

TIME AND VISION IN BEN OKRI'S *THE FAMISHED ROAD*

Mahdi Teimouri¹

Abstract

This essay attempts to offer a reading of *The Famished Road* with a view to the issues often least touched upon in magic realist works. The idea is to provide a liberal humanistic reading of the novel. In this venture, I argue that 'time' as a major preoccupation of the novel explicitly and implicitly affects major characters. Entwined with 'time' is the concept of vision. The connection between these two is what this article will explore as well. The article will focus on the transformations that two major characters, that is, the spirit-child and his father undergo and will demonstrate how these changes are a function of temporality.

Keywords: Ben Okri, time, vision, freedom and will

[I]f nothing were passing, there would be no past; if nothing were to come, there would be no future; and nothing would exist, if there were no present. The past is that which is no more; the future that which is not yet. And if the present were perpetually present, there would be no longer any time but only eternity. For the present to belong to time it must pass. Hence time only exists because it tends to not-being. (Hausheer 1976, p. 30)

The Famished Road, which won the Man Booker Prize for Ben Okri in 1991, is the story of an abiku child named Azaro born to a destitute Nigerian family in an unknown village somewhere in Nigeria. The time, based on the political turmoil, fervour and agitation, can be estimated to be in the wake of Independence. According to Nigerian mythology, an abiku is a spirit-child who commutes between the world of living and spirit. He or she is born repeatedly to the same parents.

We are told at the beginning of the story that the spirit-child has made of his mind to end this repetitious reincarnation and stay in the world of the Living. He enumerates different reasons such as being fed up with the coming and going, the wish to savor this world, to enjoy "the sublime mood of eternity" and finally the face of his mother: "I wanted to make happy the bruised face of that woman who would become my mother" (Okri 1990, p. 5). Ironically his stay brings no happiness and comfort to his parents and he becomes a burden, adding to the chagrin of a penurious livelihood.

Azaro is harassed and haunted by emissaries from the world of spirit who, as forewarned, are sent to abduct him back. These agents of the other world frequently appear in different forms and shapes and each time Azaro's attempts at escaping from these demonic figures foment troubles, and create chaos at the expense of his family

who must pay for the damage incurred or to appease the injured. Azaro's father is a laborer who struggles hard along with his wife, a hawker, to earn a meager livelihood. Their wages are barely sufficient to meet their daily needs. Frustrated and dismayed Azaro's father tries his hand at becoming a boxer and a politician. He chooses the nickname Black Tiger for himself. In one of his boxing matches towards the end of the story, he falls into a trance from enervation and exhaustion. While being attended to by his wife, he is immersed in a visionary dream replete with prophecies and visions, which are related vicariously by Azaro. This is a significant point in the story because it directly bears on the topic of this essay. I will elaborate on it later. The story finishes with the recuperation of Azaro's father and the families return to a normal life.

On the whole the story unfolds on three interdependent planes: a) the blurred ontological state effected by the uninvited appearance of ghoulish, grotesque characters and their pursuit of Azaro which brings about phantasmagoric scenes; b) the socio-personal level marked by the fruitless efforts of Azaro's father to provide for his family; c) the socio-political circumstances, the chaos and clashes instigated by the highly volatile political situation of post-independence period. Okri manages artfully to interconnect these levels by recourse to the conventions of magic realism.

The Famished Road belongs to the category of magic realism. As a magic realistic work or a hybrid genre, it is regarded on the one hand as a merger (of realism and fantasy) and on the other as occupying a noncommittal position (neither reality nor fiction). This tendency to exist in a limbo or to blur the boundaries is also one of the dominant themes of the novel. The main character is a spirit-child neither a human nor a spirit. In a similar way, the setting of the novel is informed by the same indeterminacy where readers are confronted with two domains as the protagonist unwillingly "switches between the two realms without warning, and he himself is as much a victim of the errant switches as his readers are of the confusion this generates for the narrative form" (Quayson 2000, p. 97). Following such a pattern two perceptions of temporality are evident. One is predominant in the world of the living and the other in the world of spirits. In the former conception, time flows out to eternity. However, in the latter, temporality is construed from the words of the soon-to-be-incarnated spirit as an eternal repetition of a birth-death-rebirth cycle.

