

Metaphor and the Rhetoric of Postcolonial Politics in Ben Okri's Fiction

Abstract

*This essay examines Ben Okri's use of metaphor to frame the relationship between groups in his society. A careful study of the **The Famished Road (TFR)**, **Songs of Enchantment (SOE)** and **Infinite Riches (IR)** reveals the asymmetry in the distribution of socio-political power in the system. It also reveals the uneasy juxtaposition of values and groups such as the colonizer vs the colonized; the rich vs the poor; the white vs the black; the politicians vs the inhabitants; the modern vs the ancient, etc. The texts show one group trying to impose its ideology on the other while the dominated group tries to resist or contest the ideological hegemony of the dominant group. Okri is a magical realist who avails himself of the resources of metaphor to express a content that is typically postcolonial. This presupposes that magical realism and metaphor as modes of artistic presentation are not mutually exclusive, hence the former can be expressed in the latter, or vice versa. The study reveals that Okri's literary style is essentially framed in metaphorical patterns that present new schemes, categories and semantic domains that indicate the abiku-nation relationship. The rhetoric of metaphorization also enables him to present the ideology of social disjuncture in his society. Metaphorization enables the reader to comprehend how different political, ideological and social groups in Okri's society perceive each other and the kind social relationship that is engendered in the process. It also assists the reader to see how language gives rise to meaning among individuals and groups of individuals, and how these meanings are integrated in matters of cooperation and conflict. Okri's re-inscription of spirituality into the discourse of Nigeria's nationhood, through the re-articulation of the abiku myth, is a confirmation of the crucial importance of literary imagination and its linguistic analysis in the project of creating deeper understanding about identity, inter-group relationship and humanistic pursuit of the common good.*

KEYWORDS: Ben Okri, Realism, Metaphor, Africa, Hybridity, Postcolonialism.

Introduction

This paper examines Okri's use of metaphor to frame the relationship between groups in his society. A careful study of the trilogy: *The Famished Road* (TFR), *Songs of Enchantment* (SOE) and *Infinite Riches* (IR) reveals the asymmetry in the distribution of socio-political power in the system. It reveals the uneasy juxtaposition of values and groups such as the colonizer vs. the colonized; the rich vs. the poor; the white vs. the

black; the politicians vs. the inhabitants; the modern vs. the ancient, etc. The texts show one group trying to impose its ideology on the other while the dominated group tries to resist or contest the ideological hegemony of the dominant group. Several studies on Ben Okri's trilogy have either focused on his use of magical realism as a generic style, or on his social criticism. Our interest however is to unravel his use of the metaphorical mode to support or contest certain assumptions about his society. Okri is a magical realist who avails himself of the resources of metaphor to express a content that is typically postcolonial. This presupposes that magical realism and metaphor as modes of artistic presentation are not mutually exclusive; hence the former can be expressed in the later, or vice versa. But before we can effectively analyse Okri's use of metaphor in the texts, let us briefly examine the interconnectedness between magical realism and the postcolonial discourse.

Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Discourse

For a proper understanding of the relationship between magical realism and postcoloniality, this study shall first provide a brief definition and explanation of the term "Postcolonial". Ashcroft et al in *The Empire Writes Back* (1989:2) state:

We use the term 'post-colonial' to cover all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day. This is because there is a continuity of preoccupations through out the historical process initiated by the European imperial aggression.

This definition covers the world as it was and still is during and after the period of European imperial domination, and includes literatures from Africa, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Caribbean countries, India, Malaysia, Malta, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, South Pacific Island countries, and Sri Lanka, including the United States of America.

The postcolonial theory explains that the imperial centre still manipulates the language and literary mode as a way of subsuming the colonized; giving the impression that the emergent literary efforts of these societies are a "variant" of the "original" and thus inferior.

Postcolonial literatures therefore wage war against such assumptions. Ashcroft et al (1995:11) explain that "the idea of "post-colonial literary theory" emerges from the inability of European theory to deal adequately with the complexities and varied cultural provenance of post-colonial writing." The postcolonial literary discourse is a response to the monocentrism of the "centre" that serves to relegate the colonized to the "margin". Postcoloniality challenges the "Universalism" of Western epistemologies, while espousing an alternative.

Bhabha (1994: 171) describes the postcolonial perspectives as having emerged from “the colonial testimonies of Third World countries and the discourses of ‘minorities’ within the geopolitical divisions of East and West, North and South”. Postcoloniality then becomes the product of cultural displacement and social discrimination – where political survivors become the best historical witnesses of this aggression. It involves the desire for freedom; the desire and assertion of the subordinated people to retrieve and reassert their repressed indigenous cultural traditions and histories. This explains why Daring (1995:125) sees postcolonialism as “the desire of decolonized communities for identity ... obviously it is closely connected to nationalism.” Postcolonial writings are expressions of the experiences of these marginalized, dislocated and exploited societies and their quest to salvage their rich historical values from the cesspool of imperial domination. It is this desire that gave impetus to magical realism in postcolonial fictions. Magical realism as an element of postcolonial discourse emerged to “challenge the very basis of Western dominance especially its totalizing and absolutist epistemologies and schemata” (Liman, 1997:63). As Cooper (1998:216) puts it:

Magical realism arises out of the popular societies – postcolonial, unevenly developed places where old and new, modern and ancient, the scientific and the magical views of the world co-exist. It grapples with cultural syncretism and accepts it to a greater or lesser extent.

Magical realism interrogates the existence of these Manichean dichotomies in Western conventional realism. It tries to upset Western conception of reality through hybridity. Hybridity is an eclectic technique that tampers with the features of received tradition by mixing it with the oral traditions of the decolonized societies. Ashcroft (1994:167) stresses that: “The two dominant assertions of post-colonial theory are heterogeneity and hybridity, and these seem to oppose the very structures upon which the being of modern states are founded.” This explains the presence of albinos, spirits, witches, incubi, the grotesque, etc. in post-colonial literatures – these being the mark of magical realism. Dash (1995:200) explains that postcolonial writers turn to:

Myths, legends and superstitions of the folk in order to isolate traces of a complex culture of survival which was the response of the dominated to their oppressors (and to) shatter the myths of ‘historylessness’ or ‘non-achievement’.

