MAGIC REALISM AS A POSTMODERN DEVICE FOR POSTCOLONIAL CRITICISM: A STUDY OF BEN OKRI'S *THE FAMISHED ROAD*

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Abstract
In Literature, magical realism is a narrative strategy that combines realism and the fantastic in such a way that the marvelous grows organically within the ordinary, blurring the distinction between them. Unfortunately, in the domain of literary studies magical realism has become a debased narrative strategy. Thus we find critics and researchers portraying magical realism as shallow, dangerous, primitive, the literary language of the emergent postcolonial countries, a term underpinned by racist ideologies and at worst a suggestion that magical realism ought to be done away with. This is because most critics and researchers of magical realism have endeavoured to look at it as a postcolonial narrative strategy that serve the yearnings of the peripherized, colonized and marginalized regions of Latin America and the Caribbean, India, Eastern Europe and Africa, thus making it primitive; these critics and researchers have failed to take magical realism beyond the confines of postcolonialism. There has been very few researches on magical realism incorporating postmodern devices and techniques, thus making it a contemporary trend. In response to this problem this study unveils the fact magical realisms' usefulness exceeds the confines of postcolonialism, importantly, it incorporates postmodern devices which helps in the realization of the postcolonial themes in the work. In this light this study critically examines Ben Okri's use of magical realism to portray the cultural and political oddities in Nigeria. This study unveils the fact that these writers use of magical realism set them in the genre of postmodernism making their works contemporary. This study becomes a reminder that magical realism is innovative, productive, a contemporary trend, a mode of expression worldwide and an aesthetics of necessity. The research work utilizes the theories of postcolonialism and postmodernism.
Keywords: Magical Realism, Converge, Postcolonialism, Postmodernism and Colonized

Introduction

Literary works are made from threads – both of thoughts and imagination. Each thread has its significance in the universe of literary creativity. There are thus different narrative techniques and strategies within which these threads are woven together. Among these narrative strategy is magical realism. Magical realism is a narrative strategy that combines realism and the fantastic so that the marvelous seem to grow organically within the ordinary, blurring the distinction between them (Faris, 2014). The origin of magical realism is traceable to the aftermaths of the First World War (1914-1918) after Germany, had been defeated, obviously depression and trauma set in, the demands of reparation imposed on it by allies was another issue. To move on, they began to make efforts to find a new meaning to the unfortunate reality.

Magical realism began in art history, having been coined by Franz Roh in 1925 to describe European paintings (Faris, 2014). For him, magical realism was presented as a reaction to expressionism's more abstract style and to mark a return to realism. Expressionism was a movement in literature and other parts of Germany that emphasized and supported arts departure from realistic portrayal or depiction of events, incidents, and situations in the world by expressing visionary and powerfully emotional states of the mind (Ifejirika, 2014). Expressionism which seeks to convey personal inner experience through

the distortion of natural images had run its course. Several artists began to experiment with this new form, labeled *Magischer Realismus* (Magical realism).

Magical realism's multicultural perspective often resonates in the peripheral and colonized regions of Latin America and the Caribbean, India, Eastern Europe, Africa. But the narrative strategy is becoming less and less marginal, even though it retains the charm of the marginal position (Cooper, 2004). In 1980, John Barth rejected membership in any imaginary writer's club that did not include Garcia Marquez, praising *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as a prime example of replenished postmodern fiction. Barth's statement represents an important shift in literary relations and signals an increased worldwide recognition of magical realism – according to John Updike, writing "a new widely available elixir" (111 – 116). Both a cause and an effect of magical realism's international success, its decentering of contemporary literary discourse is the fact that its master texts are widely dispersed.