Accordingly, time in its worldly sense for the inhabitants of the spirit world makes no sense. However, it does not mean that time is elided. Rather it is kept under erasure in a Derridian gesture. It is both present in the sense that its passage is felt which is substantiated in the preliminary monologue of Azao: "As we approached another incarnation we made pacts that we would return to the spirit world at the first opportunity" (Okri 1990, p. 4) and absent in the terms that time does not peter out in a teleological manner to eternity. This form of existence, which is neither exactly time-bound nor immortal, is again indicative of a propensity for uncertainty and indeterminacy.

It is not only in this esoteric domain that we witness such conditions; the world of living is temporally situated in a volatile situation too. As the story moves forward, it dawns on the reader that the people of the story are on the brink of a historic decision i.e. an election through which they will transfer the fate of their land into the hands of domestic policy-makers consisting of two major parties that are vying for power. From the events, it can be inferred that the election is taking place in roughly post-independence times. Therefore, time here matters. What I intend to accomplish in this

paper is to cast light on the way the characters relate to and come to terms with time. According to this reading, the events that take place in the story can be explained tangentially in relation to time. The interaction between different ways of relating to time constitutes the overall structure of *The Famished Road* evident in the application of the two worlds of magic/realism and spirit/the Living that makes the necessity of focusing on time as a major determinant indispensable.²

An overview of time

Time has always been the focus of attention among scholars since the ancient times to the present era. Philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, and Saint Augustine, to name a few, have devoted part of their philosophical endeavors to the explication of time and its relationship with eternity. Their works were either an attempt to redress and modify their predecessors' texts or to negate and introduce of a new conception of time. This obsession with time is not limited to philosophic treatises or ruminations of *ancien régime*. Time has been a major theme in many writings especially since the beginning of the twentieth century from physics to literature. Bergson and Einstein are among scholars and scientists whose theories of time have left a huge impact on the literary domain.³

Time-centered discussions in academic circles were so robust that they have attracted the attention of novelists. Writers such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust, and William Faulkner have displayed their enthusiasm with time through their works, which represent a break from their realist predecessors. New conceptions of time play an undeniably defining role in the transition from realistic modes of writing to modernist texts. For instance Virginia Woolf, particularly, believed that the novelists should turn their gaze to the world in the mind of characters and ignore the external world.⁴ The implications of this new approach are noted by Stevenson in *Modernist Fiction: An Introduction* where he points out that realist novelists looked at the external world, whereas modernists looked at the internal world; they looked within, therefore art was for them a mirror "held up to mind" or "at least to nature reflected in the mind" (Stevenson 1997, p. 169).

This subjective approach, which entails abandoning the objectivity of former modes of writing, involves a crucial shift from time on the clock to the time in the mind. The attention to the relationship between time and mind is not a point only raised by recent thinkers. Apart from Freud who shed light on the dark and unknown side of the consciousness i.e. the unconscious which brought into light the importance of memory, dream and psychological time, philosophers such as Henry Bergson have likewise emphasized the overriding importance of mind in giving us access to the real. Bergson's speculations bear resemblance to various aspects of modernist fiction. The shallowness and superficiality of vision in realistic art -- evident in limiting itself to the externals -- is implied in Berson's ideas as Peter Childs mentions: "Bergson maintained that facts and matter, which are the objects of discursive reason, are only the outer surface that has to be penetrated by intuition in order to achieve a vision in depth of reality" (Childs 2000, p. 49).

One of the cores of Bergson's thinking is its resistance, like modernist writers, to the conception of time. Psychological time, a term Bergson coined for time in the mind, could not be measured by regular beats of clock-time that measure all experience by

the same gradations. That reality resides in the unseen or a different ontological state is what Ben Okri puts forward through the revelation of Azaro's dream-content and the straightforward narration of it by the dreamer himself which I will touch upon later.

The origin of the connection between time and mind dates back to one of the authorities in the theorisation of time, St. Augustine. St. Augustine belongs to that group of thinkers who differentiate time from eternity. According to these scholars, time is subject to change and it is divisible. It is worldly and measurable. In contrast to time, there is eternity, which is perpetual in the sense that it is indivisible. Time is earthly and is divided into past, present and the future on a large and general scale and obviously subjective which is in opposition to the more objective division i.e. seconds, minutes or hours, etc.

