

UNDERSTANDING SYMBOLISM AND THE METAPHYSICS OF NIGERIAN HISTORY AS REFLECTED IN BEN OKRI'S *THE FAMISHED ROAD*.

Chikezirim Kingsley Chiemela

ALVAN IKOKU FEDERAL COLLEGE OF EDUCATION, OWERRI
DEPT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

Abstract

This paper examines Okri's manipulation of particular fictional method-symbolism in *The Famished Road*, to reveal his vision of life and his metaphysics of history, Nigerian history, as an eternally recurring pattern of hopes and betrayals, construction and destruction. The symbols, especially of the spirit-child who dies only to be reborn and of the Mighty Green road that is repeatedly built only to get destroyed, encapsulate this vision. It also looks at what constitutes adequate response to the evils of the nation using the formal approach to literary criticism.

Introduction

Symbolism is an all-inclusive term with no simple meaning. In literary criticism, it brings together such tendencies, including, as Graham Hough writes "the assimilation of poetry to music (Poe, Verlaine, Pater), to dream (Poe, Baudelaire), to an unattainable and inexpressible ideal (Poe, Mallarme), to magic and the cult (Rimbaud, Yeats (128)). The common ground of all symbolist ideas, is the attempt at capturing the reality absent from the familiar world, but which, by recreating the familiar world into a particular structure, makes apprehensible the inappeasable or "absent" reality. The literary symbol then is a verbal or visual structure that enables man to recognize and interpret his experience; it is a method of discovery, the discovery of reality. Webster's entry describes the symbol as:

that which stands for or suggests something else by reason of relationship, association, convention or accidental but not intentional resemblance, especially, a visible sign of something invisible, as an idea, a quality or a totality such as a state or a church.

The symbol then has the capacity, as W.Y. Tindall remarks, to refer to something indefinite – ideas, feelings, thoughts. It becomes a means of concretizing the abstract. It works through a process of analogy, but an analogy that holds no one - to - one correspondence with what it stands for. It "carries something indeterminate and however we try there is a residual mystery that escapes our intellect" (Stevick 342). In its analogical quality, the literary symbol may be a picture, a rhythm, juxtaposition, an action, a structure etc.

A distinction is usually made between public and private symbols. It is with the writer's creation of personal symbols to interpret his vision of life that we are concerned. But even when a writer uses a symbol deliberately, it often happens that he is never aware of the whole range of meanings that it can discover for the reader.

In *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, where symbols form elaborate patterns of meaning, Armah projects his vision of post –independence Ghana using several symbols. Let us here focus on one; the use of the bus motif. The novel starts with the picture of a stinking decrepit bus carrying people to work. The conductor is a security rogue, cheating the vain –glorious passengers out of their money. They appear completely indifferent towards their plight.

As we follow the man, the anti-hero of the novel, we discover that like the decrepit bus, Ghana is ‘an old Man-child’ born “with all the features of a human baby, but within seven years it had completed the cycle from babyhood to infancy to youth, to maturity, and in its seventh year it has died a natural death” (63). The people behind the wheels of the nation are exactly like the corrupt bus conductor. The leaders are “pilots of the hungry alien seeking human flash...” (66).

A bus also appears towards the end of the novel. This is in the morning after the military coup d’ etat that ousted the corrupt Koomson and his colleagues and was supposed to have put an end to the corrupt political culture of the Koomsons of Ghana. Significantly, this bus is new and shiny. Despite this newness, we discover that it is still the same old bus, but merely painted. The conductor is still corrupt, in fact, more brazen. We see him bribe the policeman who had mounted a road block, of course to apprehend any of the deposed corrupt leaders who may be escaping. So, like the bus, the change in Ghana is superficial. It is only a change of one set of corrupt actors to another. By using this motif in which the bus come in the beginning and reappears in the end, Armah provides a symbolic organic structure that points to the fact that Ghana, in spite of the coup is still caught in the vicious trap of corruption. The beautiful ones, indeed, are not yet born.

Myth as Symbol

Sometimes, the use in fiction of the oral tradition, including folktales, fables, legends, myths, etc, extends beyond localizing the work. These forms may be treated as to assume a structural part of a work so that they provide a symbolic interpretation of the novel. We shall briefly look at the mythic form because of its direct relevance to the focus of this whole study.