The novel that put 'magical realism' on the international literary map was *One Hundred Years of Solitude,* and it came from the small Latin American country of Colombia. What seems to be increasingly regarded as a second definitive example, is *Midnight's Children* from India. Both of these are aggressively postcolonial texts. A third, Gunter Grass's *The Tin Drum,* is from Germany and locates the final (albeit chronologically first) apex of this far-flung triangle in Europe so that it is not only a postcolonial style. Other magical realist writers include Jorge Luis Borges in Argentina, Isabel Allende in Chile, Italo Calvino in Italy, and John Fowles. These writers weave, in an ever-shifting pattern, a sharply etched realism in representing ordinary events and details together with the fantastic and dreamlike elements, as well as with materials derived from myths and fairy tales. From the above, one can say that the magical realism is indeed a worldwide phenomenon. No wonder, Zamora, and Faris (1995) point out that magical realism is an "International Commodity" (2). With important antecedents in such European modes as pastoral, romanticism. It was certainly in Latin America that magical realism was first applied to a literary genre. The international success of such magical realist writers as Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel Garcia Marquez has only confirmed the international success of this narrative strategy primarily with literature from the continent. Marquez's fame in the use of magical realism is unparalleled. Sustained interest in the novel brought about its translation into thirty-seven languages and sold about thirty million copies of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967). His magical realism was borne out of the troubled Latin American history during the years of civil strife in Colombia. His masterful and fascinating imagination has made a name not only for himself but for his native land as well. This story is about seven generations of the Buendia family, which read like the history of generations of Latin American people. The myths, beliefs, and traditions are given an aura of reality even though the events are ordinary. The simple life of peasants transforms into a life of magic and enchantment that simply just happens. Magical realist films such as *The Witches of East wick, Fields of Dreams, Ironweed, Wolf, Thinner, Like Water for Chocolate* and its spin-offs *Woman on Top and chocolate,* among others, in the cinematic mainstream, further attest to its increasing dispersion throughout all contemporary culture. In terms of literary history, magical realism in the West developed from a combination of realism and surrealism, often with an infusion of pre-enlightenment or indigenous culture. Rushdie claims, for example, that his writing comes from a combination of Gogol and Dickens "on the edge between the surreal and the real" and the Arabian Nights – "flying horses and invisible cloaks" (Rushdie, 2000). Located within postmodernism, it nevertheless has strong roots in modernism, situating it at the intersection of those two modes (Enda Duffy 1994: 8-10). In articulating the position of magical realism as growing out of modernism into postmodernism. It is useful to consider Brian McHale's idea that modernism is ssssepistemologically, concerned with questions of being (61 – 62). In one we ask how we know something and in the other, we ask what it is.

Thus, like magical realism in Latin America, and partial response to it, African magical realism developed out of the first wave of postcolonial, indigenist novels inspired by traditional myths and oral narratives, such as The *Palm-Wine Drinkard and My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* by Amos Tutuola *or The Forest of a Thousand Demons* by D.O. Fagunwa, and the nationalistically oriented fictions of Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka, but also indirectly fed on earlier surrealist impulses imbibed by Negritude poets such as Leopold Sedar Senghor (Cooper, 2004).

Today postcolonial African writers employ magical realism in their literary works as an effective alternative to the realist mode used in the past. It serves to capture what may seem unbelievable to western sensibilities but real to indigenous understanding as well as open the way to the world of limitless possibilities. In fact, in postcolonial Africa, the magnitude of vices like corruption, deposition, dictatorship, and electoral frauds, defies human imagination; even the sacredness of life is violated by the carnage that is the result of the gratuitous violence that characterizes socio-political relations in postcolonial Africa. In an interview, the veteran postcolonial African theorist and critic Ngugi wa thiongo observes that the socio-political situation in Africa has reached a point where the novelist's imagination must go beyond realism if he/she is to adequately represent it. He suggests that one possible and adequate way of depicting the present predicament of Africa is through the fable, the fantastical. Ngugi's call for the use of what is referred to as magical realism in the depiction of the current African situation in literature, suggests that this mode is employed out of necessity, thereby confirming the incommensurable role of literature and writers in the socio-political life of Africans. Indeed, Ngugi's response echoes Salman Rushdie's comment on the situation in his native country thus: "You must use the language in a manner which permits god to exist- the divine to be as real as the divan I am sitting on. Realism can no longer express or account for the absurd reality of the world we live in – a world which has the capability of destroying itself at any moment" (qtd in Faris, 2004:88).

Here Rushdie describes magical realism as a special style he needs for the portrayal of the contemporary situation in India. five primary characteristics of the mode have been identified, the first is an irreducible element of magic; second, the descriptions in magical realism details a strong presence of the phenomenal world; the reader may experience some unsettling doubts in the effort to reconcile the two contradictory understanding of events; third, the narrative merges different realms; fourth, magic realism disturbs received ideas about time, space and identity and finally, authorial reticence is a major characteristic of magical realism.

According to Wendy Faris The "irreducible element" is something we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe as they have formulated in western empirically based discourse, that is, according to "logic, familiar knowledge, or received beliefs". Therefore, the reader has difficulty marshalling evidence to settle questions of events and characters in such fictions. These irreducible elements are well assimilated into the realistic textual environment, rarely causing any comment by narrators or characters, who model acceptance of their readers.