Whether time is subordinate to eternity has been a moot point dating back to ancient times. The idea of the difference between time and eternity has been addressed for example by both St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Augustine. As it can be inferred from the introductory quotation/interpretation of the idea of time for Augustine, time is inferior to eternity for it tends to pass "to not-being". It is the nature of time to pass and not to stay for ironically if time does not pass it means it does not exist. This paradoxical state of time is implied by the spirit-child in *The Famished Road* which he speaks of as "the earth's life and contradictions" (Okri 1990, p. 487). As St. Thomas Aquinas elaborates, time has a duration meaning that it has a beginning and an end or "a before and an after" which differentiates it from eternity which is "simultaneously whole" (Pegis 1945, pp.78-79). Now as it appears time is caught between being and not-being because if it ceases to pass it ceases to be and if it passes it approaches an end.

But how are we related to time and eternity? Obviously regardless of the superiority of eternity to time what is of immediate concern to us is time, because we are mortal and the passage of time matters. We sense or measure the passage of time by change and movement. Time affects our body and impairs the power of the memory. Since we are unable to transcend time, we must accede to its power, so our life is marked by an endless struggle against time in the sense of survival. Here lies another contradiction: we breathe to stay alive but this does not mean the once-for-all vanquishing of time. Every breath that we take brings us closer to death which absolutely paradoxical.

Therefore, time can affect us as long as we are on this earth for the simple reason that each and every one of our faculties is at the mercy of the ravaging power of time. This has been a major concern for many and has unsurprisingly found its way into poetry and literature as for instance it constitute a leitmotif in Renaissance poetry and in sonnets of Shakespeare.⁵ But does time have the same impact on a non-matter like our soul? Can soul be subjugated by time?

Alternatively, should we place spirit in the realm of eternity for it is immortal? If we attribute temporality to body then eternity or any state of being close to eternity can be ascribed to soul or spirit. This state of in-betweenness is called *aeviternity* by St. Thomas. He distinguishes *aeviternity* from time in that "aeviternity differs from time and from eternity, as the mean between them both" (Pegis 1945, p. 80). *Aeviternity* is metaphorically construed as a middle-land having on one end time and on the other eternity. This does not imply that *aeviternity* has a 'before' because of being preceded by time and no 'after' due to its being followed by eternity. To clarify the point St. Thomas starts with a definition of eternity as "the measure of a permanent being" (Pegis 1945, p. 81) characterized by a state of unchangeableness of being and place. He then

elaborates that based on the degree of recession from this "permanence of being" time and *aeviternity* can be categorized. Thus *aeviternal* things "recede less from permanence of being, since their being neither consists in change nor is the subject of change" (*ibid*).

To clarify this matter I want to suggest that we take the binary opposition of body/soul as consistent with time/*aeviternity*. So just as much as body and our worldly senses (hearing, sight, smell etc.) are bound by time, soul is free of temporal restraints because it belongs to "a different state of being from time" (Rau 1976, p. 26). Yet, time can exert dominance over soul in this world. Time's sway over soul is exerted through bodily existence: time which belongs to the changeable, finite, material world holds our spirit in captivity as long as our existence continues here and now. I see this as a compromise or reconciliation between time and *aeviternity*, though this pact is from the very beginning doomed to failure and it is always the time which is the loser and *aeviternity* the vanquisher. The reason is that the passage of time brings death closer. With the termination of life, the spirit is at large and is no longer confined by earthly temporality. This means an entry into a higher realm for the spirit: "transformation ... into higher realities" (Okri 1990, p. 4).

However, such a state does not materialize in a view of life based on transmigration of soul after death whereof the spirit is caught once more in the reincarnation cycle. This is what urges the protagonist of the story to demote himself so as "to have the sublime mood of eternity in" him as he lives "the life to come" (Okri 1990, p. 5). The spirit child chooses to live a life in which there is the prospect of eternity. Therefore he demotes himself to a life dominated by earthly temporality in which there is the promise of an eternity even if it entails the permanent separation from the bliss of the world of spirit.