The mix of myth in literature has often provided a symbolic assessment of society. In its traditional sense, a myth is a story in which the deeds, often of supernatural or extra-human beings, serve to explain the human condition or other natural phenomena or social customs. It is a sort of invented explanation, a “how-it come-about” story.

Wole Soyinka’s *Myth, Literature and the African World*, explores the use of myth in African literature. “Myths, Soyinka remarks, “arise from man’s attempt to externalize and communicate his inner intuitions” (3). One significance of this statement is, its recognition of the symbolic process involved in mystification:

Mazisi Kunene in “The Relevance of African Cosmological System” identifies mystification African literature and symbolism as the means through which the African writer can lift his work to classic proportions. Though Kunene treats myth and symbol as two different, though related forms, we prefer to see mythology as capable of symbolizing depending on the treatment it receives in a work.

One strong myth in African literature is that of the spirit-child, variously called “abiku” (Yoruba), “ogbanje”, (Igbo), “mtumtum” (Efik), “Menji Ogbo” (Kalabari), and “Igbakhun” (Edo). This phenomenon, according to Chidi Maduka’s study, draws from the African religious belief in reincarnation and predestination.

M. Ogbolu Okonji in “Ogbanje (An African conception of predestination) throws some light on this phenomenon. He writes:

{The Ogbanje} refers to an individual who goes through a continuous circle of birth and death as a result of a sort of primeval oath (iyi uwa: oath of the world) taken in the spirit world in the presence of the creator and bind on the living... the individual has to live in a particular manner throughout his or her usually short span of life (1).

It is further believed that the spirit-child is repeatedly born to the same mother. J.P. Clark (Bekederemo) in the poem “Abiku” captures the anxiety and pain the child causes mothers and family members. The child’s spirit companions are believed to keep luring the child to return to the spirit world, especially if his agreed time on earth has elapsed and he seems to be settling down in this world. The parents on their part show special love and care to the child, if only to make him want to stay. Among various African peoples, once a child is diagnosed by a diviner priest to be a spirit child, elaborate rites are performed to dig out the token of his “abiku” oath which is believed to be buried under huge trees or in forests or under water or such impressive places. A successful completion of the rites is believed to “earth” the spirit child.

In some literary works the myth of the spirit child becomes the framework through which meaning is discovered. This myth in such works provides the writer a symbolic vehicle for interpreting life, especially in contemporary society. A ready example we can think of in fiction is the esoteric short story “A Child in the Bush of Ghost” by Olympe Bhely-Quenum whose ethnic group, the Fun of Binin Republic shares close affinities with the Yoruba in language and other cultural and cosmological systems. Kunene in the article already cited, for instance, sees a singularity of African world view deriving from a similarity in cosmic concepts from parts of the continent. Though this seems an oversimplification, various African societies share similar world views with local colour variations. Bhely-Quenum’s story is loaded with mythic symbolic elements, and organized around the initiation motif. Codjo, the boy-narrator, sets out on a symbolic three-day orphic quest in the underworld for the secret of immortality (in the men of a Gilgamesh). Codjo searches for the source of the river, the source of life. On his way, he meets a Chameleon (“oga”) which in Fun and Yoruba mythology is a symbol of a transitional figure that journeys into other realms. Significantly, the chameleon takes on the colour of Codjo’s cloth, and Codjo on his part decides to take back two qualities associated with chameleon Codjo here becomes a projection of the Chameleon. He too is a transitional figure.

The boy descends into the subterranean passage, arriving finally at Wassi, where he undergoes sexual initiation with black skinned “ravishing young beauties”. So she is one with these “spirit beings”. This fact, and the fact of his return, shows him as a reincarnate, a spirit-child. From this derives a statement; Death (as a cessation of life) does not exist. What exists is rather a continuous cycle of transitions through deaths and rebirths. Apparently, Codjo has been dead for a symbolic period of three days like Christ was. And his return, like the saviour’s resurrection, signals victory over death. Codjo announces to the perplexed mourners of his

