Ben Okri’s Magic Realism: Blending the Identity and Culture of the Nigerian Writer in

*The Famished Road*

By

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Abstract

In literature, Magic realism or magical realism is an artistic technique or genre of fiction in which mysterious elements intermingle with the real world. The tale explicates these supernatural elements as real occurrences, presented in a straightforward manner that places the "real" and the "fantastic" in the same stream of thought. The term is broadly evocative rather than essentially thorough. Matthew Stretcher a Winona State University Assistant Professor of Japanese Studies, and author, defines magic realism as "...what happens when a highly detailed, realistic setting is invaded by something 'too strange to believe (3)." Magic realism is therefore characterized by the mingling and juxtaposition of the realistic and the fantastic, bizarre and skilful time shifts, convoluted and even labyrinthine narratives and plots, miscellaneous use of dreams, myths and fairy stories, expressionistic and even surrealistic description, arcane erudition, the elements of surprise or abrupt shock, the horrific and the inexplicable (5). According to Luis Leal, in his Magical Realism in Spanish American Literature, 'the principle thing is not the creation of imaginary beings or worlds but the discovery of the mysterious relationship between man and his circumstances. In magical realism key events have no logical or psychological explanation. The magical realist does not try to copy the surrounding reality or to wound it but to seize the mystery that breathes behind things (119-123). Based on the above assertions, this paper looks at magical realism in Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* as a graphical examination of the the mysterious relationship between man and his circumstances and the nature of human existence in the author’s society.

Introduction

The South (Latin) American writer, Gabriel Garcia Marquez once asserts frankly that …"My most important problem was destroying the lines of demarcation that separates what seems real from what seems fantastic." This also seems to be the challenge faced by his Nigerian counterpart, Ben Okri whose brand of magical realism appears to be an intricate multifaceted fiction that integrates fundamental Nigerian contemporary thinking, as well as a feature and shape of the traditional indigenous Nigerian cultures.
Ordinarily, Ben Okri appears to imbibe the fact that magic realism centres on the material object and the actual existence of things in the world, as opposed to the more cerebral, psychological and subconscious reality that is western in orientation. He apparently goes along with the idea that magic realism describes the uncanny. This is because he comes from a culture where magic, like myth, also provides an essentially artificial or absolute way of depicting reality and this strongly manifests in the daily veracity of the average Nigerian character’s bewilderment of life. However, in contrast with other magical realists, Okri’s art does not only include the overtly fantastic or magical content, it also takes care to include the mundane, the every day, through a matter-of-fact and often inexplicable points of view.

Standing on the ongoing assumptions that Ben Okri’s magic realism aims at merging the chasm between imagination and reality in the Nigerian context, this paper will seek to analyse The Famished Road as a fictive work aimed at conveying a blending of the author’s true identity and cultural background.

The Famished Road as a Hybrid of the Author’s Identity and Cultural Background

The publication of Flowers and Shadows in 1980, shot Okri to international limelight and he is often described as one of Africa's leading writers. His best work however is, The Famished Road, which won the 1991 Booker Prize. This book has been classified as the archetypal magical realist novel of West Africa. Okri has often vehemently refused the tag of a magical realist choosing rather to see his work as "dream-logic" narrative. He succinctly stated:

I grew up in a tradition where there are simply more dimensions to reality: legends and myths and ancestors and spirits and death. You can't use Jane Austen to speak about African reality. Which brings the question: what is reality? Everyone's reality is different. For different perceptions of reality we need a different language. We like to think that the world is rational and precise and exactly how we see it, but something erupts in our reality which makes us sense that there's more to the fabric of life. I'm fascinated by the mysterious element that runs through our lives. Everyone is looking out of the world through their emotion and history. Nobody has an absolute reality (culled from an interview).

Considered as one of Africa’s foremost magic realist, Okri persistently seeks to present the "...mysterious and fantastic quality of reality (15)." His fictions become a means to create a collective Nigerian societal consciousness by "...carving out new mythical and magical perspectives on reality." He basically used his writings to emphasize "...the mystery of human living amongst the reality of life (15)." He believes his brand of writing is "...a forward-thinking modernist experimental writings in the African contemporary society.

In January 2003 Okri argued in The Guardian, a Nigerian national newspaper that the decline of nations begins with the decline of its writers. He opines that, "Because writers represent the unconscious vigour and fighting spirit of a land. Writers are the very sign of the psychic health of a people: they are the barometer of the vitality of the spirit of the nation."
The need to expose the traumatic conditions of life has often occupied Ben Okri’s writings. This leads him to succinctly achieve a historical exposition of the trauma of existence and realities in the Nigerian society. Okri seems to draw from the magical front a unique idea of exposing the odds in his contemporary society. He deems this a very effective means of eventually exposing the truth. History is not left out in his quest rather it becomes for him a great tool for the perfection of his talent. His inclinations to history blend into his works the much desired truth. He views the political intrigues in the country as history worth preserving for the future. History and politics are merged as necessary human quality but the writer sees the malfunction of politics as the bane of governance.

The motif of politics in The Famished Road, examines governance as the scourge of the Nigerian society. Okri’s landmark as a magical realist is apparent in his ability to mix everyday realities with imaginative extravaganzas drawn from the rich interplay of the Nigerian experiences and native cultures; that is his inert ability to enlarge a reader's ordinary sense of the real to include magic, myth, hallucination and miracles. He presents the frame or surface of works that may be conventionally realistic, while incorporating such attributes as supernatural myth and dream fantasy.

His prototype, Azaro introduces a serious mystifying angle to life. He is gifted with the “spirit-eye” with which to discern all the uncanny and unnatural lurking around as fraudulent policemen, fluttering imps turned traders, phantoms, ghosts, fiends and cheerless souls. In the midst of all these, his spirit-world kiths and kin lure him to keep his promise and come home to the world of the unborn, away from his paucity riddled home with his earthly parents and the unexciting wrangling of political frictions, sketch to the rubrics as a competition between "The Party of the Rich" and "The Party of the Poor". Politics play a large part in the story as the party of the rich and the parties of the poor vie to get the people of the ghetto’s votes.

Okri’s narrative stance is brought about as a response to social vices, political turmoil and spiritual decadence prevalent in his society. He applies magical realism in patterns that make his creativity divulge that human beings and the supernatural beings can intermingle in addressing the human situation. This ushers in realism as it pertains to the Nigerian belief system. The Famished Road exposes the continual military coups in Nigeria and the attempts by the ruled to restore sanity to their polity. Azaro, an Abiku child, is used as a symbol of the incessant political odds, military odds and social injustices. The coming and going of the child represents the consistent coups and odds in African governance.

In considering Okri’s work as magical realism one is drawn irresistibly to his plot lines and characteristic employment of hybrid multiple planes of reality that take place in "...inharmonious arenas of such opposites as urban and rural, and spiritual and physical planes” (18). Azaro is portrayed in Okri’s The Famished Road as experiencing multiple realistic situations simultaneously criss-crossing into the Nigerian post colonial city state and the bucolic ghoulish world of the spirits and the unseen, all in the same place but at different times and tides. The character’s dreamlike state connects these multiple realities; these bits of magic that make the multiple planes of reality possible. Azaro’s ties with the spirit world are
by no means disengaged, and he habitually meanders from one plane of reality to another. He is however emotionally deeply attached to the physical world.

