

**Linking the Spirit and Living World: the Development of *Abiku* Myth in Okri's *The Famished Road***

**Shahaji Dhanaji Dethe**

Research Student

Department of English

Shivaji University, Kolhapur

&

**Dr. A. M. Sarawade**

Associate Professor

Department of English

Shivaji University, Kolhapur

**Abstract**

*The present paper discusses and accounts for the struggle of the Abiku child, Azaro in the Spirit and Living world. In order to stay with his family, he has to face many problems. As per the bond he has signed with king of Spirits, he has to go back to the spirit world, but he determines to break the bond and live with his family. However, his companions do not allow him to live a comfortable life. Although he is fed up with all the hardships of the Spirit world companions, he determines to face them in order to obtain the love of his family members. Whereas the Spirit world symbolizes joy, light, rainbow, possibilities, and land of freedom, place of eternity, silence and a kingdom of music, world of living symbolizes resistance, hardship, clash and anarchy. Okri brings together by using the abiku myth as a trope to comment upon the prevailing conditions in Nigeria.*

**Key Words:** *Abiku Myth, World of living and spirit, Yoruba culture, the Party for the Rich & Poor, Indestructible oaths.*

Ben Okri's novel *The Famished Road* (1991) is a story of an abiku called Azaro, his travel between the world of the spirits and living and the hardships he has to face. An Abiku, a spirit child, is the one who dies before reaching maturity but is given an opportunity to be born again and again. This myth has been used by Nigerian writers to indicate the possibility of renewal and rebirth for their postcolonial nation. In his article entitled "Ben Okri's Spirit-Child: Abiku Migration and Postmodernity" John C. Hawley maintains that the widespread notion of the Abiku in Nigerian culture replicates the painful deaths of innumerable newborns

throughout the region's history. It also confirms to a principle in the permeability of the membrane separating the spirit world from the real world.

Talking about the special usage of the myth in Okri's novel, Smalligan states that the Abiku in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* departs from the standard usage. Here it exemplifies a desire of the people of Nigeria to be able to shift between two seemingly opposed worlds: the secular, commercialized world of Western modernism and the spiritual world founded on Yoruba culture and belief (359). In fact, Okri uses the intersection of the spiritual and the physical empires to develop a vision of Nigeria's future in which original cultural traditions are continued while Western modernism is embraced. Ben Okri tries to show the steering of the Abiku child with the help of the mixture of African myths and Western traditions. Okri uses various incidents and people to depict the journey of the Abiku such as Madam Koto's Bar, Landlord's dominance on the Compound people, the Photographer, the struggle of Azaro's parents, the socio-political condition of the region, and the conflict between Party for the Rich and Party for the Poor. Accordingly, the paper focuses and explores the secrets, riddles and knowledge related to Abiku which exemplify Okri's interest in exploring the way historical events and spiritual truth are made familiar.

At the beginning of the novel, Azaro's dissimilarities from other *Abiku* have been stated clearly. Although Azaro confirms to remain on the earth, he gets trapped in the interspaces between the Spirit and the Living worlds. Okri advocates that the main character, an *Abiku* named Azaro, is an allegory for the Nigerian nation. He explicitly states his vision of Nigeria as an *Abiku* child by the end of the novel. Azaro's best friend Ade voices his thoughts, which are unquestionably shared by Okri, on the future of the nation; that this country is an Abiku country. There is continuous navigation of Azaro just like the spirit-child in both worlds.

Madame Koto's bar plays a crucial role in the life of Azaro and his parents. It is a place where Azaro learns to steer between the world of the spirits and the world of the living. This is the place where the two regions, representative of the world of the living and the spiritual world respectively, interconnect plainly. It is also the setting where the most dramatic actions of the novel take place. As a spiritual site with intimate ties to the spiritual world, Madame Koto's bar is patronized primarily by spirits who are attracted by her religious prayers and the spiritual objects that decorate her walls. Yet the bar is also very much part of the living world. Madame Koto is a businesswoman who, by the end of the novel, surrounds her bar with flashing lights, electric lines and her brand new car, which she parks outside in a showy display of wealth. In Yoruba religious faith, the forest is understood to belong to the spiritual world or the realm of the spirits. In accordance with this tradition, Azaro says: "The bar had moved deep into the forest and all customers were animals and birds" (71). In Madame Koto's bar, the ordinary and the extraordinary become one, and Azaro is unknowingly shuffled from the living world to the spiritual world.