No matter how much time appears insignificant in comparison to the infiniteness of eternity, revealed religions for which the belief in hereafter is a fundamental ideological principle, attach a great deal of importance to it. From an eschatological standpoint, our life in this world lays the foundation of the life in the hereafter. Contrary to this view is the predominant conviction among Buddhism and as regards this case, African religious cults which are grounded on reincarnation or transmigration of soul. The idea has been prevalent in Greek philosophy in accordance to which "souls are the originators of all motion in the universe (for matter is inert), but the souls of men are allowed no personal destiny beyond life on earth" (Rau 1976, p. 26). This is tantamount to the rebirth or the concept of metempsychosis which corresponds to the perpetuity of human souls but confines it to an ever recurring cycle.

Time, knowledge and vision

If life on earth is defined and shaped in terms of temporality it is because we are time-bound creatures both in the sense that we cannot trespass temporal bounds and that our perception of the world is usually a time-consuming process. We make sense of our surroundings only after we have spend some time discovering the *modus operandi* of this world. This condition is most pertinent especially in discussions about future contingencies. We can gain insight into some phenomena only after ample deliberation. However, attaining foresight is even less definitive as our time-boundedness reduces our vision to mere predictions and renders it incapable of penetrating the future. The human mind is capable of holding time at bay only in retrospect by immersing itself in memories stored in the brain or gaining a probability of future events in a prophetic

guise but in neither case does the mental images conjured match the actuality of the past or the future. Thus, as long as time appears indomitable by our temporalized existence, immediate and simultaneous knowledge and or vision of the future events are beyond our reach. This can be a point of departure for the commencement of a critique of *The Famished Road* because the effects of time on our vision or knowledge is the backbone of the story.

Azaro's father like him is involved in a conflictual relationship with time. He suffers from a metaphoric shortsightedness or myopia, which limits the scope of his concern to his family. Literally speaking he sees only himself and his family but as the story unfolds, the scope of his vision widens to embrace others as well.⁶ This comes to pass only after he succeeds in conquering time in a trance-like sleep. Azaro's father's expansion of vision can be explicated in terms of a trajectory which is completed toward the end of the novel. Initially he struggled to lift his family from the squalor of a ghettoized life. Despite his tenacity in providing for his household, he made a scanty livelihood and managed to have a hand-to-mouth existence. His efforts were doomed to failure because they were entangled in a grotesquely deterministic manner with socio-political exigencies of his time.

The dire aftermath of an inchoate incomplete decolonization is rampant in the network of social relations of the imperfect dispensation. This is reminiscent of the gloomy predictions raised by Fanon in 'Pitfalls of national consciousness' one of the chapters of his seminal book *The Wretched of the Earth* where he laments and warns us against the pitiful fate of a spurious independence. What we witness is the blindness of the so-called bourgeoisie to the immediate needs of the people and their plight. Similarly, in *The Famished Road* people are caught in a tug-of-war and are manipulated by the competing parties to win their support in the upcoming elections. As long as they are needed they are given favor.

Under the straitened circumstances, any move made by either party toward an even makeshift obviation of daily needs of the disadvantaged or underprivileged is met with febrile reception. However, before long people see through the trickery and deception. They regard such so-called 'benevolent' practices as disdainful. The free-for-all and pandemonium of the scenes in the story can be seen as the intolerance of people for political hocus-pocus.

In a world ripped apart by selfishness and self-gratification the only solution is to rise above personal needs and grow out of this nearsightedness in favor of an altruistic de-temporalized vision and universal love. The message that Azaro's father delivers after his enlightening dream-journey emphasizes the same point:

My son our hunger can change the world, make it better, sweeter. People who use only their eyes do not SEE. People who use only their ears do not HEAR. It is more difficult to love than to die. It is not death that human beings are most afraid of, it is love. (Okri 1990, p. 498)

There are some noteworthy points mentioned in this quotation. Firstly, the insistence on transcending the sense-bound impressions conveyed to us via our temporalized faculties. This amounts to the recognition of a metaphysical comprehension of the world. Secondly, the idea of love vis-à-vis death is controversial. Why would people prefer death to love? The answer is simple: love brings responsibility for others, which entails active participation in the fate of the other and not passivity. Responsibility for others'

misery and plight is what people tend to shrug off. In fact this is not a new message because earlier at the beginning of the novel Azaro's speaks of his determination to stop his coming and going and what stirs him to action is the face of his mother, the face that he feels obligated to see happy.