A second characteristic of magic realism is that its description details a strong presence of the "phenomenal world". This is the realism in magic realism, differentiating it from fantasy and allegory. It appears in several ways. Realistic descriptions create a fictional world that resembles the one we live in often by extensive use of detail. On one hand, this attention to sensory details continues and renews the realistic tradition. On the other hand, in addition to including magical events or phenomena, magical realism fiction includes intriguing magical details. Because these magical details represent a clear departure from realism, detail is freed from a traditional mimetic role to a greater extent than it has been before.

By "unsettling doubts" the researcher means that before categorizing the irreducible element as irreducible, the reader may hesitate between two contradicting understanding of events, and hence experience some unsettling doubts. The question of belief is very vital here, this hesitation frequently stemming from the implicit clash of cultural systems within the narrative, which moves toward belief in extrasensory phenomena but narrates from the post enlightenment perspective and in the realistic mode that traditionally exclude them. And because belief system differs, clearly, some readers in some cultures will hesitate less than others, depending on their beliefs and narrative traditions. In other words, magical realism expands fictional reality to include events we used to call magic in realism.
In magic realism we experience the "closeness or near-merging of two realisms". It involves a confrontation between real world norms and other – worldly, supernatural norms. In terms of cultural history, magic realism often merges ancient or traditional. Sometimes indigenous and modern worlds. It merges the world of ordinary people and that of witches, the land of the living and the land of the dead. In addition to merging different worlds, these fictions disturb received ideas about time and space.

Magic realism not only disrupts time and space but our sense of identity a well, "Authorial reticence" refers to author's lack of explanation for magical events that occur in magical realist's texts. The author gives no explanation or surprise over these events. This deliberate withholding of explanation for magical events is typical in magic realist texts. This reticence serves the purpose mainly of preventing the reader from questioning the narrated events as no attention is drawn to the strangeness of the world view of reality.

Unfortunately, in the domain of literary studies the popularity of magical realism has not been met with any certainty over what magical realism is and what it does. Scholars new to the field are thus confronted by a number of contradictory attitudes. Thus we find critics and researchers denigrating magical realism as "shallow and dangerous" (Barker, 14), "the literary language of the emergent postcolonial world" (Bhabha: *Nation*;6) and "a brand name for exoticism" (Franco: 204). It has even been accused of being underpinned by "pernicious-even-racist-ideologies" (Martin,104). Some Critics have suggested that we ought to do away with the term altogether (Gonzalez Echeverria Carpentier 108: Connell 95-110). This attitude towards magical realism is first rooted in the fact that magical realism is an Oxymoron: that is magic is thought of that which lies outside of the realm of the real. Magical realism, in its very name, flouts philosophical conventions of non-contradiction. Secondly, most critics and researchers of magical realism fail to trace the postmodern currents in these works. Despite this denigration magical realism has been proven to be a productive mode, with cultural, political and postmodern currents running through it. This is what makes magical realism a Worldwide phenomenon. In short, it is perhaps the most contemporary trend in international fiction. This is because magical realism provides the literary background for significant cultural works. In its texts are marginal voices, submerged traditions and emergent literatures which has developed and created master pieces.

Magical realism has become a debased narrative strategy, most critics and researchers of magical realism have endeavoured to discuss magical realism as a postcolonial form of writing that serve the yearnings of the peripherized, colonized and marginalized regions of the West, making it primitive; these critics and researchers have failed to take magical realism beyond the confines of postcolonialism. There has been few researches on magical realism incorporating postmodern devices which helps in the realization of the postcolonial themes; thus making it a contemporary trend, a mode of expression worldwide, an innovative strategy that is productive and an aesthetics of necessity as explored in The Famished Road.

Set at the historical moment just before Nigerian independence, *The Famished Road* is primarily situated in three sites. There is the wild forest, in which spirits, witches, monsters, and ghosts find dark and dense safe cover; the road, which clears and encroaches on this bush and brings Western technology and 'progress', while exposing the hiding spirits. Between the road and the bush is Madame Koto's bar, through which pass new politicians and old witches, electricity and ghosts, a gramophone, a motor car, and malevolent Abiku spirits.

