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Abstract

*In recent years, the 'Body' has turned out to be a site of investigation and various discourses are being brought out upon the topic. One among them is the representation of body as a 'metaphor' to satirize the regime of the State and society to which the body belongs. In the postcolonial context, certain bodies have gone unrecognized and the area of research is highly debatable and various critics and scholars have contributed to the field and still do so. The marginalized bodies are denied identities and are brutally suppressed by the postcolonial regime. By witnessing the society from a marginalized position offers a vivid recollection of the true history than the ones offered by the fabrication of the imperial and dominating upper class. The works of the postcolonial writers always involve some kind of loss, even perversion of concerning reality in all its complexity by focusing on the postcolonial situation. It is the body that suffers a lot and, thus serves as a metaphor of supremacy of loss of every kind, especially, the loss of identity. Body, is presumably the direct representation of power exerted by the imperial forces. By interrogating the body, we get a better insight into the postcolonial history. The critical lens applied here is an in-depth study of the text *The Famished Road*. Through this paper I will try to raise certain issues that were neglected so far and, will also try to answer certain questions, like; why do postcolonial writers choose to talk from a marginal position in their narrative? How political exploitation and marginalization is being reflected in the postcolonial literature?*

Keywords: Postcolonial society, marginalization, identity crisis, metaphorical body and imperial regime.

Introduction

Any piece of writing is a product of its time. [. . .]. for the present it will suffice to say that identity was not by any means the single problem which occupied the minds of those who sought to dismantle empire. But it is one that still draws particular attention. (EllekeBoehmar 2005, 8)

The Famished Road by the Nigerian author Ben Okri is often read as a national allegory offering imaginative manifestation of Nigeria and its history. There are a vast majority of critical commentary and discourses made upon the novel as a postmodern and postcolonial text. For instance, Hawley in his famous work “Ben Okri’s Spirit-Child: ‘Abiku’ Migration and Post-Modernity” (1995) states that “[i]n Okri, the Western dilemma of the dissolution of the subject is celebrated” (36), and that the perplexing ontological positioning of the abiku child; says Derek Wright, in his work “Pre- and Post-Modernity in Recent West African Fiction” (1999) that Azaro indicates “the postcolonial nation state in its chaotic passage from colonialism to independence” (16).

Postcolonialism turns out to be a notion to establish the identity of the once colonized subject. So, it becomes the responsibility of a postcolonial writer to give voice to the postcolonial subject that is distinct from that of the colonizer’s, thus helping them in establishing their identity. In accordance to this, Albert J. Paolini, in his text; *Navigating Modernity: Postcolonialism, Identity and International Relations* (1999), with respect to assessment of personal and political dimensions of postcolonialism, suggests that the postcolonial “Other” reemerges with a newly formed identity that is in contrast to the western identity. He further accounts in the words of Helen Tiffin as;

“Postcolonial writers “rehabilitate” the self against European appropriation. In fracturing imposed European master narratives and perspectives, postcolonialism replaces them with an “alternative vision”. This is particularly the case for “indigenous peoples” (India, Africa) who are able to challenge European perspectives with their own metaphysical systems” (79).

It is no longer a question of the British damnation of the once colonized nations, but of how the power-hungry leaders of postcolonial nations have affected the ‘utopian vision’ of independence, distorting the identities of the once, colonized subjects. ‘Radical democracy’ is envisioned in *The Famished Road* which is emblematic of a post-independence era of Africa. With the help of magical realism and the application of the ‘Abiku’ myth as a metaphor, the author tends to unmask the political reality of Nigeria. In her famous article, “Rulers against Writers, Writers against Rulers: The failed promise of the Public Sphere in Postcolonial Nigerian Fiction” Ayo Kehinde comments; “The exploits and ordeals of the spirit child, his vascillation between two worlds (terrestrial and extra-terrestrial) unfolds in the socio-political, cultural and moral fabrics of the society” (86-87).

The paper represents African subjects’ experience in a historical context, through the work of the Nigerian author Ben Okri and emphasizes the richness of the interdisciplinary approach to literature. The paper also presents an analysis on cross-cultural experiences in a particular historical period through the lens of postcolonial theory and political theory to

explore critically the work of Okri whose historical narrative depicts the reality of colonial Nigeria. The confrontation of West African society with Western imperialism gives rise to social and cultural changes which molded the lives of people and redefined their identity. An identity can be considered with respect to 'Otherness', i.e., the way colonialism views postcolonialism and the way postcolonial subject perceive themselves within their society. With this respect, Couze Venn in his study of postcolonialism *The Postcolonial Challenge Towards Alternative Words* (2006) says; "identity is an identity that emerges in relation to an other or others; it is a plural self . . ." (2).

The dehumanizing categorization of otherness, the execution of otherness during colonial rule in Africa, and the augmentation of otherness in the (neo)colonial period concretizes this 'otherness' in the African society. Their existential base as postcolonial identity(s) are deep-rooted in a fabrication of white culture that labels their identity(s) as social and political beings. For instance, in his famous book *The Cambridge Introduction to Postcolonial Literatures in English*, C. L. Innes considers that "the recovery of a lost or 'subaltern' history, told from the point of view of those who have been ruled and oppressed rather than those who are members of the ruling classes" gives a better insight to the postcolonial identity formation (37). So, this paper tries to give voice to the shared history of the "margins" through a literary narrative.