Similarly, Alexis (1995:197) sees it as an “integral part of social realism”. Hybridity (a key element of magical realism) is a conscious effort to enter into the discourse of Europe and West, to mix with it, transform it, to make it acknowledge marginalized or suppressed or forgotten histories.

Hybridity is a prominent feature of most postcolonial writers who themselves are border writers, otherwise known as writers on the margin. Most of them (for example,

Ben Okri, Rusdie, Kojouhar, Marquez, etc) inhabit the two worlds: resident in cosmopolitan cities of Europe while writing about their precolonial past, thus bestriding two conflicting worlds or spaces. The issue of space is crucial in magical realism and postcolonial discourse. The struggle between the “centre” and the “periphery” is the struggle for space. The imposed socio-political systems of Western culture systematically denied the colonized the space to express themselves. Magical realism therefore creates a “space in which the spatial effects of canonical realism and those of axiomatic fantasy are interwoven ... in magical realism, space is hybrid (opposite and conflicting properties are copresent)” (Drouart: 1993,online). This is also known as “dual spatiality” – the two worlds interact and interpenetrate so that spirits, demons, sorcery figures mingle with the real.

Layiwola (2001: viii) does not foresee any near end to the struggle between the centre and the periphery “as long as the struggle over and about territories or resources and space subsisted”.

Metaphor and Postcolonial Politics

Okri uses metaphorical frames to present the notion of postcolonial politics in Africa. He uses them to present the social relationship that exists between Africa and the West. Okri perceives history as a crucial element in postcolonial discourses because it provides an insight into how groups perceive and present each other in the social system. History enables groups to assert, as well as, contest certain ideological perceptions about them. It enables language users to express their knowledge of the world.

It is important therefore that we explore Okri’s use of metaphor to deconstruct and interrogate the history of colonial and postcolonial Africa and the realities that emanate from them. Kovecses (2002:61) contends that historical accounts can be “couched in metaphor” and the “actual makers or agents of history can also consciously pattern their actions on a particular source domain”. This implies that even literary deconstruction of historical events can be couched in conceptual metaphor or conceptualized metaphorically as an important feature of “our experiential reality” (Abbott, 2008:152). Abbott further argues that “our understanding of the actual world we live in, including history, plays a part in the made-up worlds of fiction (151).”

The rhetoric of historicism locates fictional works within a socio-cultural and historical milieu. It reveals that a work of art makes a statement about certain epoch in the people’s history, and tries to negotiate a dialogue between their past, their present and their future. Consequently, an author can negotiate a dialogue between the past and the present with the intention of opening a corridor into the future. Thinkers in the hermeneutical tradition hold the view that:

this dialogue with the past is ongoing, just as our futures are open-ended. Both past and present have to remain separate so that one can question the other, and so that a ‘fusion of horizons’, making

possible agreement and disagreement can take place (Hamilton, 1996: 92).

Historicism, according to Hamilton (1996:2), “is a critical movement insisting on the prime importance of historical context to the interpretation of text of all kinds.” This becomes imperative in the light of George Santayana’s admonition that “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” (Hamilton, 1996:118). Hence, historicism relies on the benefits of historical past to interpret a text. Historicists study literature in the “context of social, political and cultural history” (Selden and Widdowson, 1993: 161).

Postcolonial writers like Okri interrogate history as packaged by the West. The colonial invaders defeat the indigenous peoples linguistically as well as physically and thus impose their cultural codes on them (the subjects) and interpret their mission as a God-sent one to free the subjects from barbarism and primitive practices. All native values are replaced with colonial models. Colonialism in its various forms (the imperial, industrial and economic) down-graded indigenous values and in some cases “typically pirated cultural differences for its own historic purposes” (Hamilton, 1996: 176).

Consequently, postcolonial writers resort to the use of hybridity, miscegenation and grotesqueries to interrogate Western epistemology and debunk their claim to cultural superiority and supremacy. They also debase the ambiguities and arbitrariness in Western epistemology through the use of mimicry. All these can be presented through the metaphorical mode. In this part of the paper we examine how Okri engages in a kind of historical and cultural retrieval of the past to correct the wrong impression about Africa’s “historylessness” as packaged by the West. Dasyuva (2004:86) calls it a “conscious reconstruction of an otherwise mutilated and distorted history”. The field of discourse presents the interlocking relationship between the political and religious experiences of the participants in the social system. Western epistemology secularizes the society and makes a distinction between politics and religion but the African perspective which is encoded in magical realism shows the interlocking relationship between the two domains of knowledge. Thus, history becomes a documentation of the people’s religious and political experiences.

Okri starts his historical deconstruction by metaphorically conceptualizing the historical and cultural dimension of pre-colonial Africa as a forest. The forest, prior to colonial advent, was the totality of African essence and the abode of the ancestors and other kindred spirits. Its pristine darkness was benign and inspirational. Okri frames it thus.

The forest once represented the beginnings of dreams, the boundary of our visible community, the dreaming place of spirits, the dwelling place of mysteries and innumerable old stories that incarnate in the diverse minds of human beings. The forest was once a place where we saw the dreams of our ancestors take form. It was once a place where antelopes roamed with crowns on their heads. It was a rich homeland of the spirit. Its nocturnal darkness

was the crucible of all our experiments in imagination. The darkness there had always been a spell, a hallucination, a benign god. In its silence old herbs kept their secrets of future cures (IR, 83).

The text conceptualizes Africa as a forest of knowledge and inspiration. The conceptual metaphor that Okri uses here interrogates earlier Western conceptualization of forest as a domain of evil and barbarism. Again, Western epistemology conceptualizes Africa as the “Heart of Darkness” and evil, but Okri conceptualizes it through the image of the forest as “benign” and inspiring. Thus, Okri uses the metaphorical mode to present a positive self- image of African values. He also uses linguistic elements to support his argument that there is a credible balance between the African forest and its darkness.

