

Unfolding the Utopian Vision in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*

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Abstract

Prior to the Status quo of a nation, literature has always been a linear gamut in marching towards the moral privilege of people with the stimulation of Utopian vision. The manifesto of utopian vision in this paper is eventually traversing with the cognizant growth and vision matrix of people in Nigeria and in the words of Ben Okri. This paper seeks to scrutinize Okri's *The Famished Road* with emphasis to rapid age of advancement, repercussion of political issues and enchanting visions based on his experiences in life. The speculation of 'abiku' myth acts as metaphorical analogy to make the study more engrossing. It is argued that Okri sees his fragmented Nigeria with a third-eye truth and redreams a vision for his hometown, also extending the trope as a universal vision.

Keywords: Utopia, vision, third-eye, politics, abiku, Yoruba myth, Nigeria, The Famished Road.

Ben Okri, of Urhobo descent, who can best portray the glimpses of life of progressive Nigeria. His tales depict the problems which beset his homeland, particularly poverty, famine and political corruption. Okri parallel the relationship between the natural and spiritual world in his writings, combining western literary techniques with the elements of traditional African folklore and myth.

Okri has additionally received praise for his use of elements of Magical Realism, a western literary technique notably to uplift the detailed analysis of his writings. Okri prefers to talk about how reading has influenced his writings. He started by reading African, Classical and European myths and he continued reading from his father's library. It is evidently found that Okri has amalgamated a multi-cultural aspect of study right from his young age.

Okri is considered one of the fore most African authors in the post-modern and postcolonial traditions. He has been compared favourably to authors such as Salman Rushdie and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Okri has the capacity of writing a work by blending two genres and producing a new one. Realism is an aesthetic sense that promotes accurate, detailed and modest depiction of natural life or contemporary life. Realism has also been used critically to denote excessive minute detail with trivial subjects.

On the other hand Modernism refers to a matter of experimentation in the literary field. When these two genres of writing gets collaborated and there arises a hybrid variety of writing. The hybrid nature of writing is a victim of twentieth and twenty first century. Therefore Okri has given sincere effort in bringing out the essence of post-colonialism. It is an evolving method of interpreting a text by focusing on recurring myths in the narrative, symbols, images and character types in a literary work.

Okri's best-known novel *The Famished Road*, which won the Booker Prize in 1991. Its narrator is Azaro, a stubborn spirit child who calls himself 'an unwilling adventurer into chaos and sunlight, into the dreams of the living and the dead'. He is a witness, a go-between for the human and spirit worlds, protective of his parents and the community they live in. This is needed because 'the world is full of riddles that only the dead can answer'. It is also full of 'the rotten milk of politics', violence, traditional rituals, human-animal hybrids, and sudden transformations and 'a delirium of stories'. Azaro's father is a boxer 'Black Tyger', who fights fearsome opponents and champions his people, when vote-seeking politicians turn up with their thugs and bribes. The atmosphere of the novel is feverish but also hopeful, as political rallies in the run up to Independence take place.

Okri's Utopian vision is derived from the reality of suffering. The vision is pursued from the reality. The perception of this suffering reached a state of Higher Reality. The journey towards such an actual existence is long and laborious. The realisation of Okri's Utopian vision is built on the layer of suffering. Sufferings denote the past struggles which is immersed into chaos thus the struggle and suffering are parallel to the cyclic motif is consequently a never-ending. A small word of appreciation brings good changes to a person's mind, heart and body. At this point the comments of Bill Ashcroft on Okri is worth referring,

Ben Okri on the other hand generates a utopianism through an exuberant language that provides a richly utopian view of the capacity of the African *imaginaire* to re-enter and reshape the modern world. It is not merely a hope for African resurgence, but a vision of Africa's transformative potential. (Introduction: Spaces of Utopia7)

Okri's Utopian vision is a forceful response to Nigeria's political instability and his depression as an outcome of his country's failure after independence. Through the work of art *The Famished Road*, Okri offers his vision of the Nigerian Utopia. A utopia is a vision of an ideal future or place. Utopian vision of Okri shares the quality of a dream that pass beyond the existing socio-political reality. It is the tendency of a fiction that demonstrates how human beings will live and respond in certain environments. Likewise Okri's

vision of the Nigerian utopia is written in the form of a fiction. Through his fiction Okri enables the struggles and sacrifices made by the people.