As an Abiku baby, Azaro the main character through whose eyes the bulk of the novel unfolds, has an ambiguous existence. Abiku babies torment their mothers by being spirits in the guise of babies, spirits who repeatedly are born, only to die and return to the spirit world. He may have decided to stay in the world of the living, but he is perpetually vulnerable to the call, and even to the threat of his companions in the spirit world, who wish them to return Okri's narrative stance is brought about as a response to social vices, political turmoil, and spiritual decadence prevalent in his society. Okri applies magic realism in patterns that make his creativity divulge that human beings and supernatural beings intermingle in addressing human situations. Azaro the Abiku child is a symbol of incessant political odds, military odds, and social injustices. The coming and going of the child represent the consistent coups and odds in African governance.

The novel is set in the historical reality of Nigeria at a crucial moment – independence. While the much vaunted independence looms, with the construction of modern communications, roads, cars, photography, and electricity, Azaro lives with his poverty-stricken parents in Nigeria on the eve of independence. Their lives are touched destructively by corrupt political parties which use dishonest,

ruthless, and violent means to try to win support. However, the story is simultaneously situated in the world of the dream, of the nightmare of the dead, of those waiting to be born, and crucially linking up with the circularity of time of those abiku babies, with their repeated deaths and re-births. Azaro's restless feet traverses between bush, road, bar, and forest, spirit and human worlds – seeking knowledge and understanding of the bewildering changes he encounters – of the poverty in which his family lives, of the spiritual dimensions from which he comes and to whose call to return he is vulnerable.

In the physical realm, Azaro symbolizes poverty-stricken Nigerian children struggling to survive amid agony and misery in Nigerian slums. These slums are places where infant mortality is a common occurrence. He feels the pang of the harsh realities of hunger and want. The wretchedness is overwhelming. The steadiness of starvation, brutality, and sickness, horrid accommodation in a single room with no toilet or electricity, joblessness; violence, fraudulent politicians, the conflict between modernity and a traditional way of life. The Nigerian reality is made manifest in the lives of the majority of these ghetto dwellers. Azaro explains his relationship to his spiritual affiliates:

> There was no one amongst us who looks forward to being born. We disliked the rigors 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, fear of whomever 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 any time and without hindrance. 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 close was our birth. As we approached another incantation 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 pains of Azaro's parents lay in the fact that their child has a flimsy hold of life and may at any moment heed to the call of his spirit peers. 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 Okri's magic realism is the result of a unique fusion of the beliefs and superstitions of the author's cultural background. This might imply that there is a linear progression in the plot and the novel structure, as burgeoning progress moves along its constructed round, cutting away the bush and pushing the border constantly backward. And indeed, the bar does perpetually change and metamorphose as the relations between the road and the bush, between the past, present and future realign themselves. However, we will see that Okri abolishes the neat polarities and linear movement of the past and future of the modern and the old in the very process of their erection.

Madam Koto's bar, is a place where spirits and politicians mingle, and to the question of the burgeoning Nigerian independence politics. It also brings us to the mythical Madame herself. Throughout the discussion, it will be obvious that Okri's authorial viewpoint is elusive, that he offers a mixed message and takes an ambiguous stance. The narrative's many points of view will be examined in this light.

It is a mistake to assume too readily that the road of the title of Okri's novel is a colonial symbol of Western intrusion and technology. At the outset of the novel, this road passes through the ancient world of the spirits and is conceptualized within traditional mythology Azaro's father, as the storyteller tells him that his father (Azaro's grandfather) is "head-priest of our shrine, priest of the God of roads. Anyone who wants a special sacrifice for their journeys, undertakings, births, funerals, whatever, goes to him. All humans travel the same road" (70). Azaro's father in the mode of hiving back to past values,

emphasizes that ‘our old people are very powerful in spirit and sadly that “we are forgetting these powers. Now, all the power that people have is selfishness, money and politics” (70).
The story that Dad tells, however, is about the greed and restlessness of long ago, that resulted in the creation of a monster – the insatiable king of the road: "Once upon a time", Dad began suddenly, "there was a giant whom they called the King of the Road". This giant "used to be one of the terrible monsters of the forest and there were many like him", that is to say, he originated from deep within the bush's greed and instabilities. Then the man came along and the forest began to shrink and "when the giant couldn't find enough animals to eat, he changes from the forest to the roads that men travel" (258).