The rhetoric of Okri’s historicization is conveyed in a combination of multiple and complex syntactic structures. The first sentence is multiple in nature containing five principal clauses that are structurally equivalent. Yankson (1999:20) is of the opinion that linguistic parallelism can be used for rhetorical emphasis. The structural parallelism is diagrammatically represented below:

The forest represented the	beginnings of dreams
	boundary of our invisible community
	dreaming place of the spirits
	dwelling place of mysteries...
	innumerable old stories...

Apart from the phonological parallelism in the |d| and |p| sounds, the five NGs are in syntagmatic relationship with the VG “represented”. Besides, there is a synonymous relationship between the nominal group “the beginnings” and “the boundary”. Both connote fringe or periphery which is crucial in postcolonial discourses. Similarly, a synonymous relationship also exists between “dreaming place” and “dwelling place,” both connote habitation. There are other forms of pattern repetitions such as the reiteration of the phrases “the forest was once...” and “It was once...” This pattern is repeatedly employed in the first four sentences of the text. Besides, Okri’s use of spatial deixis is to show the space or social relation between Africa and the West in the perception of some social values. It also shows the boundaries between certain entities or groups in the society.

Okri demonstrates that this balance in the African world is being threatened and upset. The trees are now “covered with yellow dresses” (TFR, 38) symbolizing imminent death. This is because of the colonialist’s decision to subdue Africa by constructing a road through its dark and thick forest. Okri tells us that one could hear the trees “groaning as they crashed on their neighbours” (TFR, 137); “groaning before they fell” (TFR, 143). A certain tree bleeds so profusely that the “Red liquid dripped as if the tree had been a murdered giant whose blood wouldn’t stop flowing” (TFR, 16).

Particularly significant is Okri’s deliberate violation of collocational rules in describing the plight of the trees. Trees which are non-human entities with the semantic feature : |+ animate -human| are invested with the human attribute or feature : |+ human + animate| of having neighbours, putting on dresses, groaning and being murdered like human beings. Ordinarily, the nominal groups (NGs) “neighbours” and “dresses”, and the verbal groups (VGs) “groan” and “murdered” respectively are attributes that are reserved for human beings and select the feature |+ animate + human|, but Okri confers them on the trees to demonstrate the human attachment that Africans have for them.

Metaphorically, Okri conceptualizes the forest as a human community and the trees as human beings that inhabit it. This explains why they have neighbours and groan in pain. Thus, he pictures the colonialists as murderers who came to decimate an otherwise peaceful community under the guise of bringing them to civilization. The “yellow dresses” that cover the trees are the fears, diseases, and death that are imposed on Africa by foreign ideology. The West unleashed violence on Africa under the guise of “rescue scenario” (Lakoff: 1991, online); thereby confirming Lakoff’s (1991, online) argument that “violence can further self-interest”. Thus, the phrase “yellow dresses” is a metaphorical framing of the negative impact of foreign values and orientation on African socio-cultural values.

Okri laments the distortion of African values and the denial of accomplishments by “the dominant history of the short-sighted conquerors of the times” (SOE, 160). The Governor-General, knowing that colonial rule will soon end, spends several days destroying all incriminating records that reveal colonial atrocities and injustices in Africa, including those that contain “notes about dividing up the country” and “the new map of the nation” (IR, 38). We are told that when he “completed the destruction of all incriminating documents relating to the soon-to-be-created nation”, he proceeds to “rewrite our history” (IR, 125). The Governor-General rewrites history to favour the West. He distorts Africa’s past and presents it to suit colonial ideology; “he rewrote our past, he altered our present” (IR, 127, 128). Even time is altered. He makes his longer and ours shorter. Okri provides a long list of African values that experience colonial distortions. African names, rivers, mountains, towns, geography, etc. are changed and distorted. The Governor-General also redesigns the “phonality of African names, softened the consonants, flattened the vowels. In altering the sound of names he altered

their meaning and affected the destiny of the named” (IR, 126). The consequence of this act is that in rewriting our history, the Governor-General:

deprived us of language; of poetry, of stories, of architecture, of civic laws, of social organization, of art, science, mathematics, sculpture, abstract conception, and philosophy. He deprived us of history, of civilization and, unintentionally, deprived us of humanity too. Unwittingly, he effaced us from creation (IR, 126).

It is this falsification of history by the West that Okri challenges in the novels on *abiku*. Okri’s historical task is to upset the hierarchy of Western assumptions that African history began with the advent of colonialism. The weight of Okri’s argument in the text lies in the syntactic reiteration of the prepositional phrase “of”. It post-modifies the pronominal “us” and indicates the relationship between the Governor-General and the recipients of his activities.

The scenario that is presented above can best be explained with Sandikcioglu’s (online) two concepts of *frames of Self-presentation* and *frames of Other Representation*. The two frames posit values and power relationship in the world in asymmetrical dimensions of the West vs. Africa; Them vs. Us; civilization vs. barbarism; power vs. weakness; progress vs. backwardness; maturity vs. immaturity; rationality vs. emotionality; stability vs. instability, etc. The implication is that the West uses these metaphors of polarity and asymmetry to “perpetuate the antagonism between the two worlds by contrasting positive images of the Self with negative images of the Other” (Sandikcioglu: 2008, online). Thus, the West constructs a positive self-image for itself and a severely negative one for Africa and the rest of the world. The metaphorical mode that is involved in this frame is the spatial CENTRE-PERIPHERY image schema that is a dominant motif in Western construction of its relationship with other groups whom they regard as outsiders. Okri therefore presents the kind of social relation that exists between **Them** vs. **Us** by evoking what Lakoff (1999, online) calls “the ruler-for-state metonymy”, in which the Governor-General stands for the imperial West. The ideology behind the metaphors presents language, art, history, etc as an index of national or group identity, and the attempt by the Governor-General to alter them is an attempt to denigrate or efface the group (Africa) from historical relevance. It is a legitimization strategy that presents Western values as superior to African traditions. Chilton* (2004) observes that the extreme form of de-legitimization is such that denies the “human-ness of the other.” Unfortunately, this is the dominant motif in the way the West perceives and frames Africa.

Okri further contends that the Governor-General “made our history begin with the arrival of his people on our shores” (IR, 126). He reminds the West that it is Africa:

Who began the naming of the world and all its gods... **who** fertilized the banks of the Nile with the sacred word which sprouted the earliest and most mysterious civilization, the forgotten foundation of civilizations ...**whose** secret ways have entered into the bloodstream of the world-wonders silently (IR, 127).