The Utopian vision is a world in which everything and everyone work in perfect harmony. It can be well associated with the term millennium. Millennium is the year in which one period of One Thousand years ends and another begins. When paralleling the same idea with Okri's selected novel the millennium is not much of the dawn of a new period of one thousand years length but a new cycle of events. Thus Okri's utopia is a kind of millennium that provides people to re-dream a new world. People are with undying hope for a kind of Golden age that Okri tries to emphasize in *The Famished Road*.

From these backgrounds Okri can be reasonably considered as a writer who transformed himself to be a political icon of the nation. His main and ultimate intention is to seek reformation of the world especially his homeland Nigeria. Collectively directed by a singular vision, mankind can achieve a state of utopia where there will be no starvation and oppression. Justice and liberty will then prevail. Okri's utopian vision in the selected novels can be realised by the suffering of the oppressed if they dare to dream it into existence. In the poem *Plea for Somalia*, Okri writes:

[A] new religion now we must dream

That speaks from heart to heart, from ocean

to dried-up stream

We are all inheritors of divine mystery

We are not gods

But can have the effects of them

Who can feel and soothe another's misery

Man is god to man,

That's what some Africans say... (17)

Reality, vision and doom are all abundantly found within the novel. Dreams or fictions can dim the boundary level. There is a real possibility of crossing beyond the boundaries. From the above lines, it becomes clear that blur in dwellings between the spirits and conventional world are part of Okri's larger design *The Famished Road*. On such grounds of crossing the typical settings to a new way of reality will emerge to pass in commonly accepted notions. There arises the thirst of superficially seeing. For the challenging view of two dimensional accepted norms in the selected novel, Okri is regarded as an innovative postcolonial writer.

The collective utopian dreams and visions of the people will determine the destiny of the country. Okri sees that the cycle of order and chaos will keep evolving until it is broken through the conscious act of regeneration guided by a vision such as Dad's. To break the nation's abiku cycle and start a new cycle of order and democracy, the people need to re-dream their world. Dad believes that they can "Re-dream this world and make the dream real" (*The Famished Road* 498). His imagination and dreams are subversive because they offer alternative realities that is rewriting and re-establishing the prevailing system.

Ben Okri is that rare thing, a literary and social visionary, a writer for whom all three-literature, culture and vision-are profoundly interwoven....Given that Okri's best fiction almost always turns itself into something poetic, it's fascinating to watch...how to make possible the impossible, how to turn ordinary moment or mind into legendary, how to turn darkness into light-plus something new. (*Mental Flight*)

The aim of re-dreaming the world in the abiku destined novel is to achieve higher reality. Such an ideal constitutes Okri's utopian vision, a nation that could astonish the world. The utopian vision cures the blindness of the people. The motif of blindness is marked with an emphasis in the abiku novels. In *The Famished Road*, emphasis is laid upon the motif of blindness; Azaro is well aware that all human beings "Are born blind...few ever learn to see" (*The Famished Road* 3).

As per Azaro's view many characters are literally struck blind and the notion blind is symbolically the choice of the people who never wish to see and confront the reality of their situation. Because of this nature they lack good dreams and visions. Okri believes that a transcendental sight is vital because it enables the individual to see beyond distorted reality and perceives the hidden truth. Such vision let the people to see their destiny. By looking at the world through new eyes, Azaro is able to apprehend the true nature of things that he confronts. Just as there are many layers to reality, there is also a necessity to widen one's visual perspective in order to see the multi-dimensional reality.