I study the construction of reality of the child narrator in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* that represents the liminality of the society that belongs to the ethnic minority group in the transitional period of Nigeria. Realities intertwined with myth and the spirit world, or what is said to be "magical realism", are specifically functional in studying the resistance urge to reality, especially in the postcolonial context. Okri's child protagonist possess extraordinary abilities that are significant in studying their resistance to postcolonial nation-state. In her famous work *Postcolonial Fiction and Disability: Exceptional Children, Metaphor and Materiality* (2012) Clare Barker states that "His experiences as an abiku child who desires to remain in the world of the 'Living' offset and challenge social understandings of difference in his community" (161). And this difference is what problematizes their identity and drags them to the 'peripheries'. "Azaro's is a phenomenological account that constructs an active engagement between the body, consciousness and the world, and it obliges us to sidestep dispassionate objective responses to construe the violence of his society in enraged phenomenological terms" (Barker 161).

The identity of Nigerian society in the postcolony undergoes drastic changes and is engrossed in a succession of metamorphosis, in the process, disintegrating their physical appearance and as observed by Achille Mbembe in his famous work, *On the Postcolony* that "the geography of existence vacillates and loses all stability and compartmentalization" (204). Several men like Azaro's Dad are witnessed to be carrying inhuman heavy loads in the

marketplace with their exhausted, aching body in return of a few pennies that doesn't contribute to their meagre living. At one occasion, Azaro's Dad, who has just come back from work, expresses his dissatisfaction in a ghostly and fatigued voice that "[t]hey have begun to spoil everything with politics [. . .]. Now they want to know who you will vote for before they let you carry their load. [. . .] If you want to vote for the party that supports the poor, they give you the heaviest load. I am not much better than a donkey." (81). The distorted and abused body (sick and animal-like) is slowly being dissolved into chaos and damnation. The body that lacks the resemblance of that historical identity which was once being proud and honourable. The strong civilization is seemed to impose their forms of rule and authority upon the weaker ones, following the footprints of the colonizers. In this sense, the 'Road' can be assumed to be a disabling fracture which is the dividing lines between the city and the secluded ghetto.

The exhausted body of the impoverished slum is repeatedly dehumanized to that of an animal. The myth related to the famished stomach told to a ravenously hungry child and Dad's grievances against his work signifies Nigeria's economic and political uncertainty as an emerging independent nation. Like the "famished road" in the novel, the political leaders in the emerging nation-state attach themselves to the national capital of the country. Consequently, it becomes unbearable for the poor to survive and a threat to their existence and hence, the ghetto dwellers are forced to live under dire circumstances. Azaro labelled the ghetto as a "world drowning in poverty", "eating the food of suffering" (281, 326).

The myth of the "famished" King of the Road who devours upon anything and everything is a modern manifestation of the greed prominent in the text, namely colonialism and perversion of power by the politicians of postcolonial Nigeria. In his study of the practice of satire and its relation to the advancing traditions in Africa, Felicia Oka Moh contends; "(t)he King stands for the archetypal predator who has such an insatiable appetite that he preys on everything and everyone for self-preservation. The road is famished because the rulers are monsters and oppressors. The road becomes a symbol of the Nigerian nation which has unjust predatory rulers" (77).

Socio-political realities, being the characteristics of magical realism, Azaro's narrative highlights the political reality of Nigerian society. "What is curious [. . .] about Okri's text", Stepher M. Hart and Wenchin Ouyang observe, "is the fact that – even while it fuses the magical with the real, and the animal with the human, the spiritual with the material, and the natural with the supernatural – it never loses its political relevance" (10). Supporting the idea, Abubakar Liman recounts *The Famished Road* as "a way of depicting the life of the poor in Nigeria who are caught between the urge to life, a better life and the difficulties of a system built on injustice and exploitation of man by man" (70). It is the riots that accelerates the

events in the text describing a ruthless incident where the landlord blames the tenants for setting fire to the compound while demanding money and the colonial police is convened to fulfil the purpose, thus leading to a riot. “That night,” Azaro observes, “our life changed” (9). This change denotes the dynamic identity formation of the one deprived of the social activities in the independent nation-state.

Okri exposes the exploitation of the poor executed by the elites through the detailed description of lives in the compound where they endure humiliations and are deprived of even the basic necessities. They are the vulnerable ghetto dwellers, living under continuous inhuman atrocities, neglected all together by the state. Sharing their roofs with the fleas, mosquitoes, and the rats as their household, problematizes their identity as a normal human. As Azaro’s Dad observes; “It seemed a plague had come upon us, insinuated itself into our intestines”. (107) “They have poisoned us with the Milk!” At times of crisis, the vulnerable men assemble to resist the political regime of society. An episode where the ghetto dwellers retaliate against the politicians of Bad Milk and a riot breaks up, brutalizing the innocent public is highly significant. The poverty-stricken compound, suddenly turns out to be “a battleground of resistance”, rejecting the label of corrupt politics and constructing their own identity.