In the physical realm, Azaro represents the poverty stricken Nigerian children struggling to survive in the midst of agonizing paucity and misery of the Nigerian slum, where infant mortality is a common occurrence. He feels the pang of the harsh realities of hunger and want. He feels the full impact of the humankind in its full weirdness and foibles. He represents the countless Nigeria’s underprivileged children, hungry in the midst of plenty and dwelling haplessly beside far richer neighbours. He experiences all the hardships that a child growing up in the deep paucity of the Nigerian ghetto has to face. The wretchedness is overwhelming- steadiness of starvation, brutality and sickness; horrid accommodation in a single-room shanty house with no sewage or electricity; paucity and joblessness; fraudulent politicians and rigged elections; domestic violence, deforestation, the conflict between modernity and a traditional way of life. "Our hunger can change the world," Azaro's father tells him, "make it better, sweeter." The Nigerian reality is made manifest in the lives of the majority of these ghetto dwellers. Azaro explains out his relationship to his spiritual affiliates:

There was not one amongst us who looked forward to being born. We disliked the rigours of existence, the unfulfilled longings, the enshrined injustices of the world, the labyrinths of love, the ignorance of parents, the fact of dying, and the amazing indifference of the Living in the midst of the simple beauties of the universe. We feared the heartlessness of human beings, all of whom are born blind, few of whom ever learnt to see (3).

Spiritually, Azaro as an abiku or spirit child, whose ties to the real world are weak understands the real plight of the earthly child. He is a sojourner, free to return to his spiritual base at anytime and without hindrance too. He explains that:

There are many reasons why babies cry when they are born and one of them is the sudden separation from the world of pure dreams, where all things are made of enchantment, and where there is no suffering. The happier we were the closer was our birth. As we approached another incarnation we made pacts that we will return to the spirit world at the first opportunity. We made these vows in the fields of intense flowers and in the sweet-tasting moonlight of the world (4).

The agony of Azaro’s parents is embedded in their knowledge that their child has a flimsy hold on life and may at any moment hearken to the call of his spirit peers on the homecoming to the realm of the spirits. The most agonizing of having an abiku as a child is not just the death of the youngster but the fact that the death of the child is a cyclic motion of tragedy. There is the belief that the abiku is born again and again to the same parents, each time dying without getting to adulthood. It is not therefore far from the truth to argue that his blend of magic realism is the result of a unique fusion of the beliefs and superstitions of the author’s cultural background.
On the whole, Okri’s reader is presented with a narrative that can create a deeper and truer reality than the usual realist method would exemplify. *The Famished Road* as a Magic realist novel has typically, a strong narrative drive, in which the recognizably realistic merges with the unexpected and the inexplicable and in which elements of dreams, fairy story, or mythology combine with the everyday, often in a mosaic or kaleidoscopic pattern of refraction and recurrence.

Okri’s *The Famished Road* manages to present a view of the Nigerian contemporary life that exudes a sense of energy and vitality in an environment that promises not only ethereal delight and a fair share of mystery but as well the intricacies of the author’s societal identity and cultural inclinations. In effect, his reader is rewarded with the author’s point of view on a society that would have naturally given more to its inhabitants in the real sense of life and existence. He presents a society where the most potential can instantaneously be exchanged for the most probable as he drifts with ease from the domain of the real to the magical realms by the similarly, yet, unfamiliar device of the magical artistic imagination. Madame Koto’s new car must undergo the rituals of ‘washing.’ The narrator persona describes the guests thus:

There were old men who we have never seen before. And there were a lot of powerful strange women with eyes that registered no emotions. We saw chiefs, thugs, and there were even herbalists, witch-doctors and their acolytes (380).

Then there was the great herbalist among them, a stern man with a face so battered and eyes so daunting that even mirrors would recoil and crack at his glance as he poured the libations with profound incantations. He who promises among other things that Madame Koto’s new car will bring “prosperity [and] plenty of money went on to prophesy that:

‘This car ...will drive even to moon and come back safely.

Anyone who thinks evil of you, may this car run them over in their sleep. This car will hunt out your enemies, pursue their bad spirits, grind them into the road. Your car will drive over fire and be safe. It will drive into the ocean and be safe. It has friends in the spirit world. Its friend there, a car just like this one, will hunt down your enemies. They will not be safe from you. A bomb will fall on this car and it will be safe. I have opened the road for this car. It will travel all roads. It will arrive safely at all destinations (380-381).

Okri’s chief character, Azaro gives off the impression of existing in a society... a culture where people continually blend their lives with the real and the imagined- nothing is completely so real, everything is mostly of the bizarre and the weird. Here, life is a fusion of the dream and the waking. Nothing is as it seems and one is forced to look on every event, every experience, and every occurrence with new eyes. Okri’s work embodies an innovative technique that simultaneously highlights and celebrates both the mundane and the real. The author thereby provides a wonderful divergence from the routine perception of pragmatic writings.
The author’s apt lie in his ability to employ various techniques that bestow all things with deeper meanings and appropriately expose the obscurities therein, that constantly threaten the secure harmony of simple and ingenuous societal life. Okri’s *The Famished Road* offer a composed approbation of the magic of being predominant in the Nigerian society. The author makes one believe that every occurrence has a dual face of the real and the imagined. This is typified by the dual nature of Madam Koto and her bar. There is the continuous existence of spirits at Madame Koto’s bar drinking along with the unsuspecting humans. There are women with the face of animals, and boxers who return from the dead for one last fight. Okri here seems inclined to share the views of Franz Roh in his *Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism Magical Realism* where he asserted that

this [art offers a] calm admiration of the magic of being, of the discovery that things already have their own faces, [this] means that the ground in which the most diverse ideas in the world can take root has been re conquered--albeit in new ways. For the new art it is a question of representing before our eyes, in an intuitive way, the fact, the interior figure, of the exterior world (32).

Okri’s *The Famished Road* seems also to echo the assertions of the great magic realist Alejo Carpentier in his *On the Marvellous Real in America ‘Lo real maravilloso Americano* where he succinctly affirmed that

The marvellous begins to be unmistakably marvellous when it arises from an unexpected alteration of reality (the miracle), from a privileged revelation of reality an unaccustomed insight that is singularly favoured by the unexpected richness of reality or an amplification of the scale and categories of reality perceived with particular intensity by virtue of an exaltation of the spirit that leads it to a kind of extreme state. To begin with, the phenomenon of the marvellous presupposes faith. (85-86).

The characters in Okri’s works live in a fragmented world, where there is a natural transformation of the ordinary and the everyday into the awe-inspiring and the illusory. His works are more or less laced with the art of surprises. Time exists in a kind of changeless uncertainty and the weird come about as part of reality. There is Tyger, Azaro’s father in his constant longing to get away from the ferocious poverty and sequence of the rural community life. There are his unending plots and diverse plans that end up etching the insignia of poverty more and more on his family thereby hurling them into turmoil and euphoria from time to time. When he tries his hand on becoming a boxer, he adopts the name Black Tyger and gets himself beaten blue black by half spirit-half human wrestlers.

He turned politician and sought the support of contrasting crew of beggars and destitute. His entourage includes embroidered characters like the village blind man who can see when he wants to and plays horrific music at his pleasure; then there is the photographer who enchants the villagers with his skill of recording neighbourhood proceedings on photography. This photographer also had the temerity of laying himself open to the wrath of
the powers that be for practicing his skill irascibly. Then there is Madame Koto, the unpredictable owner of a neighbouring public house and brothel whose flair for industry and associates in elevated seats institutes her as the most powerful person in the environs.