Okri emphasizes that the famished monster of the road is not the obvious symbol of either the greed of colonialism or the new brand of politicians. Although these are its more modern manifestations, greed is universal and ancient – 'people believed that he lived for thousands of years and that nothing could kill him and that he could never die' (259). The story continues to describe how the monster wreaks havoc. The ending of Dad's story reiterates the universality of the danger of being exposed to the monster of insatiability and proffers a warning. What had happened was that the king of the road has become part of all the roads in this world. He is still hungry and he will always be hungry. This is why there are so many accidents in the world.

And to this day some people still put a victual on the roadside before they travel, so that the king of the Road will eat their sacrifice and let them travel safely. “But some of our wise people say that people make sacrifices to the road to remember that the monster is still there… That is why a small boy like you must be very careful now you wonder about in this world” 26). This story stresses the power of the past and the stories and wisdom contained in it, as guides to behavior in the present: “On many of those nights in my childhood hour, mum told me stories of aquamarine beginning. Under the white eye of the moon, under the indigo sky, in the golden lights of survival in our little room, I listened to the wisdom of the old songs which dad rendered in his cracked fighting voice” (183).

These are old stories, the proverbs, and myths the tales of origins and warnings of human well-being linked to the recurrence of the seasons and the conservation of custom; these are the stories that discourage change, foster purity in aquamarine origins, and work against newness entering the world. Dad has other stories to tell, he has a nightmare, which he relates to Azaro and which must have autobiographical overtones for Okri, who emigrated to London at a tender age. And obviously this is in line with postmodern authorial self reference. Dad firstly dreams a continent into existence. The inhabitants of this continent are "not like us. They are white. Bushmen (436), unwelcoming and insisting that they have been there "since time immemorial".

Mum has a similar story about white for all its apparent plot differences with Dad's tale. This time the whites come to Africa, an Africa which is more advanced in all spheres of knowledge than the West, an Africa in which these whites come to learn. This is an Africa of the idealized negritude traditions, homogeneous and intrinsically generous continent that shares what it has only afterward to be cheated and robbed. Essences, generalization, and bitterness stalk this story:

> When white people first came to our land' she said, as if she were talking to the wind, 'we have already gone to the moon and all the great stars. In the olden days, they used to come and learn from us. My father used to tell me that we thought them how to count. We taught them about the stars. We gave them some of our gods. We shared our knowledge with them, we welcome them, but they forgot all this. They forgot many things. They forgot we are all brothers and sisters and the black people are the ancestors of the human race. The second time they came they brought guns. They took our lands, burned our gods, and they carried away many of our people to become slaves across the sea. They are greedy. They want to want to own the whole world and conquer the sun. Some of them believe that they have killed God. Some of them worship machines. They are misusing the powers God gave all of us (282).

Mum's story is very complex towards its end, but the 'us and 'them' polarity are not really mediated by her rather peculiar witty remark that - 'they are not all bad. Learn from them but love the world" (282). Her other story is more complex. It carries remnants of the same, theme of the superiority of African,

black culture over white, but it mediates this image with symbols that contradict it. It is about a degenerate misguided white man, who has to learn to be an African to find redemption. Mum tells how she was selling her provision one day in terrible heat when she came to a 'crossroad' and saw a tortoise, coming out of the bush and crossing the road this sets the scene of portentous, given the importance of the crossroad as a symbolic moment of choice and the road and bush as significant boundaries. The 'tortoise spoke to me' but mum refuses to tell what it said and this afterward becomes a riddle she sets the white man she meets on another hot day. He wants to find a way out of Africa and she wants, in return for helping him the blue sunglasses, to protect her eyes which are red from "sun and dust".

In a novel where seeing, blindness, masks are critical, her desire for these blue sunglasses is symbolic, it is an acknowledgment that the white man has something of value to exchange for her African wisdom:

> Then I asked him to tell me what the tortoise said. He stopped and thought for a long time. Then a bus went past slowly. It had a motto written on its side. The white man laughed at the motto and read it out and I said that's what the tortoise told me. "What?' He asked 'all things are linked', I said. What has the tortoise got to do with it? He asked I said: "if you don't know you will never find any road at all'. Then he gave me his blue sunglasses…(483).

The "all things are linked" asserts the belief that there is no absolute divide between human and animal, animate and inanimate, life and death. The sunglasses are the masks of old syncretized with the changes brought by the whites and by colonialism. They link up the way deities or ancestral spirits, or the spirit of natural forces are manifested through masked performances and rituals within the format of the riddle what mum is describing is precisely a modern transformed ritual, harnessing the new technology to suit its purposes. Is the purpose however to create a hybrid between old and new, or do we simply have the mask of old, constructed for the same, ancient purpose but now made out of velvet.