The term 'face' is charged with significant meaning and enjoys a privileged position in Emmanuel Levinas's writings on ethics and responsibility towards the Other. In fact the concept of 'face' and 'facing' is among the fundamental terms on which Levinas's argument rests. Levinas defines subjectivity in terms of responsibility for the other. Alphonso Lingis in the introduction to his translation of Levinas's *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* writes:

Responsibility is a bond ... This bond not only determine a being to act but, is constitutive of subjectivity as such, determines it to be ... the locus where this imperative is articulated is the other who faces – the *face* of the other ... For Levinas, responsibility is the response to the imperative addressed in the concrete act of *facing*. Responsibility is in fact a relationship with the other, in his very alterity, then a relationship with alterity as such is constitutive of subjectivity. (Lingis 1991, p.xiii)
[Emphasis added]

This quotation verifies Azaro's subjectivity as the moment when he was arrested by the face of his mother. He is encumbered with the responsibility prior to his arrival at this world which makes responsibility a condition for being and thus 'constitutive of subjectivity'.

It is the absolute unconditional love of people together with the belief in will and freedom which enables people to take destiny in their hands: "We must look at ourselves differently. We are freer than we think" (Okri 1990, p. 498).

Azaro's father's myopic vision from individual consciousness which necessitates the fulfillment of his family needs broadens to include his immediate surroundings exemplified in his care for the beggars and the need to raise their collective awareness of their shared existence which is ironically achieved in a surrealistic dream. The dream gives him a birds-eye-view of the status quo incorporating hindsight, insight and foresight highlighted by the numerous recurrence of the verb "saw" in the passage. Azaro narrates his dream: "he saw the world in which black people always suffered" or "he saw people drowning in poverty, in famine, drought, in divisiveness and the blood of war" and finally "he saw the wars in advance" (Okri 1990, p. 492), which illustrate the hindsight, insight and foresight respectively.

Let me add parenthetically that these three time-oriented sights are in line with Augustine's theoritization of time based on which "[t]he reality of time as an experience external to man cannot be denied; yet past, present and the future are also experiences within the mind of man" (Patrides 1976, p. 5).

The prophetic dream not only opens his eyes to the reality behind the simulations of this unreal world as he comments after his revivification: "The world that we see and the world that is there are two different things" (Okri 1990, p. 498), but also substitutes his worldly vision with an other-worldly one. The overcoming of myopia is the concomitant outcome of surmounting temporal obstacles which imposes blindness as a result of its contingency on sequential unfolding of events. His attainment of such time-defying vision is effected in dream where arguably mind can break loose from temporalized restrictions of a worldly vision. We learned of his dream through Azaro

who functions as a seer thanks to his esoteric existence which makes him capable of such feats. Azaro construes that redemption is slow "because our perception of time is long" (Okri 1990, p. 494); however, this process can be precipitated by recasting the world in a new mould which is a re-dreaming of it.

Freedom, love and will

Contrary to his father, Azaro's concern is eternity. Being a spirit-child who is caught in a relentless cyclical birth and rebirth, time and eternity stand in a different relation to him. For the residents of the world of the Living whose birth into it sets their destiny in motion like being caught in the currents of a river, the only possible way is to go forward just as time flows until we are brought face to face with our destiny. Time peters out to lead us to eternity or as Augustine describes it metaphorically as "the candle of eternity" (Patrides 1976, p. 6). Only in this way eternity becomes a "sublime mood" as Azaro mentions (Okri 1990, p. 5). On the contrary for a spirit-child the ever recurrence of these passages between the world of spirit and the Living is the only thing that approximates a notion of eternity. It is an eternity which is equivalent to an ever receding destiny hence "the beautiful terror of eternity" (Okri 1990, p. 3). This oxymoronic phrase is subtly elaborated as Azaro reveals the Manichaean structures of the world of spirit or in Quayson's words "the real world and the esoteric" (Quayson 2000, p. 97). The early pages of the story bring this point to our attention.