The repetition of “wh” (relative) constructions: “who” and “whose” in the text is to reinforce the rhetoric of Okri’s argument that Africa’s past predates Western civilization. Pattern repetition is the dominant feature of Okri’s style. Okri evokes what Chilton (2004) calls **de-legitimation** (of the other) and **legitimation** (of the self) strategy to construct a positive face for himself and other members of his group (Africa), and a negative face for the opposition (the West). Chilton (2004) observes that “de-legitimation can manifest itself in acts of negative other presentation, acts of blaming, scape-goating, marginalising, excluding, attacking the moral character of some individual or group, attacking the communication cooperation of the other, attacking the rationality and the sanity of the other.” Thus, Okri’s rhetoric tends to reposition the place of Africa in world civilization and culture. His is a counter-rhetoric or counter-attack on Western claim to legitimacy, rationality and cultural superiority. The reference to the “Nile” and the “foundation of civilization” in the text activates the historical knowledge frame that attributes the origin of modern civilization to Egypt – Africa. The text therefore interrogates the Western acceptance of Africa as the cradle and “foundation of civilization” but still regards its cultural values as inferior to theirs. Okri’s metaphorical frames seem to deny or diminish the positive self-image the West constructs for itself, and asserts a more positive one for Africa.

The old woman in the forest weaving tapestry symbolizes the resilience of African culture, religion, social structure and civilization, in spite of the colonial agenda of cultural decimation and obliteration. We are told the old woman is “weaving the long cloth of stories” (IR, 100). The old woman’s weaving takes place simultaneously with the Governor-General’s destruction of colonial records and rewriting of the history of the oppressed. The old woman knowing that the distortion of African history by the Governor-General will not obliterate Africa’s historical relevance “laughed now, standing up because she had unfurled the full length of tapestry she had been weaving” (IR, 103). In the cloth, she records “stories and myths and philosophical disquisitions on the relativities of African Time and Space” (IR, 130). What the old woman has done is to immortalize African history, religion and culture which the Governor-General has been trying to distort or destroy. The tapestry symbolizes the immortality of art and truth. Okri uses the old woman to frame the image of the artist as a preserver of culture. Thus, the underlying metaphor of the text challenges the African writer to assume the role of a curator of African art and cultural values. Jaggi (2007, online) describes Okri’s effort as a “mythical attempt to reconstruct the disrupted past, not least through its art”. According to Okri, “It is not the loss that defines us, but recovery. One has to read the clues of what seems to be lost, in art, artefacts, intuitions, dreams. The artist is a conduit through which lost things are recovered . . . Loss is an inextricable part of what it is to be human”

(Jaggi: 2007, online). This explains why Okri strives to desecularize the society by re-inscribing spirituality into the discourse of Nigeria's nationhood. Okri's historical deconstruction shows that political and spiritual retrieval are of critical importance in his literary agenda.

Interestingly, as the old woman weaves our stories, "Simultaneous narratives of past, present and future were also being woven in other places around the world by other people" (IR, 120). Okri is here making a case for the widening of artistic and political space through which other oppressed peoples of the world can re-articulate their past and assert their national consciousness. The old woman therefore becomes a metonymic representation of the resilience found in surviving cultures. This further debunks the claim to hegemonic or metanarratives by the West. The postmodernist theory wages war against Western absolutism and calls for the relativization of style. Hence, every society has its own story to tell in its own peculiar way. The "centre" therefore cannot dictate or legislate to the "margin" on the mode of artistic presentation to be adopted in telling its stories.

Okri's historical task is not to prove that Africa has a superior past, but to disprove Western "assumptions that deny and denude Africa of humanity and value". Okri also uses the medium of his art to urge his compatriots to "Return to the ways of our ancestor! Take what is good from our own way and adopt it to the new times!" (SOE, 172). This is against the background that the women in the forest who have turned into "white antelopes" are wailing and singing of the "forgotten ways of the ancestors" (SOE, 79). Okri seems to be proposing a kind of historical retrieval and "cultural syncretism" (Cooper, 1998: 216) that will synthesize the values of the past with the imperatives of contemporary realities.

Okri also historicizes recent historical developments in Africa like the testing of atomic bomb in the Sahara in the early 1960s by France. Dad tells Azaro, "The white people have just exploded a big bomb in our backyard... They call it an Atom Bomb" (SOE, 146). Here, Okri uses historical knowledge frame to activate and evoke geographical frames that establish geo-political space between Europe and Africa, and the socio-political disparity in their relations. This sets up a frame that polarizes society into white people versus black people, strong versus weak, atomic power versus non-atomic power, etc. The encoding metaphor entails a lot of presuppositions about the social relation between both groups. Okri presents this incident as another chapter in colonial aggression against Africa. He also reconstructs the chequered political-history of post colonial Africa and presents it in a futuristic mode. Even before the nation gains political independence Azaro informs the reader that:

the future burst on me and I saw tanks rolling over the wounded roads; I saw swarms of soldiers in dark places of the country, while the rest of us dreamt of a new domination (SOE, 138).

The reader is therefore not surprised when Dad in *Infinite Riches* sees:

...visions of future coups and riots, tribal massacres and famine, plagues of beetles and explosions at oil sites, the genocide of war and the decades of hardship to come (52).

Most of these dreaded calamities have already happened and are still happening in most African countries, even though Okri presents them as if they are yet to be. Extratextually, phrases (NGs) like “soldiers”, “tanks”, “coups”, “riots”, “tribal massacres”, “domination”, “famine”, “plagues”, “explosions at oil sites”, “war”, “genocide”, and “decades of hardship” will evoke sad images and memories in many African readers. They have intertextual relations to real events in the wider situation outside the text of study. Thus, the reader has to rely on shared knowledge or previous experience drawn from the wider context to interpret and make meaning out of them. Paul Chilton (2004) opines that certain structures of the language system “can only be explained in terms of the utterers’ and interpreters’ knowledge of the immediate setting, the immediate discourse, and knowledge of the physical and social world.” Their use in this context activates frame and script knowledge about warfare frames, hardship and suffering frames, political frames, etc. For example, the phrase “domination” entails social conflict and struggle for the control of political space by contending powers: the colonizer versus the colonized, the politicians versus the inhabitants, the ruler versus the ruled, the rich versus the poor, etc.