In the text, the photograph’s produced by the photographer Jeremiah functions as a metaphor for defining and capturing the devastating reality of the compound, as a whole the identities of Yoruba society. Their identity is only rectified when elections arrive and the power-hungry politicians need their precious vote, luring them with fake promises. Ben Okri’s main purpose in the text seems to criticize the political leader’s failure to govern the newly formed nation-state (Africa) and laments the everlasting effects of cultural colonization. But through the optimistic character of a person like Azaro’s father Okri shows a ray of hope in the state of loss and devastation.

In his studies upon *[De]constructing the politics of Indigeneity* in Maori culture, Manuhia Barcham suggests that “[t]he prioritisation of identity over difference leads to the necessarily synchronic predication that bodies (be they concrete or abstract, singular or plural) exist in an ahistorical essentialism wherein reality is collapsed into a timeless present such that what *is* now is the same as what *was*, which in turn is the same as what *will be*, thereby effectively excluding any chance of recognizing notions of social transformation and change” (138). “The prioritization of identity over difference has led to the creation of an existential dichotomy of *being* and *non-being* that has effectively excluded recognition of that dynamic process of *becoming*” (Barcham 138). With respect to what has been said about the politics of New Zealand, the idea runs parallel to the politics of the people of Africa on the verge of attaining independence. Devoid of any priorities given to the marginal section, their identity goes unrecognized and further pushed to the peripheries.

In the words of Oluwole Coker as mentioned in his article “Mythic Imagination and the Postcolonial Experience in Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* and Debo Kotun’s *Abiku*”; “Okri concentrates on a society bedeviled by the consequences of bad leadership and the antics of corrupt politicians” (p 80). In Okri, the continuous “instability”, political restrictions, failed governance, have a direct impact upon the postcolonial society which is revealed through the *abiku* myth; “It shocked him too that ours was an *abiku* nation, a spirit-child nation, one that keeps being reborn and after each rebirth come blood and betrayal and the child of our will refuses to stay” (494).

The central focus of Okri’s *The Famished Road* lies in an attempt to investigate the crisis of the self. Azaro’s family (Dan and Mum) symbolizes the ‘marginal’ section of the society, thus serving as a microcosm of the postcolonial society. The ill-treatment of society thwarts Dad’s competence and self-determination. The grim reality of the household in the compound is the underprivileged scenario. Mum’s grappling with the hard times signifies the lifelong suffering. Azaro recollects vividly; “I was still very young when in a day I saw Dad swallowed up by a hole in the road. Another time I saw Mum dangling from the branches of a blue tree” (7). These images are collective representations of the men living in the peripheries symbolizing anomaly, hostility, struggle and despair.

Due to modernization and industrialization, the original culture and identity of the indigenous people gets disintegrated. The interconnecting road between the city and the slum, in spite of creating a bridge between them, creates a vacuum, thus secluding the ghetto dwellers and depriving them of the slightest chance to access the resources of postcolonialism. With great mastery, Okri succeeds in satirizing the postcolonial Nigerian society by merging the grotesque elements. He criticizes the responsible heads of the society, mainly, the colonial police and the corrupt politicians, who despite that “they swear to oaths, go ahead to betray public trust reposed in them”, leading to further damnation of the people (22). Okri proposes that the anomalous reaction voices the misrule against the just reaction by the ghetto dwellers in the riot, is simply unjustifiable; Dad was there, imprisoned for taking part in the riots . . . He had been beaten by the police and there was an ugly cut on his forehead, bruises on his face” (25). “For only when the realization is made that identity is not a state but a dynamic process can the Fourth World be said to have been truly decolonized” (Barcham151).

Conclusion

We can say that Okri’s historical narrative is quite optimistic, though experimental. He claims back the pre-colonial and colonial history by applying historical perspective as a narrative in creating the plot of *The Famished Road* and forming his characters in a detailed manner. He explores the backdrop of postcolonial contexts and political theory to reimagine the history and identity of African (Yoruba) society. Postcolonial Nigeria is represented as a

country where the rulers either reject or disallow the existence of the ‘marginal’ section, which diminishes their access to the public sphere and disregard their status altogether. This can be witnessed from the absence of the ghetto dwellers from the activities in the public domain. The political restrictions and continuous surveillance threaten their very existence, delimiting their access to the society.

In this way, Okri reflects the social and political injustices prominent in the postcolonial nation-state, where the marginals are identified as “donkeys’ carrying unbearable heavy loads and one with lifelong struggles and sufferings”. The post-independence disillusionment and the fragmentation of the society has been echoed throughout the text. The novelist doesn’t provide any solution but ends up with a hope and a “utopian vision” to the postcolonial people. By focusing on the “inner vision”, Okri suggests that the postcolonial men can stay rooted to their culture in spite of disintegrating and thus retain their identity.

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