As discussed earlier, Ade is another abiku travelling within the series. The corpse of Ade's father is also a representative of all the corpses in the people's consciousness which they refuse to acknowledge and which are preventing them from growing. Consequently, they wake up "one morning to find that a mysterious plague of blindness" (*Songs of Enchantment* 230-231) has struck up the community.

The people's blindness is both literal and symbolic for not using their eyes to acknowledge that accomplishment need to be taken, the people have become metaphorically blinded. Okri's utopian vision is achieved through the character of Dad. Dad also regains the utopian vision. He calls for the people to "KEEP REDREAMING THE WORLD WITH MORE LIGHT" (*Songs of Enchantment* 280), by which he acknowledges the wretched conditions they live in with new eyes. In other words, there must be a continuous

effort to resist the oppressor's plight of actions. Dreaming, coupled with the act of sustaining that dream, will take the people on their journey towards a utopian nation. Such is the poignant sense of the people.

From the posture of a black Nigerian now leading his lifestyle and pursuing his career in London, Okri portrays in the trilogy a different Africa. Okri's writing capacity makes the people to "Re-dream the world and make the dream real" (*The Famished Road* 591). In brief, it is his writing mystery that enhances them to look at the inexhaustible history and past and turns dream to a reality. In an interview with Jane Wilkinson, Okri notes that "the best fiction can become dreams which can influence reality" and "writing is sometimes a continuation of dreaming". (Wilkinson 82-83).

In *The Famished Road*, re-dreaming the world refers to illuminate the light and make clear on history which paved way for futuristic histories. Human beings are living under past and future. As it is set in a historical moment of Nigerian independence, *The Famished Road*, re-dream and re-invent the postcolonial history of Nigeria. The specialised novel narrates an event in which the character, Dad prefigures the postcolonial reality from an extensive truth of perspectives and scope. The event occurs in Book 8 of the novel. The episode commences which Azaro's portraiture of the rainy season in his ghetto. In this situation, Dad is in his unconscious state, and he is actively re-dreaming the world. The same dream is sequentially explained by Azaro.

He saw our people drowning in poverty, in famine, drought, in 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. He saw the rich of our country, he saw the array of our politicians, how corruptible they were, how blind to our future, how greedy they became, how deaf to the cries of the people, how stony their hearts were, how short-sighted their dreams of power. He saw the divisions in our society, the lack of unity, he saw the widening pit between those who have and those who don't. [...] He saw the wars in advance. He saw the economic boom in advance, saw its orgiastic squander, the suffering to follow, the exile to strange lands, the depleting of the people's will for transformation. (*The Famished Road* 564-65)

Though these words are expressed in the form of dreams, the omnipresence of poverty, tyranny, corruption and warfare is an unexpressed historical reality in many post-independent African countries. Dad's dream about the past and the present has been brought out by another character Ade, also an abiku child:

Suffering is coming. There will be wars and famine. Terrible things will happen. New diseases, hunger, the rich eating up the earth, people poisoning the sky and the waters, people going mad in the name of history, the clouds will breathe fire, the spirit of things will dry up, laughter will become strange... There will be changes. Coups, Soldiers everywhere. Ugliness. Blindness. (*The Famished Road* 547)

The time period between the written and publishing process and that of Nigerian independence is around thirty years. *The Famished Road*, *Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches* are derived from Okri's imaginative reinterpretation and re-construction of the historical reality. Historical reality is recorded in the novel through the re-enactment of documentary evidence and the incorporation of indigenous African beliefs in dream, myth and foresight.

The novel reveals much societal wicked behaviour carried out by human beings and other beings against the feeble in the society. Moreover it reveals the moral culprit inside the society. The explanation of various level of moral decays and expresses the experience of the characters. The scrutiny of the novel shows a society tortured by immoral people where the weak exist at the power of rich politicians and other bad supernatural forces. In examining the enemies present in the society in Okri's world, the more needed is equitable society and morally standard society free from uncontrolled use of power which squeeze the people down as depicted in the novels under the eyes of Okri.