Here the author transports his readers from the shingles of the realistic to the utterly implausible-in such a solid setting thereby effectively merging the logical and the illogical. Angel Flores, in *Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction* refers to this as a situation where once the reader accepts the *fait accompli*, the rest follows with logical precision (113-116).

Ordinarily, Okri’s fictions make the reader reason alongside Amaryll Chanady in *The Territorialization of the Imaginary in Latin America: Self-Affirmation and Resistance to Metropolitan Paradigms* that

Magical realism is, more than anything else, an attitude toward reality that can be expressed in popular or cultured forms, in elaborate or rustic styles in closed or open structures. In magical realism the writer confronts reality and tries to untangle it, to discover what is mysterious in things, in life, in human acts (125-144).

The interplay between the real and the imagined in Okri’s *The Famished Road*, is more pronounced in the characters’ struggle to strike a balance between the duality of nature. The author seems inclined to the conviction that magical realism is about a reality which is already in and of itself magical or fantastic. His art is therefore tied seriously to the veracity that the individual character requires a bond with the traditions and the faith of his community where he is deeply historically raised and attached. In pushing Okri’s *The Famished Road* to the realm of the Magical realism one is forced to recall Salmon Rushdie’s argument that magic realism, at least as practised ... is a development out of Surrealism that expresses a genuinely Third World consciousness.

Okri’s work therefore turns out to be part of a twentieth-century preoccupation of the Nigerian writer with ways of capturing and remedying the lacuna predominant in so many socio economic facets of the traditional Nigerian society. There is a total magical projection of the intimate interdependence between reality and fantasy as a mode of escape from the harsh realities of life in the country. Magical realism becomes an escapist world. The characters are more contented when submerged in mysteries and the magical. This is because according to David Mikics, Derek Walcott and Alejo Carpentier in *Nature, History, and the Caribbean Writer*:

Magical realism wills a transformation of the object of representation, rather than the means of representation. Magical realism, like the uncanny projects a mesmerizing uncertainty suggesting that ordinary life may also be the scene of the extraordinary. (372).

In the real sense of the Magical realist, Okri takes the supernatural for granted by
presenting prototypes that tend to spend more time exploring the array of human response to the barest Nigerian factors. The author explores the Nigerian situations to the limits of the knowable and the unknowable. He looks beyond the limits of the knowable to that tangible but flimsy line between the factual and the imaginary. Here, too the author appears to tow the lines of thought of Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris in *Introduction: Daiquiri Birds and Flaubertian Parrot(ie)s* where they jointly opined that:

Magical realist fiction is:
--A disruption of modern realist fiction
--creates a space for interaction and diversity
--no less 'real' than traditional 'realism'
--about transgressing boundaries, multiple worlds
--on the boundaries and destabilizes normative oppositions
--subversive
--an international phenomenon(45).

All the above assertions are buttressed in the author’s techniques which include, firstly, a combination of reality and fantasy, secondly, the transformation of the real into the awesome and unreal and thirdly an art of surprises, one which creates a distorted concept of time and space. There is also the abundant portrayal of the supernatural, or anything that is contrary to the characters’ conventional day to day existence and view of reality, yet not fully divorced from reality either. Okri’s works are thus based on reality, or a world to which he is completely attuned. His works carry along the expressions, the mythical and superstitions of the traditional Nigerian contemporary society. The result is a bare awareness of dimensions of reality of which the readers are not normally aware.

Okri has come a long way in his fictive manoeuvres. He had earlier on, experimented copiously with new literary forms, different styles, genres, and traditions. He took off as a realist, dabbling into postcolonial themes and representing core traditional Nigerian lives. He also experimented with stream of consciousness literatures as well as diverse realism, modernism, and oral forms, especially those of Yoruba culture. His most prominent works are however, the magic realism fully laced with African flavour. The author however maintains that his works are simply portrayals of unabashed Nigerian realities. He refused to go along fully with the school of thought that branded his works as leaning on the magical. He has accentuated the realistic proportions of his work – myths and local beliefs are part of the real world, urban life-world, not that they exist next to the real world. He avers:

We are the miracles that God made
To taste the bitter fruit of Time.
We are precious.
And one day our suffering
Will turn into the wonders of earth.
The author started writing early in life. At the age of nineteen his first novel, *Flowers and Shadows* (1980) came into being. The story centres on the travails of a rather successful businessman whose envious relations strived to make life complex and thorny. Here he completely experimented on the lanes of conventional Realism. Okri’s second novel, *The Landscapes Within* (1981), also revolves around the ventures of an underprivileged young painter residing in Lagos. Here he portrays the abject poverty facing the majority of the Nigerian masses and their day to day struggles to survive amidst severe hardships. Okri said in an interview that

Ghetto-dwellers are the great fantasists...There was an extraordinary vibrancy there, an imaginative life. When you are that poor, all you've got left is your belief in the imagination.

Then, *The Famished Road* (1991) was Okri’s literary magnum opus. This Booker Prize winner has been called the classic magical realist novel of West Africa. The title was taken from *Abiku* a poem by Wole Soyinka – "May you never walk / When the road waits, famished. The plot of Okri’s *The Famished Road* is an intermingling of Yoruba myth and postcolonial, post modernity, set on the eve of the independence of Nigeria. *The Famished Road* is the astonishing tale of the travails of a spirit child as he journeys through the poverty and suffering of life in a contemporary Nigerian society. Here the author wades into the traditional Nigerian societal beliefs of reincarnation and death. The narrator persona, Azaro is a "spirit-child," an *Abiku*, a famished baby of a rather confusing way of life, who is predestined to die in infancy and be reborn to the same mother over and over again. At birth, it was discovered that Azaro was a spirit child.

This character has the rare and bizarre gifts of vibrant dreams, which predict the future with accuracy. He could distinguish with ease the spirits who co-habit the human existence in human forms intermingling with the living. These spirits relate with him and often beckon on him thereby making him depart his human body for an ethereal one from time to time. At such occasions, his parents would pronounce him dead and have him encased in a coffin, ready for burial. When he regained his earthly spirit and woke up in the coffin it apparent to his parents that he is an Abiku on a sojourn in human flesh. His parents were expected to perform some rituals to break his bond with the spirit world, but they were not financially strong enough to do so. Azaro therefore grows up fighting for his life against the spirits who continually call him to come back home to the spirit world. He also is at perils from humans who would want to utilize his supernatural powers. An instance is when Priestesses who recognized him for what he was, kidnapped him.

Another instance of the human danger blending with the spiritual is when Azaro escaped from the priestesses and found himself in the house of a police officer whose dead son tried to communicate with him.

As a spirit child Azaro is expected to love the spirit world more than the human existence. He is expected also to die willingly and join his spiritual counterparts whenever they reincarnate in the physical world. The book gives off the idea that these spirit children
are born into the world of the living with firm pledge that as soon as they are born they will die and thus return to their friends in the land of spirits. Though Azaro made such a pledge he falls deeply in love with the impoverished home he was born into. He is most especially held back by his beautiful, poor mother whose suffering face made him decide to live a full human life. He battles unendingly with his spirit companions who haunt him to return to the land of the dead. Azaro explains:

I remember that it was because of her bruised face that i had chosen to live, to stay, in the confines of this world, and to break my pact with my spirit companions. One of the many promises I made before birth was that I would make her happy. I had chosen to stay and now she wanted to die (228-229).

This makes Azaro’s childhood weird and traumatic. There is always the eerie presence of a supernatural intermingling with the living, in human or animal form, or in the form of lights and omens. Sometimes Azaro disappears fully into the spiritual realm.