The prominence of secrets, riddles and knowledge in *The Famished Road* indicates Okri's interest in exploring the way historical events and spiritual truths are made known. Although a true *Abiku* child would be unable to reveal the secrets of his companions from the Spiritual world, Azaro shares his experience of the spirit world with his family and Madame Koto. Moreover, he shares the hurdles which he faces in the spirit world. During each visit to Madame Koto's bar, Azaro comes into contact with spirits. Instead of feeling comfortable in their presence and with the knowledge that they have come to take him from the living world, he unveils to the others that they are from the spiritual realm.

As per the Yoruba traditions, the secrets of the spiritual world are planned to be forever weird by the people of the word of living. However, Azaro seeks to disrupt this borderline of knowledge by revealing the secrets of the spirits. McCabe argues in "Histories of Errancy: Oral Yoruba Abiku Texts and Soyinka's *Abiku*", that a true *Abiku* makes certain that the secrets of the spiritual realm remain tied up, screwed, or nailed. However, Azaro exposes the secrets of the spirits. Azaro wants to break up the mad gathering of the spirits in Madame Koto's bar, but he is unable to get Madame Koto to assist him. He knows that the spirits "who had borrowed bits of human beings to partake of human reality" (161) would be stripped of their disguises if the fetish object hanging on Madame Koto's bar wall is removed. Azaro comes across a branch which is split at the end, so he moves to the bar wherein the spirits masquerade as humans and involved in strange and absurd activities. Azaro then says:

I climbed on a bench and probed the fetish with the stick. I had lifted it off the nail and was bringing it down when one of the spirits saw me from the other end of the bar and gave a piercing cry. I got down hastily. The fetish fell from the stick. There was a terrible silence in the bar. And then the disguised spirit who had shouted, pointed out at me and in a voice of command, cried:

SEIZE THAT BOY! (162)

When Azaro takes away the fetish from the wall of Madame Koto's bar, he causes the secret identity of the bar's patrons to be exposed. By breaking the *Abiku* tradition and causing the secrets of the spiritual world to become un-nailed, he captures Okri's vision for Nigeria as a nation where secrets – even those tied to the history of the Yoruba – are revealed and knowledge is made commonly obtainable. Followed by countless angry spirits from the bar, he runs into the forest and buries the fetish. When the fetish is buried in the mud, the spirits begin to dissolve. Even Madame Koto loses her strength once the fetish is detached from the wall:

Her arm dissolved into an indigo liquid and poured down her face and her face dissolved slowly [...]. Then her hair fell off and her head became reduced; and then her head

rolled off into a ball of red waters and her shoulders melted and eventually her great massive bulk disappeared [...] (164)

In addition to showcasing Okri's concern for revealing knowledge of the spiritual world, *The Famished Road* also advocates his wish for knowledge of the world of living to be made open. The man branded simply as 'the photographer' uses his camera to record political clash and fighting. He exhibits the pictures of clash openly in a cabinet outside his home. The photographer captures the reality of the society and displays pictures open the cruelty of the party of the rich through. He has pictures of politicians being stoned at a rally. He also has trapped their panic, fearfulness and degradation. By capturing the politicians in a fault-finding light, the photographer is competent to communicate to people not just in his own village but the nation at large. In documenting the events of history as they transpire, the photographer implements his ability to reveal what would otherwise be the secrets of the politicians.

The socio-political condition plays a pivotal role in this novel. Rather than being trustworthy to his inherited family, a true *Abiku* child is faithful only to the association of spirit children, the group to which he belongs. At the beginning of the novel, Azaro conveys his wish to break his oath at the association of spirit children, when he declares his wish to satisfy the aching face of the woman who would become his mother. By communicating his wish to disregard his obligation to the association, Azaro completely exhibits his fidelity to his ancestral family. Nevertheless, breaking such union with the spirit children of the spiritual world is not easy and much of *The Famished Road* concentrates on Azaro's attempts to separate himself from the association in order to become a permanent member of his ancestral family. However, by simply wishing to change his socio-political loyalty from his spirit companions to his family, Azaro wants to avoid being locked into any single alliance altogether. Unlike a true *Abiku*, whose oath to his spirit companions is indestructible, Azaro is torn between his association and his ancestral family. Ultimately, he does not simply discard his loyalty to the spirit children in favour of his ancestral family; rather, he throws the entire notion of strict socio-political alliances into question.

