures in the forest turn into spirits suddenly. Azaro also sees strange stones warmed with his soles. Azaro found a mask in the forest; he picked and wore it on his face. When Azaro wore the mask he saw a different world. Azaro says,

When I looked out through the mask I saw a different world. There were beings everywhere in the darkness and the spirits were each of them a sun. They radiated a brilliant

copper illumination hard to the eyes. I saw a tiger with silver wings and the teeth of a bull. I saw dogs with tails of snakes and bronze paws. I saw cats with the legs of women, midgets with bright red bumps on their heads . . . I held on to the mask and went on hobbling, looking for a way out of the forest. (TFR 284)

Supernatural elements of the novel is ornamented beautifully through these lines. When he looked through the mask he saw new spirits wandering throughout the forest. He also witnessed a prehistoric dragon with the body of an elephant and the face of a wrath dog. Okri intertwined supernatural elements and politics to show how a part of the corrupt society masks itself and makes its own people suffer. They never realized that they are part of the society which they are corrupting. Okri clearly pictures the selfish behaviour of the rich and inhuman treatment meted out to the people. He creates an awareness regarding politics in postcolonial scenario authentically. Mary Helen Specht in *In Search of the Nigerian Abiku*, describes that,

The Famished Road is frenetic, a meandering novel . . . in which the "scumscapes" of Lagos, where Azaro lives in abject poverty with his parents, are permeated by the dazzling images and machinations of the spirit world: "The sun made the air and the earth shimmer and as I kept watch I perceived, in the crack of a moment, the recurrence of things unresolved –histories, dreams, a vanished world of great old spirits, wild jungles, tigers with eyes of diamonds roaming the dense foliage. I saw beings who dragged clanking chains behind them, bleeding from their necks. I saw men and women without wings, sitting in rows, soaring through the empty air". (35)

Azaro was often distracted by the spirits who lured him into the woods and he was lost in the woods. Azaro spends most of the time in Madame Koto's bar. She considered him lucky because of his spirit connections. A magical ornament was hung by Madame Koto above the doorway of the bar. Immediately many strange customers began to visit the establishment of the bar. Azaro saw an incomplete figure like blind men, half man, and half-animal spirits in the bar. Dad had a final fight at Madame Koto's bar with a spirit man in a white suit called 'Black Tyger'. The fight between Azaro's Dad and the Spirit man was brutal; Azaro's father was beaten within an inch of his life. Azaro's father went on to fight the evil forces in his dreams and eventually he defeated them. The characters in *The Famished Road* oscillate between real and the spirit world. Azaro spirit companions always call him back to their spirit world. Azaro says,

I came to realise that they were the voices of my spirit companions.

'What are you doing here?' one of them would ask.

'Living,' I would reply.

'Living for what?'

'I don't know'.

'Why don't you know? Haven't you seen what lies ahead of you?'

'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.' (TFR 8-9)

Azaro often struggle due to his spirit companions, "who are trying their best to get him back into their world. They play tricks on him, kidnap him, dump him in weird and strange

surroundings” (Murari 38). Okri realistically shows how spirits brings often riddle to Azaro. Okri uses supernatural elements as a tool to implement social awareness to show the darker side of the society. He highlights how society is affected with the corrupt politicians, greedy society, slavery, racism and famine.

Abbreviation

TFR – *The Famished Road*

References

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