The author dwells on Azaro's fight with his fateful life. Azaro’s struggle to beat his fate becomes synonymous with the fate of man-helpless and hapless before a predestined fate. Okri depicts the struggle of this fated child to defend himself against a pre determined fate. The agony of this persona is more compounded by the harsh realities of his immediate contemporary society. The persona wills to survive against all odds, against his fate and to survive with his family despite the destitution, food shortage, disease, and violence predominant in his society.

In *The Famished Road* the author persistently traces the triangular belief of the tradition Yoruba of Southern Nigeria. Life is depicted in a tri-dimensional status closely linked to each other in an unending interaction of the living, the unborn and the dead. The book is therefore concurrently set in the world of dreams, of those waiting to be born and of the dead. The author strongly affirms this as a part of his societal life and identity. He succinctly asserts in an interview that he grew up with the knowledge and belief of kids seeing spirits hence, the author's portrayal of Azaro’s spirit-companions as continuously trying to pull him back into their world.

He also wades further into the belief of man’s pitiable struggles against fate and the infinite conviction that man can counter fate as Azaro's father undergoes series of mythic battles to save his son from an impending infantile death. Azaro's father is an optimistic labourer who wants the best for his family and the community. He suffers greatly for this, eventually becoming a boxer and later a politician. Azaro's father, Black Tyger loves him deeply, but is frequently angry at having an Abiku and sporadically goes into livid aggression. Azaro lives with both abuse and a prevailing love. A great boxer, Black Tyger sometimes gets abusive as a father and husband, taking out the harsh crudity of life on his wife and child.

He is also a dominant and decent character lamenting in the wilderness of life without catching the attention of a listening ear. Tyger represents the average Nigerian character on the clutches of life’s uncertainties. He battles unremittingly to survive. He however seem to
labour in vain, but he never gives up. Even as a wrestler, he is buffeted by fate as most of his opponents are not human but spirits from the land of fighting ghosts. He tried his hands as a politician for the honourable intent of building schools and settlements for the beggars. The author seems to remind us at once that there is more to everything than meets the eye and that, beyond the surface, there are many phenomena and mysteries in life that are not easily understood.

Azaro’s mother works very hard selling anything she can get her hands on for the family. She cares for her family deeply and constantly gives up food and security for her family and their ideals. She is proud that Azaro is her son and goes to great lengths to protect him. Her sufferings become synonymous to that of the average poor woman struggling to survive in the face of abject poverty. At times it gets too much for her and she takes it out on Azaro but the love she has for her child and husband is heart warming.

Okri’s Magic realism borders on implicit criticism of his society, particularly the leaders and the affluent. He asserts in an interview that... I lived rough, by my wits, was homeless, lived on the streets, lived on friends' floors, was happy, was miserable. This buttresses the fact that his society has no place or pity for the poor. This he represents in his portrayal of the character of the ominous spiritualist Madame Koto, whose bar Azaro visits regularly. Progress is represented by the splendid, voluptuous character of Madame Koto. She starts out as a well-meaning woman, trying to get along with everyone else. This overweight lady begins the story running a poor bar of palm wine and her famous peppercorn soup. She is the first to bring electricity to the ghetto and the first to own a car however, the richer she gets the nastier she becomes. She has a liking for Azaro, though at times she is convinced that he brings bad luck at intervals.

However, as the story progresses, she becomes richer, siding with the political party of the rich, and is often accused of witchcraft. She tries to help Azaro and his family on numerous occasions until the suspicion that she renders her help in order to have access to Azaro's blood which she is convinced will help her remain youthful.

We are always in the ghetto with Azaro’s family, always just on the brink of starvation. There is an unshakeable belief in the existence of spirits, herbalists and witches and wizards all have their places in the communities, the people are riddled with superstition but in the context of this story every superstition is a ready response to an ailment and cure to a sickness.

The tale shifts continually linking Azaro’s adventures in the real world with his struggling parents and dirty politics, and another peculiar world limited to Azaro’s vision. This other world manifests fully in Madame Koto’s palm wine bar, the (famished) road and the forest – which are crammed full with spirits, and uncanny elements. Azaro’s prophetic inclinations make it easy for him to wade through all the predicaments of the physical world.

Finally Azaro must choose between pains of mortality and the land of spirits. The spirits haunting Azaro are portrayed as weird and creepy. The undead are presented as blind lecherous old men preying on the eyes of human children. There are beggars with distorted
limbs and unspeakable wounds, awe striking figures and wild animals. The famished road has life and a horrendous stomach, a creature waiting to maul and annihilate unsuspecting sojourners without proper sacrifices.

Towards the end of the book, Azaro is still torn between his love for his earthly parents and his pledge to his spirit kins. He is confused and undecided as to whether to stay or die and join his spiritual mates. He declares his fears about another spirit-child:

There was something cruel about my friend’s spirit and I understood why spirit-children are so feared. Faced always with the songs and fragrances of another world, a world beyond death, where the air is illuminated, where spirit companions know the secret of one’s desire, and can fulfil those desires, every single one of them, spirit-children do not care much for the limited things of the world. Ade did not want to stay anymore; he did not like the weight of the world, the terror of the earth’s time. Love and the anguish of parents touched him only faintly, for beyond their stares and threats and beatings he knew that his parents’ guardianship was temporary. He always had a greater home (485-486).

Azaro obviously voices his own feelings too. He is faced with a decision and until he embraces an option, he is half human-half spirit.

Conclusion

So far this paper has strived to argue that Ben Okri’s The Famished Road, is a magic realist’s attempt at a critical presentation of the oddities of life in the author’s contemporary society. This work has been reviewed here as a deliberate presentation of analytical views of a society in the trudges of tyrannical ordeals of anarchical living conditions. These features are x-rayed beyond the micro family settings to the macro national spheres. Azaro, the spirit-child hero persona of Okri’s The Famished Road, calls himself ‘an unwilling adventurer into chaos and sunlight, into the dreams of the living and the dead. (487)’

Okri believes that his works are true portrayals of his society. He avers that...The fact of storytelling hints at a fundamental human unease, hints at human imperfection. Where there is perfection there is no story to tell... His works imbibe the basic principles of Magic realism as a literary genre that has the capacity to enrich ideas of what is 'real' by incorporating all dimensions of the imagination, particularly as expressed in magic, myth and religion. Again he opines that ...the most authentic thing about us is our capacity to create, to overcome, to endure, to transform, to love and to be greater than our suffering.

He writes about the mundane and the metaphysical, the individual and the collective, drawing the reader into a world with vivid descriptions of his contemporary society. As for his works being a true depiction of his identity and culture he succinctly asserts:

You see, I was told stories; we were all told stories as kids in Nigeria. We had to tell stories that would keep one another interested, and you weren’t allowed to tell stories that everybody else knew. You had to dream up new ones....
Okri’s *The Famished Road* is all the way through, tormenting and agonizing but on the whole it gives off a solid significance of advancement and optimism. His prototypes are the everyday struggling Nigerians with tough moral fibre and a knack for survival. Despite the harrowing wretchedness and paucity, bedevilling the characters, they occasionally flounder into love or happiness that keeps them going. Thus Okri has become quite prominent among the foremost writers of this generation of Nigerian writers, who have in principle discarded the social and historical themes and diversified into modernist plot and oral traditions as a means of remedying the oddities prevalent in their contemporary society.