Besides, these phrases are textually and semantically related. Their relationship is that of synonymy. They are associated with human misery and death. Furthermore, the use of each text connects it to other situations (contexts) in the wider setting where it has been employed to score a particular point. To Haynes (1992:120), its use “connects this particular ... text to other texts” or “calls up an array of others.” For instance, the nominal group (NG) “genocide” calls up an array of other texts such as “massacre”, “killing” “murder”, “pogrom” or “ethnic cleansing.”

More importantly, it negotiates a connection or dialogue between its textual and extratextual contexts, and also calls for a new definition and contextualization of the concept. For instance, what is genocide to a Jew (1939-1945), an Igbo (1966-1970), a Rwandan Tutsi (1994) or a black Sudanese in the Darfur region? Why did European lexicographers prefer its euphemistic equivalent, “ethnic cleansing”, when a similar act of barbarism occurred in the heart of Europe (former Yugoslavia) in the 1990s? Is it to demonstrate that modern Europe is incapable of such barbaric act (genocide)? What is the semantic difference or relationship between the synonymously related items? Chilton (2004) opines that “euphemism has the cognitive effect of conceptually ‘blurring’ or ‘defocusing’ unwanted referents, be they objects or actions. Implicit meanings of various types also constitute a means of diverting attention from troublesome referents.” Thus Okri’s use of the word therefore interrogates the euphemizing strategy of the West on the same act of barbarism.

The point this study is trying to establish is that the contextual use of a particular text may provoke the interrogation of certain values that exist extratextually. It may also affect the attitude of the reader to the text and its interpretation. This supports the contention by Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 2003:10) that “metaphorical concepts can hide

an aspect of our experience.” Lakoff (1991, online) further affirms that “those things highlighted by the metaphors were shown vividly and often. But what was hidden by the metaphor was largely undiscussable.” Thus, Okri employs metaphorical concepts to highlight and interrogate certain historical experiences that the West would like to hide, but Africa would like to reveal, and vice versa. Further, Okri uses the medium of fiction to interrogate real historical events and experiences thereby demonstrating the interconnectedness of fiction and history. Abbott (2008:151) contends that “not only can fiction encompass all the forms of historical writing, but the fictional world can appear to encompass the actual world which history is a part.”

History is presented in a balanced way in the *abiku* narratives. While upsetting the history of Africa as constructed from the colonial perspective, Okri takes a swipe at his compatriots for forgetting the ways of their ancestors. This is the reason why he reinscribes spirituality into the historical and political discourses of the nation. According to him, “History itself fully demonstrates how things of the world partake of the things of the condition of the spirit-child.” Thus, the spiritual and the political are inseparable. Okri admonishes his fellow Africans not to forget their culture and history because of the influence of modernity. He seems to be re-echoing the words of late Sedar Senghor: “Assimilate but do not be assimilated.” The adoption of a mythic strategy is discussed in the next section.

Okri also frames certain myths that present group experiences or knowledge of the real world metaphorically. Myths belong to the ideational metafunction of language because its concern with the ideas and basic assumptions that people have about life. The ideational metafunction of language enables the writer or speaker to express his/her experience or knowledge of the real world and the inner world of his/her own consciousness. Conceptual metaphors can be realized in myths in a variety of ways (Kovecses, 2006:60). One of these, according to Kovecses, is “when a metaphor functions as a key element of the myth” while the other way “involves the ‘characters’ of myths themselves”. In this part of the study, we shall examine how Okri utilizes the creative and imaginative resources of the oral narrative tradition to express his knowledge or experience of the African world. The investigation of myths will also lead us to see “in what ways the linguistic model might animate and support an analysis of fictional discourses” (Culler, 2002).

Scholars through the ages have attempted to grapple with the concept of myth, what it refers to, and its significance. The study of myth has been approached through modes such as history, anthropology, religion, psychoanalysis, language, literary criticism, etc. The meaning of myth ranges from “primitive and sacred ritual to propaganda and ideological statements” (Gould, 1981:3-5). The polysemic nature of the concept makes Gould describe it as a “portmanteau term”, an “encyclopedic ...term”, that means “everything or nothing”. To him, “Myth is a synthesis of values which uniquely manages to mean most things to most men.”

Okpewho (1980:11) proposes the “Qualitative” approach, and avers that all tales of whatever setting (sacred or secular) and manner have to be approached “on the basis of our scientific recognition of the relative weight of fact and fiction in it”. He further makes a distinction between “Historic legend” and “mythic legend”; and “aetiological tales” and “fables”

He argues that a tale is either of those depending on the degree of its historicity (fact) and fancy (fiction) and the creative ability of the narrator – “the creative or poetic temperament of the narrator” (1983:13). It is therefore the degree of the fanciful element or the creative resource that the narrator is able to imbue into the narrative that determines how such a story is categorized. Most tales in Africa are set in “Mythical time” (“once upon a time” kind of narrative) and do not make any pretence to specific time-schemes. It is called mythical time because “the creative imagination of the narrator does not have constraints or obligations whatever to a time-bound image” (Okpewho, 1980:14). The concept of time is crucial in oral narrative. Aetiological tales and fables are set in mythical time. According to Okpewho (1980:14), “Aetiological tales set out primarily to explain the roots of a society’s traditions, customs or natural phenomena. Fables are told with a moralistic bias to them”. He goes further to posit that the figures in mythical time can be either wholly human or wholly non-human, or else combined on varying degrees.