The pathetic condition is the poor receives the evil in many levels. Excluding the enslavement and ill-treatment of the poor by Madame Koto and politicians who make use of many evil forces to harass and daunt. The citizens inside the novel, also the spiritual forces and weird beings like cross-eyed spirits, white horse, etc. try to torment people. All these bad evils make life miserable for Azaro's family members and their surroundings.

The ultimate aim of presenting these impure happenings is to make life comfortable for the people. Okri agrees with Tanure Ojade who is a prolific Nigerian poet and writer is noted for his unique stylistic vision and for his intense criticism of imperialism, religion and other issues. According to Tanure Ojade, "Writer should draw sensitivity to ideas about the environment and society which concern everybody" (326). Therefore people "will be more sensitive to what is happening" (326).

It is declared that Okri finds the good value for the people and professionally he is enough responsible to take his work relevant to the society. As Jasper Onuekwusi writes about the response of art to society; he adds, "If nothing is done, society will slowly but surely march to the precincts of insanity" (213). Therefore responsible works, values the quality of man's freedom in survival.

In such a society concerned art, there are many references to witchcraft events. In these novels spirits hegemonize the living world. They take the appearance of animals, birds, beasts, mythic beings and other supernatural beings.

In the novel *The Famished Road*, Azaro can witness the supernatural taking place in his environment. Another dominant character inside the novel is Madame Koto, who owns a bar in the village is rumoured to be a witch. Ade is friend of Azaro is an evidence who often speaks about the spiritual world. Azaro's parents also believe in unseen world, though they personally cannot experience, they witness it through their son Azaro. Whatever seems to be unreal to the readers seem to merge with the real, despite of different ideologies.

The perception is accepted by everyone else. Azaro most of the time sees a parallel world full of grotesque hybrid creatures that have both human and animal qualities. This parallel world sometimes explored in dreams, suggest the coexistence of the world which is full of social injustice, poverty-stricken lives and political instability of colonial independence. Azaro's experience

encountered in *The Famished Road* is best said by Anjali Roy, who discourses Azaro as the whole representation of the Dark Continent,

African reality as portrayed in Okri's novel is not non-rational, non-scientific, or non-historical in a reversal of imperialistic readings of Africa, but looks at the world from a particular African point of view, the Yoruba, which is presented as a holistic, self-contained culture of totality independent of Europe's theories. (Roy 25)

Apart from these relatively major events in the novel, even the mundane habits are repeatedly depicted in detail. The impact of this repetition is to create a pattern giving utmost care to simple details. This pattern of Okri is defined by Appiah "500 pages with only the barest semblance of a plot" (Appiah 147). However Okri's repetitiveness within the novel indicates an underlying aesthetics that mirror the feature of ghetto dwellers.

Okri's novels are rooted in ancient mysterious and primitive practices of African societies where the fearful and impossible take place. Social evils, Christopher Nwodo writes, "are more or less results of human underdevelopment found in various degrees among every human society" (8). The people are exploited by the sturdy and the powerful. Madame Koto and hardy politicians are agents of exploitation in the story.

Politicians also bewitch the people to affect election and to confuse people. Thugs of parties beat up, the people that are not likely to vote for their parties and dispossess traders of their stalls for belonging to another party.

Election malpractice is seen inside the novel. People are not allowed to vote according to their consciences but are manipulated and deceived. Politicians provoke the people, to exchange votes for gifts, pouring polluted milk, garri and money. Politicians induce their thugs to cause violence to people. In this novel, violence is a weapon of politics.

There is a clash between the party of the poor and the party of the rich at the peak time of election. The beating of Dad in the *The Famished Road* is made evident here: "And when they realized that Dad had been struck blind and when they saw him casting about, they set upon him with sticks and metals and proceeded to give him a savage beating" (*The Famished Road* 217). According to Ikenna Nzimiro, "The history of mankind has been one of conflicts often violent and bloody ... Man has been plagued by violence ... Human societies are therefore in constant conflict induced by ... search for material existence" (18).