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Ben Okri’s Magic Realism: Blending the Identity and Culture of the Nigerian Writer in The Famished Road

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Abstract
In literature, Magic realism or magical realism is an artistic technique or genre of fiction in which mysterious elements intermingle with the real world. The tale explicates these supernatural elements as real occurrences, presented in a straightforward manner that places the "real" and the "fantastic" in the same stream of thought. The term is broadly evocative rather than essentially thorough. Matthew Stretcher a Winona State University Assistant Professor of Japanese Studies, and author, defines magic realism as "...what happens when a highly detailed, realistic setting is invaded by something 'too strange to believe (3)." Magic realism is therefore characterized by the mingling and juxtaposition of the realistic and the fantastic, bizarre and skilful time shifts, convoluted and even labyrinthine narratives and plots, miscellaneous use of dreams, myths and fairy stories, expressionistic and even surrealistic description, arcane erudition, the elements of surprise or abrupt shock, the horrific and the inexplicable (5). According to Luis Leal, in his Magical Realism in Spanish American Literature, ‘the principle thing is not the creation of imaginary beings or worlds but the discovery of the mysterious relationship between man and his circumstances. In magical realism key events have no logical or psychological explanation. The magical realist does not try to copy the surrounding reality or to wound it but to seize the mystery that breathes behind things (119-123). Based on the above assertions, this paper looks at magical realism in Ben Okri’s The Famished Road as a graphical examination of the mysterious relationship between man and his circumstances and the nature of human existence in the author’s society.

Keywords: Magic, realism, fantastic, supernatural fiction.
Introduction

The South (Latin) American writer, Gabriel Garcia Marquez once asserts frankly that "...My most important problem was destroying the lines of demarcation that separates what seems real from what seems fantastic." This also seems to be the challenge faced by his Nigerian counterpart, Ben Okri whose brand of magical realism appears to be an intricate multifaceted fiction that integrates fundamental Nigerian contemporary thinking, as well as a feature and shape of the traditional indigenous Nigerian cultures.

Ordinarily, Ben Okri appears to imbibe the fact that magic realism centres on the material object and the actual existence of things in the world, as opposed to the more cerebral, psychological and subconscious reality that is western in orientation. He apparently goes along with the idea that magic realism describes the uncanny. This is because he comes from a culture where magic, like myth, also provides an essentially artificial or absolute way of depicting reality and this strongly manifests in the daily veracity of the average Nigerian character’s bewilderment of life. However, in contrast with other magical realists, Okri’s art does not only include the overtly fantastic or magical content, it also takes care to include the mundane, the everyday, through a matter-of-fact and often inexplicable points of view.

Standing on the ongoing assumptions that Ben Okri’s magic realism aims at merging the chasm between imagination and reality in the Nigerian context, this paper will seek to analyse The Famished Road as a fictive work aimed at conveying a blending of the author’s true identity and cultural background.

**The Famished Road as a Hybrid of the Author’s Identity and Cultural Background**

The publication of Flowers and Shadows in 1980, shot Okri to international limelight and he is often described as one of Africa’s leading writers. His best work however is, The Famished Road, which won the 1991 Booker Prize. This book has been classified as the archetypal magical realist novel of West Africa. Okri has often vehemently refused the tag of a magical realist choosing rather to see his work as "dream-logic" narrative. He succinctly stated:

I grew up in a tradition where there are simply more dimensions to reality: legends and myths and ancestors and spirits and death. You can't use Jane Austen to speak about African reality. Which brings the question: what is reality? Everyone's reality is different. For different perceptions of reality we need a different language. We like to think that the world is rational and precise and exactly how we see it, but something erupts in our reality which makes us sense that there's more to the fabric of life. I'm fascinated by the mysterious element that runs through our lives. Everyone is looking out of the world through their emotion and history. Nobody has an absolute reality (culled from an interview).

Considered as one of Africa’s foremost magic realist, Okri persistently seeks to present the "...mysterious and fantastic quality of reality (15)." His fictions become a means to create a collective Nigerian societal consciousness by "...carving out new mythical and magical perspectives on reality." He basically used his writings to emphasize "...the mystery of human living amongst the reality of life (15)." He believes his brand of writing is "...a forward-thinking modernist experimental writings in the African contemporary society.

In January 2003 Okri argued in The Guardian, a Nigerian national newspaper that the decline of nations begins with the decline of its writers. He opines that, "Because writers represent the unconscious vigour and fighting
spirit of a land. Writers are the very sign of the psychic health of a people: they are the barometer of the vitality of the spirit of the nation." The need to expose the traumatic conditions of life has often occupied Ben Okri’s writings. This leads him to succinctly achieve a historical exposition of the trauma of existence and realities in the Nigerian society. Okri seems to draw from the magical front a unique idea of exposing the odds in his contemporary society. He deems this a very effective means of eventually exposing the truth. History is not left out in his quest rather it becomes for him a great tool for the perfection of his talent. His inclinations to history blend into his works the much desired truth. He views the political intrigues in the country as history worth preserving for the future. History and politics are merged as necessary human quality but the writer sees the malfunction of politics as the bane of governance.

The motif of politics in The Famished Road, examines governance as the scourge of the Nigerian society. Okri’s landmark as a magical realist is apparent in his ability to mix everyday realities with imaginative extravaganzas drawn from the rich interplay of the Nigerian experiences and native cultures; that is his inert ability to enlarge a reader's ordinary sense of the real to include magic, myth, hallucination and miracles. He presents the frame or surface of works that may be conventionally realistic, while incorporating such attributes as supernatural myth and dream fantasy.

His prototype, Azaro introduces a serious mystifying angle to life. He is gifted with the “spirit-eye” with which to discern all the uncanny and unnatural lurking around as fraudulent policemen, fluttering imps turned traders, phantoms, ghosts, fiends and cheerless souls. In the midst of all these, his spirit-world kiths and kin lure him to keep his promise and come home to the world of the unborn, away from his paucity riddled home with his earthly parents and the unexciting wrangling of political frictions, sketch to the rubrics as a competition between "The Party of the Rich" and "The Party of the Poor". Politics play a large part in the story as the party of the rich and the parties of the poor vie to get the people of the ghetto’s votes.

Okri’s narrative stance is brought about as a response to social vices, political turmoil and spiritual decadence prevalent in his society. He applies magical realism in patterns that make his creativity divulge that human beings and the supernatural beings can intermingle in addressing the human situation. This ushers in realism as it pertains to the Nigerian belief system. The Famished Road exposes the continual military coups in Nigeria and the attempts by the ruled to restore sanity to their polity. Azaro, an Abiku child, is used as a symbol of the incessant political odds, military odds and social injustices. The coming and going of the child represents the consistent coups and odds in African governance.

In considering Okri’s work as magical realism one is drawn irresistibly to his plot lines and characteristic employment of hybrid multiple planes of reality that take place in "...inharmonious arenas of such opposites as urban and rural, and spiritual and physical planes” (18). Azaro is portrayed in Okri’s The Famished Road as experiencing multiple realistic situations simultaneously criss-crossing into the Nigerian post colonial city state and the bucolic ghoulish world of the spirits and the unseen, all in the same place but at different times and tides. The character’s dreamlike state connects these multiple realities; these bits of magic that make the multiple planes of reality possible. Azaro’s ties with the spirit world are by no means disengaged, and he habitually meanders from one plane of reality to another. He is however emotionally deeply attached to the physical world.