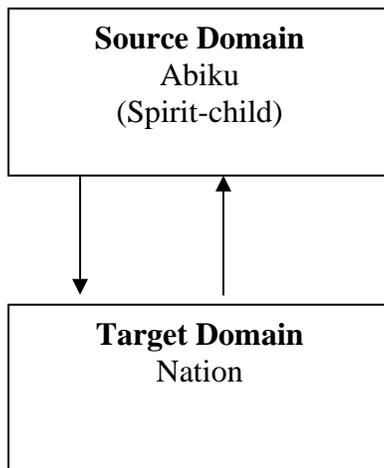
The *abiku* myth and the myth of the road which this study sets out to investigate are aetiological tales because they try to give an explanation why certain traditions or phenomena are the way they are. In other words, they try to explain the nature of certain tradition, belief or phenomenon. To Gould (1981:6), myths derive their significance from the way “they try to reconstitute an original event or explain some fact about human nature and its worldly or cosmic context”. Our working definition therefore sees myth as any narrative that is set in mythical time that tries to explain the nature or origin of certain tradition, belief or phenomenon, and whose characters may be human, non-human or a combination of both, and whose narrator imbues with fanciful elements.

The temporal setting of the *abiku* story is in the mythical time, that is, in the timeless past: “In the beginning...”, and the narrator, Azaro, is a mythical character who enjoys a dual identity of half-human half-spirit. The narrative tries to explain the concept of reincarnation — the man-spirit ambivalence and the fact that man can live in more than one region or context all at a time. The narrative employs the creative resource of oral tradition — the fusion of elements of the real and the fantastic to explain the interlocking relationship between the natural and the supernatural.

Okri uses the *abiku* myth to frame the image of the nation. Ade reveals that “Our country is an *abiku* country. Like the spirit-child, it keeps coming and going” (TFR, 478). Azaro also reveals that “Dad found that all nations are children; it shocked him that ours is an *abiku* nation, a spirit-child nation, one that keeps being reborn” (TFR, 494). Okri uses the *abiku* myth to draw out the cognitive and analogical relationship between the *abiku* phenomenon and the concept of nationhood. Okri wants the reader to understand or conceptualize the domain of experience of nationhood in terms of the domain of experience of the spirit-child. Thus, he maps the conceptual domain of the spirit-child onto the conceptual domain of nationhood. The phrases “ours is an *abiku* country... it keeps coming and going” and “all nations are children ... ours is an *abiku* nation, a spirit-child nation, one that keeps being reborn” present ontological correspondences that map the ontology of the spirit-child onto the ontology of a nation through the following mnemonic pattern or implicature:

- (i) a nation is conceived as a child
- (ii) a nation is given birth to as a child
- (iii) a nation is nurtured as a child
- (iv) a nation could be a normal child or a spirit-child
- (v) the spirit-child nation is destined to die again and again
- (vi) the spirit-child nation cannot live until a “propitious sacrifice” is made (TFR,494).
- (vii) even a propitious sacrifice may not stop the spirit-child nation from dying
- (viii) the spirit-child nation can only live if it chooses to, like Azaro (TFR,487).

The *abiku* metaphor therefore involves the mapping of the conceptual correspondences of the spirit-child onto the domain of a nation.



The mapping of the ontology of a spirit-child on that of a nation

The figure shows the imposition of the domain of a spirit-child on that of a nation. The opposing arrows indicate that a nation can be conceptualized in the frame of a spirit-child, that is, we can understand a nation using the knowledge frame we have of a spirit-child. The presentation is Okri’s own stylistic attempt at reinventing the nation. More importantly, the question is, what kind of society does Okri use the *abiku* myth to evince? Adeniji (2006: 202) observes that Okri tries to “re-work this myth and recuperate a positive image for the spirit-child”. The *abiku* child is presented in Yoruba ethnography as an evil and wicked child that relishes in inflicting maximum pain, sorrow and anguish on its victims. The *abiku* child is not expected to live a normal life unless its bond with its spirit companions is severed, because the “the spirit-child is an unwilling adventurer into chaos and sunlight, into the dreams of the living and the dead” (TFR, 487).

In the texts under study, we encounter two *abiku* children, Ade and Azaro, who possess different dispositions to life. While Azaro describes himself as a “spirit-child rebelling against the spirits, wanting to live the earth’s life and contradictions”, he observes that “Ade wanted to leave, to become a spirit again, free in the captivity of freedom” (TFR, 487). Ade maintains the traditional pattern of dying and being reborn, while Azaro wants to break away

from the cyclical journeys that are associated with his kind, because he wants to make his mother happy.

Okri constructs nationhood in the image of *abiku* and posits that “ours is an abiku nation”. This explains why Adeniji (2006:204) describes the spirit-child as “an icon of the nation”. Okri uses Azaro, rather than Ade, to re-work the image of the spirit-child and its configuration as a nation. Azaro is a spirit-child that is willing to endure torture and pain from his spirit companions in order to bring succour to his mother. Consequently, Okri utilizes this positive disposition of the spirit-child to express optimism about the Nigerian nation.

Ade, though a malevolent spirit-child, is also optimistic on the chances of his society escaping from its present cyclical socio-economic and political woes. He confesses that “our country is an abiku country. Like the spirit-child, it keeps coming and going. One day it **will** decide to remain. It **will** become strong” (TFR, 478). The modal auxiliary “will” presupposes a possibility that the nation may some day get better. Adeniji (2006:204) interprets this affirmation to mean hope for the beleaguered nation. According to him, “The decision of Okri’s Azaro to stay is, therefore, a ray of hope for the nation. At the first level of signification, it implies the survival of the nation in spite of the many problems besetting her.” Adeniji observes that Okri’s positive reconstruction of the *abiku* myth is a “paradigm shift” from the literary image of the spirit-child as an intractable and merciless being with insatiable penchant and tendency to commute between the worlds of the living and the dead as depicted in the works of Fagunwa, Tutuola, Soyinka and Clark-Bekederemo. Okri therefore uses *abiku* as a trope for the reinvention of nationhood.