The spirit child refers to these two as "the spirit world and the Living" (Okri 1990, p. 5). He describes the former as "the world of pure dreams" or "the world of the Unborn" (Okri 1990, p.4) where there is no "boundary" and you are "free in infinity" contrary to "the earth's boundaries" (Okri, 1990, p. 487) where one gets in "contact with blood and earth" (Okri 1990, p.6). Towards the end of the novel Azaro speaks retrospectively of the reasons for his wanting "to live the earth's life and contradictions" (Okri 1990, p. 487). Here just like the beginning of the novel he uses the concept of road to shed light on the matter. The famished road is indeed descriptive of his and everyone else's state whose conditions are not "right for the new immutable star within" their "universe to come into existence" which is a state of stability and maturity (Okri 1990, p. 488). The message that Azaro's father brings from his dream is a promising one. It restores will and freedom to humanity. Ironically these two indispensable components of self-determination and resolution are only definable and justifiable within time, that is, a temporalized existence: an existence subordinate to and under the sway of time. Freedom and will only make sense when they are seen in relation with limitation and finitude such as death. The freedom that Azaro enjoyed before choosing to stay in the world of the Living, despite its imperviousness to death was indeed "captivity in freedom" (Okri 1990, p. 487). Freedom is meaningful only in view of an imminent death without which the concept of will is rendered hollow.

Jeffrey Dudiak commenting on Levinas's argument about death, time and freedom explains that:

Death menaces from out of an unanticipatable future in which all of my future possibilities will have been exhausted, congealed into actualities in an incorruptible past that Levinas refers to as "fate". To have time, then is precisely to have possibilities remaining in the face of one's approaching

death... time is possible only, therefore, for a mortal, or finite being, a being at once exposed and opposed to violence of death, which, as mortal is a being-toward-death but also at the same time, by means of time, as temporal, a being-against-death --- simultaneously for and against death: finite, for death, but not yet dead. (Dudiak 2001, p. 267)

Time presupposes freedom and the awareness of this presupposition engenders 'will':

It is precisely in this adjournment of violence by time that Levinas locates the space of a freedom a time for a freedom to act against death, time as the freedom to act against, or in spite of, death, a time in which to act before death arrives. (Dudiak 2001, p. 268)

It is the imminence of death and the immanence of time that summons will into action. The absence of these qualities are the plague of the world of the spirit which gives rise to purposelessness and disorientation. Note how Azaro describes the condition of a spirit-child which is by extension a commentary on the general conditions of the world:

The SPIRIT-CHILD is an unwilling adventurer into chaos and sunlight, into the dreams of the living and the dead. Things that are not ready, not willing to be born or to become, things for which adequate preparations have not been made to sustain their momentous births, things that are not resolved, things bound up with failure and the fear of being, they all keep recurring, keep coming back, and in themselves partake of the spirit-child's condition. They keep coming and going till their time is right. History itself fully demonstrates how things of the world partake of the condition of the spirit-child. (Okri 1990, p. 487)

Azaro speaks of contingency and indeterminacy which must be distinguished from purposelessness or indifference. A few paragraphs later he reiterates his message in an optimistic tone which contains the metaphor of the *road* charged with a highly symbolic significance. I believe that the following lines clarify what Okri means by the idea of the famished road. I contend that the title of the book suggests that there are infinite roads or paths that can be taken which means that no option is final and no status quo is permanent. These are glad tidings in good times and bad times: in either case we are urged to abandon apathy, spinelessness or even complacency in order to strive hard. Azaro's announcement is imbued with optimism, an optimism that derives from the knowledge that no justice lasts forever, no love ever dies, that no light is ever really extinguished, that no true road is ever complete, that no way is ever definitive, no truth ever final, and that there are never really any beginnings or endings? (Okri 1990, p. 488)

The road represents openness and a famished or incomplete road accentuates the abundance of possibilities. The road signifies movement and change which unlike river requires will and emphasizes our responsibility and agency. A river is associated with fluidity and movement in one direction so it is identifiable to a deterministic or even defeatist acceptance of conditions. We are afloat it to carry us to our destiny whereas road is identified with choice of direction, the to and fro of movement.