In the physical realm, Azaro represents the poverty stricken Nigerian children
struggling to survive in the midst of agonizing paucity and misery of the Nigerian slum, where infant mortality is a common occurrence. He feels the pang of the harsh realities of hunger and want. He feels the full impact of the humankind in its full weirdness and foibles. He represents the countless Nigeria’s underprivileged children, hungry in the midst of plenty and dwelling haplessly beside far richer neighbours. He experiences all the hardships that a child growing up in the deep paucity of the Nigerian ghetto has to face. The wretchedness is overwhelming—steadiness of starvation, brutality and sickness; horrid accommodation in a single-room shanty house with no sewage or electricity; paucity and joblessness; fraudulent politicians and rigged elections; domestic violence, deforestation, the conflict between modernity and a traditional way of life. "Our hunger can change the world," Azaro’s father tells him, "make it better, sweeter." The Nigerian reality is made manifest in the lives of the majority of these ghetto dwellers. Azaro explains out his relationship to his spiritual affiliates:

There was not one amongst us who looked forward to being born. We disliked the rigours of existence, the unfulfilled longings, the enshrined injustices of the world, the labyrinths of love, the ignorance of parents, the fact of dying, and the amazing indifference of the Living in the midst of the simple beauties of the universe. We feared the heartlessness of human beings, all of whom are born blind, few of whom ever learnt to see (3).

Spiritually, Azaro as an abiku or spirit child, whose ties to the real world are weak understands the real plight of the earthly child. He is a sojourner, free to return to his spiritual base at anytime and without hindrance too. He explains that:

There are many reasons why babies cry when they are born and one of them is the sudden separation from the world of pure dreams, where all things are made of enchantment, and where there is no suffering. The happier we were the closer was our birth. As we approached another incarnation we made pacts that we will return to the spirit world at the first opportunity. We made these vows in the fields of intense flowers and in the sweet-tasting moonlight of the world (4).

The agony of Azaro’s parents is embedded in their knowledge that their child has a flimsy hold on life and may at any moment hearken to the call of his spirit peers on the homecoming to the realm of the spirits. The most agonizing of having an abiku as a child is not just the death of the youngster but the fact that the death of the child is a cyclic motion of tragedy. There is the belief that the abiku is born again and again to the same parents, each time dying without getting to adulthood. It is not therefore far from the truth to argue that his blend of magic realism is the result of a unique fusion of the beliefs and superstitions of the author’s cultural background.

On the whole, Okri’s reader is presented with a narrative that can create a deeper and truer reality than the usual realist method would exemplify. The Famished Road as a Magic realist novel has typically, a strong narrative drive, in which the recognizably realistic merges with the unexpected and the inexplicable and in which elements of dreams, fairy story, or mythology combine with the everyday, often in a mosaic or kaleidoscopic pattern of refraction and recurrence.

Okri’s The Famished Road manages to present a view of the Nigerian contemporary life that exudes a sense of energy and vitality in an environment that promises not only ethereal delight and a fair share of mystery but as well
the intricacies of the author’s societal identity and cultural inclinations. In effect, his reader is rewarded with the author’s point of view on a society that would have naturally given more to its inhabitants in the real sense of life and existence. He presents a society where the most potential can instantaneously be exchanged for the most probable as he drifts with ease from the domain of the real to the magical realms by the similarly, yet, unfamiliar device of the magical artistic imagination. Madame Koto’s new car must undergo the rituals of ‘washing.’ The narrator persona describes the guests thus:

There were old men who we have never seen before. And there were a lot of powerful strange women with eyes that registered no emotions. We saw chiefs, thugs, and there were even herbalists, witch-doctors and their acolytes (380).

Then there was the great herbalist among them, a stern man with a face so battered and eyes so daunting that even mirrors would recoil and crack at his glance as he poured the libations with profound incantations. He who promises among other things that Madame Koto’s new car will bring “prosperity [and] plenty of money went on to prophesy that:

This car ...will drive even to moon and come back safely.

Anyone who thinks evil of you, may this car run them over in their sleep. This car will hunt out your enemies, pursue their bad spirits, grind them into the road. Your car will drive over fire and be safe. It will drive into the ocean and be safe. It has friends in the spirit world. Its friend there, a car just like this one, will hunt down your enemies. They will not be safe from you. A bomb will fall on this car and it will be safe. I have opened the road for this car. It will travel all roads. It will arrive safely at all destinations (380-381).

Okri’s chief character, Azaro gives off the impression of existing in a society... a culture where people continually blend their lives with the real and the imagined- nothing is completely so real, everything is mostly of the bizarre and the weird. Here, life is a fusion of the dream and the waking. Nothing is as it seems and one is forced to look on every event, every experience, and every occurrence with new eyes. Okri’s work embodies an innovative technique that simultaneously highlights and celebrates both the mundane and the real. The author thereby provides a wonderful divergence from the routine perception of pragmatic writings.

The author’s apt lie in his ability to employ various techniques that bestow all things with deeper meanings and appropriately expose the obscurities therein, that constantly threaten the secure harmony of simple and ingenuous societal life. Okri’s The Famished Road offer a composed approbation of the magic of being predominant in the Nigerian society. The author makes one believe that every occurrence has a dual face of the real and the imagined. This is typified by the dual nature of Madam Koto and her bar. There is the continuous existence of spirits at Madame Koto’s bar drinking along with the unsuspecting humans. There are women with the face of animals, and boxers who return from the dead for one last fight. Okri here seems inclined to share the views of Franz Roh in his Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism Magical Realism where he asserted that this [art offers a] calm admiration of the magic of being, of the discovery that things already have their own faces, [this] means that the ground in which the most diverse ideas in the world can take root has been reconquered--albeit in new ways. For the new art it is a question of
representing before our eyes, in an intuitive way, the fact, the interior figure, of the exterior world (32).

Okri’s *The Famished Road* seems also to echo the assertions of the great magic realist Alejo Carpentier in his *On the Marvellous Real in America* ‘Lo real maravilloso Americano where he succinctly affirmed that

The marvellous begins to be unmistakably marvellous when it arises from an unexpected alteration of reality (the miracle), from a privileged revelation of reality an unaccustomed insight that is singularly favoured by the unexpected richness of reality or an amplification of the scale and categories of reality perceived with particular intensity by virtue of an exaltation of the spirit that leads it to a kind of extreme state. To begin with, the phenomenon of the marvellous presupposes faith. (85-86).

The characters in Okri’s works live in a fragmented world, where there is a natural transformation of the ordinary and the everyday into the awe-inspiring and the illusory. His works are more or less laced with the art of surprises. Time exists in a kind of changeless uncertainty and the weird come about as part of reality. There is Tyger, Azaro’s father in his constant longing to get away from the ferocious poverty and sequence of the rural community life. There are his unending plots and diverse plans that end up etching the insignia of poverty more and more on his family thereby hurling them into turmoil and euphoria from time to time. When he tries his hand on becoming a boxer, he adopts the name Black Tyger and gets himself beaten blue black by half spirit-half human wrestlers. He turned politician and sought the support of contrasting crew of beggars and destitute. His entourage includes embroidered characters like the village blind man who can see when he wants to and plays horrific music at his pleasure; then there is the photographer who enchants the villagers with his skill of recording neighbourhood proceedings on photography. This photographer also had the temerity of laying himself open to the wrath of the powers that be for practicing his skill irascibly. Then there is Madame Koto, the unpredictable owner of a neighbouring public house and brothel whose flair for industry and associates in elevated seats institutes her as the most powerful person in the environs.