Another day, she meets in the market ‘a strange Yoruba man’ with magical powers. He asks her if she remembers him – “I gave you the blue sunglasses he said” Here are a few significant metamorphoses and reversals, mum is the one this time who has to learn more than one thing – to 'see' the man again through the change in the color of his skin. To understand, the riddle of time which has passed and to listen to history as he takes over as narrator and tells a story in Mum's story, within Azaro's first-person narration. To make matters even more labyrinthine and postmodern**,** the story Okri had him tell has powerful reverberation with Camara Laye’s *The Radiance of the King.* Laye’s is a classic example of a story designed to resist cultural imperialism, by way of inverting its racism with a tale of spiritual inferiority and bewilderment of the incompetent and degenerate white man, lost in the Africa bush, until salvation can be given by the pure young African king. It is a powerful novel, but one which retains the paradigm of essences of races, of intrinsic binaries, between white and black, colonized and colonizer. It simply changes the labels of good and bad, this is Okri’s man’s story as told by mum:

> "When I left you, he began, ' I became feverish in the head and later in a fit of fury over a small thing I killed my African servant. They arrested me I sat in a cell. Then they released me because I was a white man. Then I began to wonder about the city naked. Everyone stared at me. They were shocked to see a mad white man in Africa. Then a strange little African child took to following me around. He was my only friend. All my white colleagues had deserted me. Then one day my head cleared. Five hundred years had gone past the only way to get out of Africa was to become an African. So I changed my thinking. I changed my ways (243).

This enables him to go back to England, a white man but one who has transformed himself, married, has children, is successful, and dies to be re-born a Yoruba businessman, presumably because of the internal adjustments he made in his previous life. This is a complete reversal of Dad's nightmare, where he becomes reduced, has sold his soul, becoming a white man. The white man regains his humanity by taking on African customs. Paradoxically, he finds his freedom and his way home back to England, when he is reborn a fine and powerful Yoruba man, who can make mum's fishes in her basket come alive, which he does on trust, meeting her again, his stature has massively grown. The overtones of Christ suggest that the truths he has discovered could be the salvation of all humankind. The story ends thus: I said: “But I only met you two weeks ago’ time is not what you think it is; he said smiling, then he left. That is the end of my ‘strange story’, I said. It’s true ‘mum replied.

These stories are complex, and filled with multiple meanings. A careful reader would have noted four important elements in these stories within stories. First, there is traditional wisdom and storytelling in the form of the tortoise of oral tradition, a speaking tortoise who poses a riddle, as of old, the answer to which is the philosophical cornerstone of the story, the 'All things are linked'. While this is a disruption of the Manichean polarity of Mum's earlier story as white becomes black, as the teacher becomes pupil, as the narrator becomes audience, it is also a continuity with the strain of negritude. This is so because the man can only, as in Laye's novel, regain his stature and self-respect through the superior humanity and wisdom of Africa. The tortoise is in the mold of the following early comment: “These are the myths of beginnings. These are stories and moods deep in those who are seeded in rich lands, who still believe in mysteries” (6).

No text exist in isolation Okri’s story may be similar to Chinua Achebe’s (1975) story about a fighter, who challenges his *chi,* or, as the Igbo would have it, his spiritual being:

> There is a story of how a proud wrestler, having thrown every challenger in the world, decides to go and wrestle in the world of spirits. There he also throws. Challenger after challenger, including many multiple-headed ones — so great was his prowess. At last, there is no one left to fight. But the wrestler refuses to leave. The spirits beg him to go; his companion praise-singer on the flute pleads with him. But it is all in vain. *There must be somebody left; surely the famed land of spirits can do better than this,* he said. Again everyone begs him to collect his laurels and go but again he refuses. Finally, his *chi* appears, reluctant, thin as a rope. The wrestler laughs at this miserable-looking contender and moves forward contemptuously to knock him down whereupon the other lifts him clear off the ground with his little finger and smashes him to death (95).

Achebe is of the view that this story is a 'cautionary tale', which is mainly concerned with “setting a limit to man's aspirations”. The limit is not the sky; it is somewhere much closer to earth. A sensible man will turn round at the frontiers of absolutism and head for home again” (95-6).