Another important point that these lines imply is that Azaru pronounces the necessity of discarding absolute certainties, of forgoing the desire for locating origin and essence. He emphasizes the need to embrace indeterminacy and 'becoming'. It is a move away from 'being' as a static category to 'becoming' as a processual⁷ category:

from the absolutism of modernity to the openness of post-modernity. It is in this light that the idea of the famished road makes sense.⁸

It is noteworthy that how at the end of book seven of the novel the above oratorical statement is interjected to disrupt the narration. It is as if Okri strives to conclude this part of the book with a philosophical commentary. A few pages later it is Azaro's father's turn to deliver his findings in an oracular manner. Abiko relays his father's thoughts to us:

Dad found that all nations are children; it shocked him that ours too was an abiku nation, a spirit-child nation, one that keeps being reborn and after each birth come blood and betrayals, and the child of our will refuses to stay till we have made propitious sacrifice and displayed our serious intent to bear the weight of a unique destiny. (Okri 1990, p. 494)

Azaro's father's revelations chime with what Ade, Azaro's friend, said before his death. His intimations are blended with millenarian prophecies:

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. I won't see it.... I see the image of two thousand years. I drank in its words. It took many centuries to grow in me. I see a great musician in a land across the seas. Nine hundred years ago. The musician was me. I see a priest, I see a ruler of gentle people. The priest was me, the ruler was me. I see a wicked warrior who killed many innocent people and who delighted in bloodshed. I was him. There was once a soldier stoned to death and fed to the crocodiles in Egypt. I was that soldier. (Okri 1990, p. 478)

The point is that by the end of the novel both Azaru and his father reaches a remarkable level of maturity and wisdom. A conflation of perspectives also happens between Ade and Azaro's father supported by their similar auguries. It is as if Ade is reincarnated in Azaro's father and thus their visions merge. Furthermore, it is by the end of the story that Azaro and his father symbolically unite. This is substantiated by Azaro's mediating his father's insights and also the hope and optimism that both of them implicitly propagate. Azaro's father brings the message of love and human will. He says that they "have entered a new age" where it is up to them how to shape their destinies because in this new era human beings live in a demystified world where "our gods are silent. Our ancestors are silent" (Okri 1990, p. 498).

The road for change is open and there is a plethora ways to make it happen. Love of humanity and the recognition of human will are indispensable parts of this undertaking. What Azaro's father implies is that people must understand the exigencies of time and act accordingly: "if your heart is a friend of Time nothing can destroy you" (Okri 1990, p. 499). People are not only responsible for the posterity but also for the ancestors: "many people reside in us... many past lives, many future lives" (Okri 1990, p. 499)⁹. The implication is that any decision must be well-calculated because it concerns past, present and the future. Azaro's father realizes that their nation is in a state of indeterminacy or in his words it is "an abiku nation, a spirit child nation" (Okri 1990, p. 494). The only way to put an end to this uncertainty and instability is by understanding the power of our will and steeling ourselves "to bear the weight of a unique destiny" (Okri 1990, p. 494).

This is where time and vision become confluent. When vision is no longer subordinate to time i.e. when they stand on equal terms the barriers blocking our visibility are shattered and a panoramic view is opened where the future is subordinated by human will. What people need is to believe in their power to determine their own destiny. This is what Azaro did to release himself from the tyranny of an ever-recurring cycle of birth-death. Only when one chance of living is offered, that life on the earth becomes precious and irreplaceable. This restriction leads to the realization of the "sublime mood of eternity" (Okri 1990, p. 5).

I believe that Ben Okri has tried to illustrate two important points in this novel: (a) postcolonial nations- if they seek real freedom- must seize the time and value it because will and freedom only make sense in the actuality of time. Such a view brings both hope and anxiety. There is hope that we can make a change and there is anxiety as everyone is required to make the best of their time and avoid rash and inconsiderate decisions; (b) only a vision informed by time can breed concern and responsibility for the other. Understanding that we share the same fate and a common destiny demands a transcendental vision of the temporality of our existence, one that is devoid of selfishness and self-interest. Being equipped with such a vision, we are jolted into action. It awakens us to the weightiness of our historicity and assists us in escaping the gravitational pull of passivity and endless recurrence. Thus it restores to us the power to decide for ourselves. As the quotation at the beginning of this essay implies our very being is founded in our being coextensive with time: it is the passage of time that defines our being and it is the politics of action and responsibility for others that make our life meaningful in this world because apathy equals death as indifference is the graveyard of ethics.