Here the author transports his readers from the shingles of the realistic to the utterly implausible-in such a solid setting thereby effectively merging the logical and the illogical. Angel Flores, in *Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction* refers to this as a situation where once the reader accepts the *fait accompli*, the rest follows with logical precision (113-116).

Ordinarily, Okri’s fictions make the reader reason alongside Amaryll Chanady in *The Territorialization of the Imaginary in Latin America: Self-Affirmation and Resistance to Metropolitan Paradigms* that

Magical realism is, more than anything else, an attitude toward reality that can be expressed in popular or cultured forms, in elaborate or rustic styles in closed or open structures. In magical realism the writer confronts reality and tries to untangle it, to discover what is mysterious in things, in life, in human acts (125-144).

The interplay between the real and the imagined in Okri’s *The Famished Road*, is more pronounced in the characters’ struggle to strike a balance between the duality of nature. The author seems inclined to the conviction that magical realism is about a reality which is already in and of itself magical or fantastic. His
art is therefore tied seriously to the veracity that the individual character requires a bond with the traditions and the faith of his community where he is deeply historically raised and attached. In pushing Okri’s *The Famished Road* to the realm of the Magical realism one is forced to recall Salmon Rushdie’s argument that magic realism, at least as practised ... is a development out of Surrealism that expresses a genuinely Third World consciousness.

Okri’s work therefore turns out to be part of a twentieth-century preoccupation of the Nigerian writer with ways of capturing and remedying the lacuna predominant in so many socio economic facets of the traditional Nigerian society. There is a total magical projection of the intimate interdependence between reality and fantasy as a mode of escape from the harsh realities of life in the country. Magical realism becomes an escapist world. The characters are more contented when submerged in mysteries and the magical. This is because according to David Mikics, Derek Walcott and Alejo Carpentier in *Nature, History, and the Caribbean Writer*:

> Magical realism wills a transformation of the object of representation, rather than the means of representation. Magical realism, like the uncanny projects a mesmerizing uncertainty suggesting that ordinary life may also be the scene of the extraordinary. (372).

In the real sense of the Magical realist, Okri takes the supernatural for granted by presenting prototypes that tend to spend more time exploring the array of human response to the barest Nigerian factors. The author explores the Nigerian situations to the limits of the knowable and the unknowable. He looks beyond the limits of the knowable to that tangible but flimsy line between the factual and the imaginary. Here, too the author appears to tow the lines of thought of Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris in *Introduction: Daiquiri Birds and Flaubertian Parrot(ie)s* where they jointly opined that:

Magical realist fiction is:
--A disruption of modern realist fiction
--creates a space for interaction and diversity
--no less 'real' than traditional 'realism'
--about transgressing boundaries, multiple worlds
--on the boundaries and destabilizes normative oppositions
--subversive
--an international phenomenon (45).

All the above assertions are buttressed in the author’s techniques which include, firstly, a combination of reality and fantasy, secondly, the transformation of the real into the awesome and unreal and thirdly an art of surprises, one which creates a distorted concept of time and space. There is also the abundant portrayal of the supernatural, or anything that is contrary to the characters’ conventional day to day existence and view of reality, yet not fully divorced from reality either. Okri’s works are thus based on reality, or a world to which he is completely attuned. His works carry along the expressions, the mythical and superstitions of the traditional Nigerian contemporary society. The result is a bare awareness of dimensions of reality of which the readers are not normally aware.

Okri has come a long way in his fictive manoeuvres. He had earlier on, experimented copiously with new literary forms, different styles, genres, and traditions. He took off as a realist, dabbling into postcolonial themes and representing core traditional Nigerian lives. He also experimented with stream of consciousness literatures as well as diverse realism, modernism, and oral forms, especially those of Yoruba culture. His most prominent works are however, the magic realism fully laced with
African flavour. The author however maintains that his works are simply portrayals of unabashed Nigerian realities. He refused to go along fully with the school of thought that branded his works as leaning on the magical. He has accentuated the realistic proportions of his work – myths and local beliefs are part of the real world, urban life-world, not that they exist next to the real world. He avers:

We are the miracles that God made
To taste the bitter fruit of Time.
We are precious.
And one day our suffering
Will turn into the wonders of earth.

The author started writing early in life. At the age of nineteen his first novel, Flowers and Shadows (1980) came into being. The story centres on the travails of a rather successful businessman whose envious relations strived to make life complex and thorny. Here he completely experimented on the lanes of conventional of Realism. Okri' second novel, The Landscapes Within (1981), also revolves around the ventures of an underprivileged young painter residing in Lagos. Here he portrays the abject poverty facing the majority of the Nigerian masses and their day to day struggles to survive amidst severe hardships. Okri said in an interview that

Ghetto-dwellers are the great fantasists...There was an extraordinary vibrancy there, an imaginative life. When you are that poor, all you've got left is your belief in the imagination.

Then, The Famished Road (1991) was Okri's literary magnum opus. This Booker Prize winner has been called the classic magical realist novel of West Africa. The title was taken from Abiku a poem by Wole Soyinka – "May you never walk / When the road waits, famished. The plot of Okri’s The Famished Road is an intermingling of Yoruba myth and postcolonial, post modernity, set on the eve of the independence of Nigeria. The Famished Road is the astonishing tale of the travails of a spirit child as he journeys through the poverty and suffering of life in a contemporary Nigerian society. Here the author wades into the traditional Nigerian societal beliefs of reincarnation and death. The narrator persona, Azaro is a "spirit-child," an Abiku, a famished baby of a rather confusing way of life, who is predestined to die in infancy and be reborn to the same mother over and over again. At birth, it was discovered that Azaro was a spirit child.

This character has the rare and bizarre gifts of vibrant dreams, which predict the future with accuracy. He could distinguish with ease the spirits who co-habit the human existence in human forms intermingling with the living. These spirits relate with him and often beckon on him thereby making him depart his human body for an ethereal one from time to time. At such occasions, his parents would pronounce him dead and have him encased in a coffin, ready for burial. When he regained his earthly spirit and woke up in the coffin it apparent to his parents that he is an Abiku on a sojourn in human flesh. His parents were expected to perform some rituals to break his bond with the spirit world, but they were not financially strong enough to do so. Azaro therefore grows up fighting for his life against the spirits who continually call him to come back home to the spirit world. He also is at perils from humans who would want to utilize his supernatural powers. An instance is when Priestesses who recognized him for what he was, kidnapped him.

Another instance of the human danger blending with the spiritual is when Azaro escaped from the priestesses and found himself in the house of a police officer whose dead son tried to communicate with him.

As a spirit child Azaro is expected to love the spirit world more than the human existence. He is expected also to die willingly and join his spiritual counterparts whenever
they reincarnate in the physical world. The book gives off the idea that these spirit children are born into the world of the living with firm pledge that as soon as they are born they will die and thus return to their friends in the land of spirits. Though Azaro made such a pledge he falls deeply in love with the impoverished home he was born into. He is most especially held back by his beautiful, poor mother whose suffering face made him decide to live a full human life. He battles unendingly with his spirit companions who haunt him to return to the land of the dead. Azaro explains:

I remember that it was because of her bruised face that I had chosen to live, to stay, in the confines of this world, and to break my pact with my spirit companions. One of the many promises I made before birth was that I would make her happy. I had chosen to stay and now she wanted to die (228-229).