Achebe's story echoes in Okri's. Dad, who is sick of his life of toil and poverty, of ending up carrying pails of human excrement, and of the humiliation of having his son witness him do so, decides to become a boxer and challenges increasingly deadly foes, highly reminiscent of Achebe's tale. One of them is the mysterious and sinister man in the white suit, whose unveiling as a grotesque, spirit form has overtones with yet another story, the chilling and recurrent one of Tutuola's Perfect Gentleman, who beguiles the proud maiden and is revealed as a skull. Dad, the 'Black Tyger’, ‘was absorbing monstrous punishment'(472) when he tears off the fancy, dazzling clothing of his opponent, whose inhumanity is revealed:
“He had a hollow chest and a deep hole of a navel. He was so hairy, and his hair was so much like that of a bush animal that the spectators gave a shocked cry when they saw how inhuman he looked. . . . He had long thin legs, the legs of a spiderous animal” (473).

He may not be Dad's *chi,* but out of his enormous energy and ego, Dad has challenged the spirit world and attempted to overcome it. What is the outcome: 'Challenging his spirit', Dad can release 'one of the most destructive punches' Azaro had ever seen, but “overcome with the horror of his victory, and with fatigue, Dad sank to the ground. We tried to revive him, but we couldn't.” (474).

Dad's body and spirit have been rent asunder and he lies in a fearsome coma as Mum and some old witches attempt to bring him back. In this state, he 'was redeeming the world' and experiences huge insights and understandings, which are described with intensity, but also obsessiveness that makes one fear for his sanity. Okri's perspective on Dad is, in other words, elusive. He might have escaped 'into the great realms and spaces' (492) but in the meantime, Mum is distracted, 'waves of demented mist passed over her face' and she prays for food (493). All that is clear about Dad and the outcome of his boxing bout with an evil spirit is that the message is mixed: “His wounds had healed, his spirit had sharpened, his despair was deeper, he was a bigger man with a bigger madness” (497).

The above is reminiscent of postmodernism, its technique called intertextuality explores the relationship between one text and another. Critics point out that this is an indication of postmodernism's lack of originality and reliance on clichés. This can be a reference or parallel to another literary work. The postmodernists believe that individual works are not isolated creations. They, therefore, look at the relationship between one text and the other.

Part of the new insight with which Dad awakes – and here we return to the symbol of the famished monster of the road with which we began this discussion is to revise the tone of the original cautionary tale that he told, to revise Achebe's warning about boundaries and limits: "In my sleep, I saw many wonderful things. Our ancestors taught me many philosophies. My father, Priest of the Roads, appeared to me and said I should keep my door open. My heart must be open. My life must be open. Our road must be *open.* An open road is never hungry. Strange times are coming" (497).
Is Okri modifying the original story of warning to a boy with restless feet? Or is this, rather, part of his 'bigger madness'?

Having said that we should not assume that the road is primarily the symbol of colonialism, it is true that it partly has that significance. This brings one's attention to postmodern use of multiple meaning. And in that role, the road functions in the familiar way to contest the desirability of the modernization it brings - 'steadily, over days and months, the paths had been widening. Bushes were being burnt, tall grasses cleared, tree stumps uprooted'. There is the loud noise of engines and road builders. Houses take the place of trees and 'places where children used to play and hide was now full of sandpiles and rutted with house foundations'. The trees groan as they crash down to 'the steady rhythms axes on hard, living wood' (104). This colonial, modernizing road does not necessarily, bring progress. On one of the occasions when Azaro is abducted, he is taken along an 'endless' road and he develops 'a terrible hunger for a destination. Like the wild bush, in which a person can most easily lose their way, the new web of roads can also be wild and terrifying, leading to nowhere:

> All the roads multiplied, reproducing themselves, like snakes, tails in their mouths, twisting themselves into labyrinths. The road was the worst hallucination of them all, leading towards home and then away from it, without end, with too many signs, and no directions. The road became my torment, my aimless pilgrimage, and I found myself merely walking to discover where all the roads lead to, where they end (114).