“death”. “Death doesn’t exist, and if it does, no dead man will ever return” (Bhelly-Quenum, 81). Codjo has gone, and returned. He returns with a new knowledge of himself and his world. Life, Codjo learns, is a continuum. The use of this abiku myth here becomes the vehicle for revealing the writer’s vision of life as a continuum

Okri’s *The Famished Road*, is the magical realist story of Azaro, a spirit-child or abiku, who, in the fifth round of his continual cycle of births and deaths, decides to remain, “to taste of this world, to feel it, suffer it, know it to love it, to make a valuable contribution to it ...” (5). It is the story of Azaro’s experience of living, an experience which, in line with his spirit essence, turns out to be a continual journey through many departures and returns, a journey into self-knowledge and a knowledge of this strange world of anguish. Through Azaro’s experiences too, his journey “through books and months and forgotten histories” (307), Okri offers us a long reach into the past of his Nigerian nation. The past is set up as an explanation for the present, and by this the possibilities of the future are anticipated.

Set in Nigeria from just about the time of political independence, the novel places the reader at this historic time spot, from which point he hears prophesies and sees visions of “the future present”. It is a symbolic vision of the whole of Nigeria’s socio-political history from colonial rule through independence and self-government to the time of military rule and beyond.

The novel then is built around “different epoch of time” but which collapse on one another resulting from the writer’s vision of an essential similarity in the structural pattern of the various historical movements of the nation, so that to talk of one is to talk of the others. From this eve of independence, then, we see the coming madness, hunger, confusion, war, blood; we see visions of “a whole generation that will squander the richness of this earth” (167). These are visions of a world of the ugly, the wicked and the wretched. There is no beauty here, except the beauty of survival and the undying hope of those who have grown to celebrate their pain.

This vision of life, like the authorial vision of all imaginative writers, is of course, personal, subjective. Okri further renders this vision in several private symbols. This story is one whole configuration of symbols. It is as though the writer saw symbolism as the one most authentic method for capturing and rendering his ideas about the nation, about the people and about life in general. Almost everything is imbued with the capacity for deeper significance, almost everything invites for transcendence into “the thing behind the thing”. In terms of their formal quality, these symbols relate to characters, actions, verbal structures, “pictures” (image may be problematic here), juxtapositions and background descriptions.

In examining how these symbols function as carriers of meaning, we have arranged them into a pattern that systematically reveals in sum Okri’s overall depiction of Nigerian history. In this regard, this paper follows a tripartite movement. The first section deals with the symbols that provide a general identification of the Nigerian nation. The second, which appears to elaborate the first, focuses on the symbols that mirror the particular features of the nation. In the last section, we examine the symbolic projection of Okri’s conception of what constitutes an adequate response to the anguish of life, an adequate response to the eternal cycle of the evils of the nation’s history.

Okri’s Nigeria is depicted by reference to several symbols. These include Azaro or Abiku, Dad, the Road, the old man-child, Madame Koto’s bar, and the market place. Here we select three of

these, the three we consider as the central ones in the pattern perceived to be formed by Okri's symbols. These are: The nation as (1) abiku, (2) the road and (3) the old man-child.

The Nation as Abiku:

Okri's *The Famished Road*, is built around the abiku myth. Azaro, the narrator protagonist, is an abiku. The story which he tells here is largely his. At the same time there are discernible intimations that the story is not only his story but the nation's. There is then this overlapping parallel running through the narrative. This manifests in two broad ways. At some points, Azaro's story serves only as a symbolic parallel of the nation's. At other points, the two story-strings clearly merge with the strong suggestion that Azaro as an abiku is better appreciated as a symbol of the nation.

The first overt statement relating the nation to the abiku condition appears on page 478 of *The Famished Road*; Ade, Azaro's spirit-child friend reveals: "Our country is an abiku country. Like the spirit-child, it keeps coming and going. One day it will decide to remain".