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Notes

- ¹ Mahdi Teimouri is a Ph.D candidate at the English Department, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya. He used to teach part-time at different universities in Iran.
- ² Quayson ascribes a defamiliarizing attribute to *The Famished Road*. He argues that defamiliarization and creating "perspectival alienation" is at the heart of literature. This function of literature becomes more conspicuous in the context of debates surrounding the kind of contribution that literature can make to politics. Quayson posits that political discourse tends to dichotomize political reality by offering a binary-oriented representation of the situation on the ground. Through this "binaristic code" politicians succeeds in covering up their incompetence by demonizing political enemies and deifying themselves thus generating a "quasi-metaphysical language of Good v. Evil of Chaos v. Order" which "has served as a necessary simplification that obscures the real complexities of what takes place in the political domain" (94). Now what literary and aesthetic discourse must accomplish is to "defamiliarize existing categories" (95) by avoiding falling into the essentialist binary attitude of the political discourse. To illustrate his point Quayson cites the three examples of defamiliarization from *The Famished Road*.

These are discussed at three levels of characterization of the hero, the rapid shifts between the real world the esoteric, the setting etc. In terms of characterization Azaro as the hero has nothing in common with the "titanic heroic stature" of the traditional folk tales (98). The unpredictable switches between the two worlds renders the narrative 'a tissue of interruptions, with no promise of return to the precise moments in either realm when the interruption took place' (*ibid*). The shifts that take place between the Good and the Bad category are also important. Azaro's father and Madame Koto are two characters whose political allegiances are inconstant but are finally stabilized at the end through their

advocacy for the people and power. Quayson concludes that Okri manages to defamiliarize the 'moral economy of the folktale' by showing that those who are traditionally associated with the Good (the quasi-mythic hero) and those associated with the Bad (the grotesque spirits) are not essentially so, that these are relative qualities (98). Quayson, Ato 2000, *Postcolonialism: Theory, Practice, or Process*, Polity Press, pp.94-98.

³ For a complete elaboration of this point see Peter Childs's *Modernism* and Stevenson's *Modernist Fiction*.

⁴ Woolf in 'Modern Fiction' and 'Mr. Bennet and Ms. Brown' expressly voices her opinion on the priorities of modernist fiction. See Chapter 2 of *Modernist Fiction*.

⁵ The urge to make the best of time is almost one of the salient themes of the sonnets of Shakespeare. The admonitions and promptings of the speaker of the sonnets recall the brevity of time to the young addressee summoning him to defeat time and not to be fooled by the seemingly inexhaustible vigor of youthful years. The point of these pressing demands is vanquishing time through marriage and begetting children of one's own.

⁶ José Santiago Fernández Vázquez argues that *The Famished Road* is a *bildungsroman* which problematizes its conventional form by "reformulating some of the basic characteristics and assumptions of the *Bildungsroman* from the perspective of the African subject" (86). He enumerates different reformulations which is not relevant to my argument here. Unlike me Vázquez focuses his argument on the changes that Azaro undergoes as he argues that "At the beginning of the novel Azaro's commiseration is centred on the members of his family, but this attitude is extended gradually, until it reaches all the destitute" (94) thus the novel depicts Abiko's move 'from innocence to experience' (95). Vázquez, José, 2002, 'Recharting the Geography of Genre: Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* as a Postcolonial *Bildungsroman*', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 32, no. 2, pp. 85-107.

⁷ I borrowed this term from Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*.

⁸ Gillian Gane believes that roads in *The Famished Road* symbolize and indicate different things: "They are directional and purposeful" hence "progress and movement ... They are hungry - famished - and demand sacrifices. Their construction often involves destruction of trees and the natural environment ... at the same time roads are linked to natural phenomena - the novel opens with a reference to a road that was once a river ... The construction of roads can be a noble human endeavor." Gane, Gillian, 2007, 'The Forest and the Road in Novels by

Chinua Achebe and Ben Okri, *Alternation*, vol.14, no. 2, p. 50.

⁹ Vázquez argues that this sentence refers to 'the rejection of a unified identity' and valorization of 'the construction of subjectivity as a never-ending process.' (92).