A follow-up to wretch behaviour of politics revealed on the people is their brutalisation by security personnel. These agents of the nation take pleasure in thrashing the people. They display brute force against helpless citizens and inflict pain and sufferings on them.

A vision creates an idea in one's mind for anything that is going to happen. A clear vision helps a person to pursue his/her dreams and form a worth outcome. The spark of an idea of the future must be strongly imbibed within the young minds to be grown as a better adult. A third eye vision which is sharp and focussed will open the mind to endless good possibilities of the future.

To see the futuristic world with the third vision involves creating an initial space whose commencement comes from the ability to comprehend the contradiction. From the words of Brenda Cooper's on her review of Okri's creation, "this eye can see the kaleidoscope and syncretism of possibilities; it can describe history in the language of magic and dreams; it can access the previous world, the actual one and the one to come" (67). Moreover Okri's hybrid attempt in his trilogy is to overcome obstacles. He helps the readers to hold on during tough time.

Focused vision with the result of success creates a universal fact of realism which becomes a purpose of life not only to the person concerned but also to the entire community. It is more obvious when it comes from the words of Okri himself; he expresses his anguish and grief to those who lack vision in their life. In an interview, Okri expresses his displeasure towards "the reducers of possibilities," those who "only see what there appears to be; people who insist that all there is to the world is what you can see. They perpetually resist the possibilities of the imagination. They hold back all kinds of progress with their limitations" (Davis). Chinua Achebe heighten the thinking about the writer's duty is "to explore in depth the human condition" (8), therefore the injustice and permanent values are restored.

After all thorough examination of Okri's utopian vision on his emerging nation, it is quite necessary to clear the origin of utopia. The journey of utopia started from Thomas More's *Utopia*. Here More uses the term Utopia to mean both an ideal society and the one which does not exist. It depicts a dream land which is full of ideal potentialities. Therefore utopian thinking helps the people to produce a vision for the better future which can be realized if everyone hopes for it. It is good to recall the words of Oscar Wilde at this juncture of discussion. "A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of Utopias" (Wilde 16).

George Orwell focussed utopia as "the dream of a just society which seems to haunt the human imagination ineradicably and in all ages" (Kumar 43). Okri provokes for admiring utopia with aesthetic ideals. He opts a society where there is little poverty and hunger converging with better education and better politics and socio-cultural settings.

Okri's utopian vision in *The Famished Road* can be felt from the people who are suffering in mass. They dare to dream then the utopian vision can come into existence. It is not only the mere dream will enable the people for the better days but also the pattern of re-dreaming, to alter the existing reality for the superior reality. A strong vision can challenge the great potentials to be achieved. Regardless of what so ever is going around the world, it is the vision that one carries, creates an important thought of life that what and why a person lives to present themselves. The value of life solely and socially can be universally achieved with the valuable visions in life. This is the artistic vision given by Okri to his nation as a creative writer.

Okri may or may not see his dream of vision in his eternal nation, but he deliberately quoted in the very first line of *The Famished Road* "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" (*The Famished Road* 3), which substantially gives the hope to Okri's re-dreaming vision. Just as Okri used abiku cycle to represent the life and death, Okri believes that his people will dare to dream for a single thought of revolve in time and nature which ensures a better, happier and more productive growth in life. Through the dogma and hope of vision given by Okri, marks the arousal of Nigerian masses for the long awaited march towards a real social reform in their society.

With the aid of the creative output *The Famished Road*, Okri invokes his people and the world wide readers for the new ways of seeing things. The hidden myth in unseen things is always an eye opener for everyone to realise. The protagonist Azaro's ending up the life-death cycle of his abiku being is the symbolic representation of the choice of nation to end up its birth-death cycle. It symbolizes the possibility to end the sufferings of Nigeria. Okri offers hope to these poverty stricken masses as well as urge them to rise against corrupt politicians, the business community, and landlords who are responsible for their predicament in order to end the status quo.

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