Okri also uses the *abiku* myth to conceptualize African perception of life as a journey. The tale opens with the temporal deixis, “In the beginning...” (TFR, 3) - a statement that throws up a range of contradictions and paradoxes. The presence of a beginning presupposes the existence of an end. Okri however complicates the linearity of logical reasoning with an interrogation: “Who can be certain where the end begins?” (IR, 5). Ideationally, whatever that has a beginning must also have an end, but Okri presents the concept of beginning in a seemingly complex manner. The phrase “the beginning” is used conspiratorially in the text to give the impression that the reader already knows what it means. Martin and Rose (2003:146) contend that the use of the definite article “the” assumes that the reader already knows who or what is being talked about (cf: Brown and Yule, 1989:170). He confuses the reader further with statements like “In that land of beginnings...” (TFR, 3), and “the myths of beginnings” (TFR, 6). This provokes questions such as what beginning? What or where actually is the beginning? What is the beginning of the beginning? What is the end of the beginning and the beginning of the end? How many beginnings are in each region of existence? The concept of beginning becomes ambiguous as “...within each beginning is an end, and within each end a beginning” (Deandrea, February 22). Okri compounds the paradoxes when he avers that “there are never any beginnings or endings” (TFR, 488).

The phrase, “In the beginning...” that opens the story is an orientation clause that actually serves the same function with the stock formula “Once upon a time.” It is a signal to the audience that the narrative it is about to hear/read is set in a mythical time of “no definite beginning” and that the narrator’s creative imagination is not constrained by

time-bound image or historical time of linear progression. Fowler (1973: 19) refers to this as the “timelessness of myth”. The implication is that whatever that has a beginning may not necessarily have an end, and whatever that happens now is bound to happen again. This is the structure of reiteration.

The structure of reiteration is crucial to the concept of reincarnation being presented in the story. Birth is not the beginning of existence — there is another beginning: “In the land of beginnings” (TFR, 3). The plural marker “s” indicates the existence of many beginnings within a certain beginning. The concept of reincarnation (based on the structure of reiteration) reveals that death is neither the end nor the beginning of the end but the end of the beginning. Azaro confesses that he is a child of several incarnations; Madame Koto an “incarnation of splendour and power and clannish might” (TFR, 374); and the blind old man “a demonic spirit of the worst kind” (SOE, 146). Azaro during one of his wanderings sees a man who is the “future incarnate of father’s better self...” (TFR, 144). The *abiku* myth shows that human existence is cyclical with no certain beginning and end.

The *abiku* myth is used to explain the fluidity of time and space in the African worldview. On several occasions, Azaro complains of his inability to comprehend time. At a point, he is not sure whether certain images he sees “belonged to this life, or to a previous one, or to one that was to come” (TFR, 7). In SOE he wonders “Had time been so different for us?” (41); “...it seemed time had not moved at all. But I also felt that the world had turned” (93). His confusion comes, partially from the fact that historical events are presented backwards “...from the end of the time to the forgotten original dream” (61).

The *abiku* myth also tries to explain why there is interpenetration of space in African cosmology. The world of human is conflated with the world of the supernatural. In the words of Okpewho (1983: 179), “Traditional African society has long since grasped the fact that man lives in a more than human context and so must exploit those extrahuman elements if he is to sustain his existence and justify his place in the universal order.” There is no boundary between the physical and the spiritual worlds, and Azaro confesses that *abiku* children “knew no **boundaries**” (TFR, 3). This explains why he can penetrate several regions simultaneously. In SOE (256-260), he enters into the dead Carpenter’s dream and loses his senses only for him to wake up in Madame Koto’s dream. Other elements too can penetrate and possess human beings. According to Azaro, “And for the first time I became aware that just as I could unintentionally enter the spirit of things, they too can enter into me” (SOE, 123) as if “there were no longer any **boundaries** between the world outside and our private lives. And the masquerade ...watched dad through my eyes” (SOE, 109). In TFR, Azaro sees through the eyes of a duiker. The interpenetration of space is so fluid that even spaces that appear physical may in the real sense be a mirage. When Dad and Azaro walk into a strange shop in search of Mum, it takes Azaro’s third-eye to see that the shop is anything but physical. He alerts Dad: “We are under the sea” (SOE, 55).

The conflation of boundaries enables Azaro to float easily across regions. It proves the aphorism that “All things are linked” (SOE, 58). In IR, he wonders: “On which sphere was I? It seemed I dwelt in several of them at once. All this confused me” (294). To Okri,

time in African cosmology is “finite and infinite”, while space is “negative and populated” (IR, 103). The paradox of opposites forms the staple of Okri’s rhetoric. At the level of metaphorization, Okri uses the *abiku* myth to deconstruct the creation story being floated by the West. While Western theology believes that “In the beginning was the Word...” (John 2:1), Okri postulates that “In the beginning there was a river. The river became a road and the road branched out to the whole world” (TFR, 3). This implies that the river and the road existed before any other entity, and are of primordial origin. This position contradicts the very doctrine and philosophy upon which Western civilization was founded. More importantly, the phrase “**boundaries**” (TFR, 3, SOE 109) which is based on the CENTRE-PERIPHERY image schema frames social relationship in spatial terms: they versus us, we versus them, spirit versus human, Africa versus the West, the insider versus the outsider, the politicians versus the inhabitants, etc. The image schema establishes the personal space between individuals and the spatial distance between groups, nations and entities, and engenders a fellowship face that is both inclusive and exclusive.

The myth of the road is another aetiological story Okri uses to frame group relationship and experiences in his fiction. Okri presents “the road” from the physical and metaphysical dimensions. At the physical plane, the road is the normal road that every one travels or walks on. In TFR the colonialists start to construct a road through the forest. The construction continues in SOE and finishes in IR. Azaro describes it thus:

It was indeed a splendid road. It had been built by the natives, supervised by the Governor-General. He dreamt that on this beautiful road all Africa’s wealth, its gold and diamonds and diverse mineral resources, its food, its energies, its labour, its intelligence would be transported to his land to enrich the lives of his people across the green ocean (IR, 236).