The recent colonial road has brought a crisis of identity and direction. But it gives way to a more universal and allegorical road, the road of life, subverting the image of the back-breaking colonial road gangs, into which Africans were hijacked, by one means or another, at the hands of the colonial authority. What is clear, notwithstanding the labyrinth within which the road symbolism is constructed, is that Okri's society is the bizarre, product of both new and old, tradition and burgeoning change. It is one of the unevenly developed societies that spawn magical realism. What is not clear, is whether Okri's road can be, all things to all readers. The traveler, trapped in its labyrinth, has to choose a direction, a choice that will surely dictate the nature of the journey ahead. 'Azaro observes the hybrid cacophony of African culture, of old and new, coexisting, typical of magical realist contexts:

> One road led to a thousand others, which in turn fed into paths, which fed into dirt tracks, which became streets, which ended in avenues and cul-de-sacs. All around, a new world was being erected amidst the old. Skyscrapers stood high and inscrutable beside huts and zinc abodes. Bridges were being built; flyovers, half-finished, were like passageways into the air, or like future visions of a time when cars would be able to fly. Roads, half-constructed, were crowded with heavy machinery.

Here, the mongrel culture is threatening and demonic, linked to the image of the labyrinth and the archetypal myth of the prison of the snake devouring its tail.
The spirits are everywhere, but they are extraordinarily present in Madame Koto's bar:

> It seemed that I had walked into the wrong bar, had stepped into another reality on the edge of the forest. On the floor, there were eaten bits of chicken and squashed jollof rice on paper plates. The walls were full of almanacs with severe faces, bearded faces, mildly squinted eyes, pictures that suggested terrible ritual societies, and secret cabals. There were odd-looking calendars with

> goats in transformations into human beings, fishes with heads of birds, birds with the bodies of women.

The bar is another site of multiple meanings, the most obvious of which is the bar's spatial positioning at the border between road and bush, at the gateway to the spirits, who enter from the bush and have to the new politicians, who enter from the road. As in Bhabha's border interstices, this is the zone of the mutant and the hybrid, women-birds and bird-fish, creatures, half-human, and part animal, and where Okri, constructs sometimes conflicting, meanings. If the bar is sometimes the last stop before the bush, it is also the barometer for the nature of the modernizing, Westernizing changes. Here electric light will astound the people:

> The most extraordinary things were happening in Madame Koto's bar. The first unusual thing was that cables connected to her rooftop now brought electricity. Illiterate crowds gathered in front of the bar to see this new wonder. They saw the cables, the wires, the pylons in the distance, but they did not see the famed electricity. Those who went into the bar, out of curiosity, came out mystified. They couldn't understand how you could have a light brighter than lamps, sealed in glass. They couldn't understand how you couldn't light your cigarette on the glowing bulbs. And worse than all that, it was baffling for them to not be able to see the cause of the illumination (373).

The bar is where the gramophone will miraculously blare first. 'The next thing was that people heard very loud music blaring but saw no musicians performing'. All of this is in the mode of the magic reality's ironic inversion of reality, where the spirits are a routine part of the mundane every day, and electric light and sound constitute the awesome and the unbelievable.

This ritual sacrifice of the dog to Ogun to protect the new Peugeot is reminiscent of the ritual washing of Madame Koto's car. The following funny-tragic portrayal is a quintessential instance of the African intellectual's perception of the culture's patchworks:

> When the day arrived for Madame Koto to wash her new car, many people came to celebrate the ritual with her. Our landlord was present. People brought their bicycles and scooters. Many came on foot. There were old men whom we had never seen before. And there were a lot of powerful strange women with eyes that registered no emotion. We saw chiefs, thugs, and there were even herbalists, witch-doctors, and their acolytes. They gathered in the bar and drank. They talked loudly. Eventually, everyone was summoned for the washing. They formed a circle around the vehicle. The great herbalist amongst them was a stern man with a face so battered and eyes were so daunting that even mirrors would recoil and crack at his glance. He uttered profound incantations and prayed for the car.

However, as the ritual degenerates into tragedy, ambiguity is created regarding the desirability of the changes. The great herbalist prophesies that the car will become a coffin, as indeed it does. Our faith in him is stretched when he drunkenly attempts to use his prophecy to grab a prostitute: ' "But if you give me one of these women", the herbalist said, lunging at one of the prostitutes, and missing, "then I will drive the coffin away from the car"(381). But the ominousness of his prediction is powerful and when he focuses his bleary eyes, it is eerily on the forest and the wind howls and whistles 'along the electric cables'. The elements are at war with the new technology and the birds abandon the car top. Shortly thereafter, the driver loses control of the car, smashing into a beggar and the *abiku* boy, Ade, and wounding himself.

Conclusion

So far, this paper concludes that Okri created the novel with an extraordinary imagination, blending politics, culture, and postmodernism. This incorporation of postmodern techniques in Famished Road is a proof that magical realism is not primitive but a contemporary narrative strategy that is impossible to do away with.

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