From the beginning of the novel, Azaro discloses a fear of eternal oaths. He is seized against his will in the residence of a police officer and his wife and is enforced to wear the clothing of the couple's dead son. During his stay in their home, Azaro stares at a ceremony where the policeman puts in force the seven men to take an oath. Azaro's explanation of this scene arrests his fear and mistrust of the type of men who choose to be part of an indestructible alliance:

In a tremulous voice, he said that if he had betrayed his oath in any way he should be run over by a lorry. He made a guttural sound. He consecrated his statement by drinking the potion in the calabash. He brought out the money he had collected and placed it on the table. Then he sat back into the semi-darkness and became a figure again. (27)

The men themselves appear puzzled to take an oath and they finally sink back into the dusk where they are no longer individuals. What Azaro understands from this experience is clear; people who make such everlasting oaths to a socio-political group lose their individual identities and become the shapeless, faceless forms that simply encompass a union led by others. In particular, he does not want to throw away the comfort and companionship he finds in his best friend Ade, another *Abiku* child.

Azaro is forced to question further the value of socio-political coalition when he is confronted with the conflict between the two political parties who quarrel for the allegiance of his community members. These two parties, called the Party for the Rich and the Party for the Poor, cause rift in his extended family. When his Dad's relatives come to visit, their home becomes a hub of political discussion. Azaro's Dad supports the Party for the Poor, while his extended family supports the Party for the Rich. Azaro complains that their accusation flew back and forth, developed into terrible arguments, with everyone shouting at the top of their voices, till they all appeared more like merciless enemies than like members of an extended family. Azaro is bewildered by the way political alliances wipe out familial unity. The fighting over the topic of politics encourages him to think socio-political oath and alliances dangerously outshine the more important commitments that individuals have to one another.

The conflict between the two political parties heightens when the Party for the Rich distributes powdered milk to Azaro's community. Although this act of assistance is initially welcomed with thanks and admiration, everything soon turns bitter. The milk is spoiled and everyone who drinks it becomes ill. Azaro's family remains safe from the spoiled milk due to the photographer's awareness about the intrigue of the rich party people. Days after the contaminated milk incident, the Party for the Rich visits Azaro's town in order to blame the Party for the Poor.

Just as the spirits of the spiritual world can follow the people of the world of the living, the men and women of one political alliance can imitate as the members of another political party. The possibility of deception further discredits the socio-political alliances, although Azaro's Dad claims to be a member of the Party for the Poor, Azaro cannot be sure to whom he is declaring his loyalty. Okri's novel condemns strict socio-political alliances by capturing the farcical nature of political announcements. The Party for the Rich blames the contaminated milk incident on its antagonist. It is amusing to Azaro because, as he says, "We found their statement very strange because at the back of the van were the very same people who had come round the first time" (180). However, many members of the community trust their message and become convinced that the Party for the Poor ought to be held accountable for the distribution of the bad milk. The message of the Party for the Rich becomes even more comical when they shout:

WE ARE YOUR FRIENDS. WE WILL BRING YOU ELECTRICITY AND BAD ROADS, NOT GOOD MILK, I MEAN GOOD ROADS AND NOT BAD MILK, and later, TRUST US! TRUST OUR LEADER! (180)

In a nutshell, this novel portrays an *Abiku* child as the central characters. However, the way Okri re-envisages this frequently used trope suggests a vision of Nigeria that is unlike any other. In place of suggesting renewal and rebirth, his *Abiku* signifies Nigeria's capability to steer between the opposed worlds of Western modernism and Africa's spiritual heritage. In addition, Okri has spread the knowledge that would otherwise have remained concealed. Okri further seems to suggest that it is indispensable to discard strict socio-political associations that divide rather than unite. *The Famished Road* relies on the intersection of the spiritual and the physical realms, the legacy of Nigeria and the modernism of the West, to build up the vision of Nigeria's expectations.

#### Works Cited:

Okri, Ben. "The Famished Road". (1991)

Hawley, John C. "Ben Okri's Spirit-Child: Abiku Migration and Post-modernity." *Research in African Literatures* 26.1 (1995): 30-39. JSTOR. Web. 17<sup>th</sup> August 2012.

McCabe, Douglas. "Histories of Errancy: Oral Yoruba Abiku Texts and Soyinka's *Abiku*", *Research in African Literatures*, 33, 1 (2002), 45-75

Smalligan, Laura M. "Navigating between Worlds: Ben Okri's Abiku Child and the Oshogbo School of Art". *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 46(2011):359-375 JSTOR. Web. 17<sup>th</sup> August 2012.