This is a physical road constructed to facilitate the colonial exploitation of Africa. The underlying metaphor frames the asymmetry in the social relationship between Africa and the West in terms of exploiter vs exploited, master vs slave relationship. The frame wants the reader to see the West as wicked, demonic and exploitative for reaping where it did not sow. Thus, the phrase “splendid road” euphemizes or conceals the fact that the road is excellently constructed to facilitate quick and easy exploitation of African resources by the West, and not necessarily for the benefit of Africans. At the metaphysical plane however, Okri informs us that the road has a supernatural existence and that Azaro’s grandfather is the “head-priest of our shrine, priest of the Gods of Roads. Anyone who wants a special sacrifice for their journeys, undertakings, births, funerals, whatever, goes to him. All human beings travel the same road” (TFR, 70). To foreground the significance of the road, the initial letters of “gods” and “roads” are capitalized, thereby giving them a human element. The text also reveals that there are many gods as there are many roads, but Okri never informs his audience why all the gods of the roads of the world have one head-priest who happens to be Azaro’s grandfather. Furthermore, when he says that “All human beings travel the same road”, he does not mean the physical or

concrete road, but the road of primordial existence - the passage from birth to death and vice versa. Again, Okri does not lead the reader to know why Azaro's lineage is conferred with the headship of the priest of the gods of the roads. Or why sacrifices are made to the god of the road by people seeking his favour.

It is only about one hundred and ninety pages later (TFR, 258-261) that Dad tells the story that explains the several "whys" that people ask about the road. It is the story of the "King of the Road". The King of the Road was a giant who used to live in the forest. When the forest could no longer satisfy his huge appetite, he decided to relocate to the road. He had a huge stomach and was never satisfied. For a long time people made him sacrifices so that he would allow them to pass on the road. They never complained because "they found him there when they came into the world... People believed that he had lived for thousands of years and that nothing could kill him and he could never die". However, when he became a terror to the people of the world, they decided to either make peace with him or kill him. The first two peace delegations sent to him were all eaten up by him, so the people of the world decided to kill him. They directed every human being to come with the most potent poison at their disposal to the gathering. They complied but "While the different people travelled with poison some of it spilled over and that is **why** some plants can kill and **why** there are places in the forest where nothing ever grows".

The "**why**" of why some plants can kill and why nothing grows in certain spots of the forest has been explained. But why is Azaro's lineage conferred with the headship of the priest of the deity? The story has it that the king of the Road also ate up the third delegation that took the poisoned food to him. Dad informs his audience that "Only one person escaped. And that person was our great-great-great-grandfather. He knew the secret of making himself invisible". The narrative also explains why there are so many accidents in the world. Dad says that after the king of the Road had eaten up the delegation together with the poisoned food he became more hungry and because he could not find anything more to eat, he began to eat up himself until "only his stomach remained". A terrific rain that lasted seven days started that night and washed off his stomach and dissolved it into the ground:

What had happened was that the king of the Road had become part of all the roads in this world. He is still hungry, and he will always be hungry. That is **why** there are so many accidents in the world.

But why do people still make him sacrifices? The narrator explains that it is for several reasons which include: so that he can "let them travel safely", "to remember that the monster is still there...", "a form of prayer that his type should never come back again to terrify our lives". The tale ends with an admonition from the narrator "That is **why** a small boy like you (Azaro) must be very careful how you wander about in this world." It is interesting to note that all the explanatory clauses begin with the adverbial clause of reason "**that is why**..." or "**so that**..."

This study has already pointed out that the significance of a myth is to explain the nature or origin of certain phenomena. The myth of the road also shows that the physical

road is just the outer cover of the metaphysical one as a neat line cannot be drawn between the two.

The two myths discussed in this study present life as a travelogue or what could be metaphorically conceptualized as: LIFE IS A JOURNEY or with the subframe: LIFE IS A CONTINUOUS JOURNEY. The non-linearity of road and time shows that life is a continuum whose beginning and end are indeterminate because “One lifetime flowed into the others” (TFR, 7). The cyclical journeys of reincarnation fit into the myth of the road. The road becomes a passage from death unto life and vice versa. What Okri interrogates here is the Western conceptualization of death as the end of existence and life as the beginning of it. He also conceptualizes the life of a nation in the frame of *abiku*, the spirit-child, while its journey towards progress and development is framed as a hazardous trip on a bumpy road. Thus, the King of the Road symbolizes impediments to national integration, growth and development. It therefore means that the nation cannot survive unless it comes to terms with the socio-economic and political upheavals on its path as represented in the image of the king of the road.

Further, Okri uses the image of the King of the Road to frame the Western relationship with Africa. The insatiable appetite of the “beast” corresponds with that of the West with a huge appetite for exploitation. The obstinacy of the King of the Road also equates with that of the West. The underlying metaphor therefore implies that Africa and other Third World countries will never know peace until they contain the voracious greed of the West. Sadly however, the Western road has become that through which every nation must pass in its quest for scientific and technological advancement. This explains why, in spite of the negative presentation of the West, Africa and other Third World nation still find it difficult to sever economic and political relations with it.

Similarly, it could be inferred from the text that the Nigerian nation will know no peace or progress until it has tamed the powers of the metaphorical *abiku* child. Thus, Okri uses the traditional image schema (in this case, that of an *abiku* child) to frame nationhood. More importantly, he uses the *abiku* myth to frame nationhood as an emerging community; hence the coming and going of the *abiku* child represent the processes of building a nation.

Okri’s narrative style is drawn from the resources of oral tradition. This is essentially so because the three novels are presented like a story told under the moonlight in which the novelist is a modern day griot who uses art (stories) to shape the moral consciousness of the society. The presence of the stock formula, “In the beginning...” or “Once upon a time” is indicative of that assertion. Capital letters are used as a phonoesthetic device. Tutuola has tried this in his *The Palm-wine Drinkard* and Deandrea (March 1, 2003) describes it as an attempt to return language to its oral dimension.

Conclusion

Okri uses myth in the novels on *abiku* to reveal that reality transcends its concrete forms. A story like the one on *abiku* is simply “...another intellectual effort by man to understand the phenomena with which he continually lives in a system of naturalistic — as against scientific rationalism” (Okpewho, 1980:16). Okri observes that the mythic strategies in the texts are used to tell stories about Africa’s past, pain, invisibility and misconception, and to show how “Africa’s perceived; how we perceive, and fail to perceive, one another” (Jaggi: 2007, online). This study reveals Okri’s use of familiar folk narratives to highlight the interlocking relationship between politics and religion; re-articulate the image of the nation; and deepen our understanding about identity, inter-group relationship and the humanistic pursuit of the common good.

Note

*All references are to Paul Chilton’s (2004) prepublication version of *Analysing Political Discourse: Theory and Practice*.

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