This makes Azaro’s childhood weird and traumatic. There is always the eerie presence of a supernatural intermingling with the living, in human or animal form, or in the form of lights and omens. Sometimes Azaro disappears fully into the spiritual realm.

The author dwells on Azaro's fight with his fateful life. Azaro’s struggle to beat his fate becomes synonymous with the fate of man-helpless and hapless before a predestined fate. Okri depicts the struggle of this fated child to defend himself against a pre determined fate. The agony of this persona is more compounded by the harsh realities of his immediate contemporary society. The persona wills to survive against all odds, against his fate and to survive with his family despite the destitution, food shortage, disease, and violence predominant in his society.

In *The Famished Road* the author persistently traces the triangular belief of the tradition Yoruba of Southern Nigeria. Life is depicted in a tri-dimensional status closely linked to each other in an unending interaction of the living, the unborn and the dead. The book is therefore concurrently set in the world of dreams, of those waiting to be born and of the dead. The author strongly affirms this as a part of his societal life and identity. He succinctly asserts in an interview that he grew up with the knowledge and belief of kids seeing spirits hence, the author’s portrayal of Azaro’s spirit-companions as continuously trying to pull him back into their world.

He also wades further into the belief of man’s pitiable struggles against fate and the infinite conviction that man can counter fate as Azaro's father undergoes series of mythic battles to save his son from an impending infantile death. Azaro's father is an optimistic labourer who wants the best for his family and the community. He suffers greatly for this, eventually becoming a boxer and later a politician. Azaro's father, Black Tyger loves him deeply, but is frequently angry at having an Abiku and sporadically goes into livid aggression. Azaro lives with both abuse and a prevailing love. A great boxer, Black Tyger sometimes gets abusive as a father and husband, taking out the harsh crudity of life on his wife and child.

He is also a dominant and decent character lamenting in the wilderness of life without catching the attention of a listening ear. Tyger represents the average Nigerian character on the clutches of life’s uncertainties. He battles unremittingly to survive. He however seem to labour in vain, but he never gives up. Even as a wrestler, he is buffeted by fate as most of his opponents are not human but spirits from the land of fighting ghosts. He tried his hands as a politician for the honourable intent of building schools and settlements for the beggars.

The author seems to remind us at once that there is more to everything than meets the eye and that, beyond the surface, there are many phenomena and mysteries in life that are not easily understood.
Azaro's mother works very hard selling anything she can get her hands on for the family. She cares for her family deeply and constantly gives up food and security for her family and their ideals. She is proud that Azaro is her son and goes to great lengths to protect him. Her sufferings become synonymous to that of the average poor woman struggling to survive in the face of abject poverty. At times it gets too much for her and she takes it out on Azaro but the love she has for her child and husband is heart warming.

Okri’s Magic realism borders on implicit criticism of his society, particularly the leaders and the affluent. He asserts in an interview that... I lived rough, by my wits, was homeless, lived on the streets, lived on friends' floors, was happy, was miserable. This buttresses the fact that his society has no place or pity for the poor. This he represents in his portrayal of the character of the ominous spiritualist Madame Koto, whose bar Azaro visits regularly. Progress is represented by the splendid, voluptuous character of Madame Koto. She starts out as a well-meaning woman, trying to get along with everyone else. This overweight lady begins the story running a poor bar of palm wine and her famous peppercorn soup. She is the first to bring electricity to the ghetto and the first to own a car however, the richer she gets the nastier she becomes. She has a liking for Azaro, though at times she is convinced that he brings bad luck at intervals.

However, as the story progresses, she becomes richer, siding with the political party of the rich, and is often accused of witchcraft. She tries to help Azaro and his family on numerous occasions until the suspicion that she renders her help in order to have access to Azaro’s blood which she is convinced will help her remain youthful.

We are always in the ghetto with Azaro’s family, always just on the brink of starvation. There is an unshakeable belief in the existence of spirits, herbalists and witches and wizards all have their places in the communities, the people are riddled with superstition but in the context of this story every superstition is a ready response to an ailment and cure to a sickness.

The tale shifts continually linking Azaro’s adventures in the real world with his struggling parents and dirty politics, and another peculiar world limited to Azaro’s vision. This other world manifests fully in Madame Koto’s palm wine bar, the (famished) road and the forest – which are crammed full with spirits, and uncanny elements. Azaro’s prophetic inclinations make it easy for him to wade through all the predicaments of the physical world.

Finally Azaro must choose between pains of mortality and the land of spirits. The spirits haunting Azaro are portrayed as weird and creepy. The undead are presented as blind lecherous old men preying on the eyes of human children. There are beggars with distorted limbs and unspeakable wounds, awe striking figures and wild animals. The famished road has life and a horrendous stomach, a creature waiting to maul and annihilate unsuspecting sojourners without proper sacrifices.

Towards the end of the book, Azaro is still torn between his love for his earthly parents and his pledge to his spirit kins. He is confused and undecided as to whether to stay or die and join his spiritual mates. He declares his fears about another spirit-child:

There was something cruel about my friend’s spirit and I understood why spirit-children are so feared. Faced always with the songs and fragrances of another world, a world beyond death, where the air is illuminated, where spirit companions know the secret of one’s desire, and can fulfil those desires, every single one of them, spirit-children do not care much for the limited things of the world. Ade
did not want to stay anymore; he did not like the weight of the world, the terror of the earth’s time. Love and the anguish of parents touched him only faintly, for beyond their stares and threats and beatings he knew that his parents’ guardianship was temporary. He always had a greater home (485-486).

Azaro obviously voices his own feelings too. He is faced with a decision and until he embraces an option, he is half human-half spirit.

**Conclusion**

So far this paper has strived to argue that Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*, is a magic realist’s attempt at a critical presentation of the oddities of life in the author’s contemporary society. This work has been reviewed here as a deliberate presentation of analytical views of a society in the trudges of tyrannical ordeals of anarchical living conditions. These features are x-rayed beyond the micro family settings to the macro national spheres. Azaro, the spirit-child hero persona of Okri’s *The Famished Road*, calls himself ‘an unwilling adventurer into chaos and sunlight, into the dreams of the living and the dead. (487)’

Okri believes that his works are true portrayals of his society. He avers that...The fact of storytelling hints at a fundamental human unease, hints at human imperfection. Where there is perfection there is no story to tell... His works imbibe the basic principles of Magic realism as a literary genre that has the capacity to enrich ideas of what is 'real' by incorporating all dimensions of the imagination, particularly as expressed in magic, myth and religion. Again he opines that...the most authentic thing about us is our capacity to create, to overcome, to endure, to transform, to love and to be greater than our suffering.

He writes about the mundane and the metaphysical, the individual and the collective, drawing the reader into a world with vivid descriptions of his contemporary society. As for his works being a true depiction of his identity and culture he succinctly asserts:

You see, I was told stories; we were all told stories as kids in Nigeria. We had to tell stories that would keep one another interested, and you weren't allowed to tell stories that everybody else knew. You had to dream up new ones....

Okri’s *The Famished Road* is all the way through, tormenting and agonizing but on the whole it gives off a solid significance of advancement and optimism. His prototypes are the everyday struggling Nigerians with tough moral fibre and a knack for survival. Despite the harrowing wretchedness and paucity, bedevilling the characters, they occasionally flounder into love or happiness that keeps them going. Thus Okri has become quite prominent among the foremost writers of this generation of Nigerian writers, who have in principle discarded the social and historical themes and diversified into modernist plot and oral traditions as a means of remedying the oddities prevalent in their contemporary society.

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