Dad further amplifies this when in his dreamland journeys into various spheres and into knowing, he discovers that "All nations are children; it shocked him that ours too was an abiku nation, a spirit-child nation, one that keeps being reborn and after each birth comes blood and betrayals" (494). Besides just establishing the abiku condition of the nation, Okri directly links Azaro himself to the nation. Early in the story, Azaro gets lost, and searches for his Mum in the marketplace of the world. An old herbalist who takes him hostage and thinks to use him for a ritual, perhaps, gives him a herbal portion. Azaro goes into a delirium after drinking it. And he hears voices speaking to him and about him. The voices say "They say he is looking for the spirit of independence. They say he is looking for himself. For his own spirit. Which he lost when the white man came. They say he is looking for his mother". (167). Azaro then is the spirit essence of the nation. Let us examine the ways his condition assumes a symbolic interpretation of the nation in the author's vision.

First, Azaro is described by a herbalist as "a child who did not want to be born, but who will fight with death" (8). If Azaro is the nation, then we perhaps have a suggestion here that this was a nation that never chose of its own to become a nation, but a nation which once born, decided to stay, and has since been fighting with death, with whatever will tear it apart. This may explain why Azaro's attempt at one time to return to the spirit world as a result of parental antagonism, (and this has some parallel with the secessionist attempt of the eastern region), never succeeded.

But more significant is the fact of the abiku's oscillation between this world and the other. For Azaro, this is his fifth round. (Any parallel with the five phases of governance in Nigeria is as then Colonial Rule, First Republic, Military Rule, Second Republic, and Military Rule?) So Azaro's life is one of moving consistently in a cycle. It is a life then without any real movement. In the incident already cited in which Azaro is directly linked to the nation, Azaro, after drinking the herbal portion, observes:

I tried to move. But my spirit felt lighter than, my body. My spirit moved, my body stayed still. And when I thought I had moved a considerable, distance I found that I was actually at the beginning of the movement. (165)

The nation's history as the novel reveals has been one of eternal recurrences, one of hopes and betrayals; one of always falling, and starting again. Aime Césaire's description of his wasted, desultory homeland in the long prose-poem, *Return to my native land*, corresponds to this vision. "At the end of the small hours, this town, flat... inert, breathless under its geometric burden of crosses, forever starting again, sullen to its fate, ... incapable of growing as the sap of its earth would have it grow..." (38). Okri's nation is one that has the superficial motions of changes but which never really changes. It is one of those Abikus who "do not all have the marks of their recurrence. Often they seem normal, often they are perceived of as new" (487). But it has been the same old nation. It has never grown; like Azaro, the nation remains a child.

In African cosmological system, it is believed that the abiku can be "earthed", can be "cured" and made normal. This requires some elaborate rituals. In *The Famished Road*, early in Azaro's life this fifth time, he is attacked by his spirit companions and nearly dies and returns to them but for the great herbalist and the intervention of the king of the abikus. On bringing Azaro back the herbalist advises Dad to perform the rituals to "earth" Azaro once and for all. But Dad does not have the means and is unable to perform the expensive ritual. So Azaro keeps falling into crises. Each time this happens, the parents take some temporary panic measures to get him back to this life. The implication here is that right from when it was founded, the nation has remained in a precarious state of uncertainty and continual crises because no effort has been made at fully addressing and solving whatever is the basic problem of the nation.

It is a nation for which no adequate preparations were made to sustain its momentous birth (487). It is a nation sustained only by adhoc panic measures at each time of crisis; one in which only the symptoms and not the causes, receive attention.

The Nation as the Road.

The road as a symbol here is as multiform in its references as it is ambivalent. While it refers to the nation, it is also a symbol of any oppressive system (as in the myth of the king of the roads, a monster predator who eats up men and their sacrifices) as well as a symbol of the pain of living itself, for Azaro describes it once as "my torment, my aimless pilgrimage" (115). Even in symbolizing the nation, its total reference remains elusive, indeterminate, because it contains some residual mystery.

For our purpose here, however, let us note that remarkably, Okri's *The Famished Road*; opens with the myth of the road-the road that was once a river, and the new condition or transformation of which made it ever hungry. Some explanations are offered within the narrative as to why the road is famished.

One is that the stomach of the king of the roads, the archetypal predator, oppressor, was washed off by the rains into the roads. The presence of the stomach of this ever-hungry monster who must eat everything in sight to feed his greedy, insatiable appetite for self preservation, becomes reason why the road is ever hungry and unfulfilled. Dad offers us the second explanation as he presents the manifesto of his new idealism. We read. "That's why our road is hungry" (451). Dad hollered, "We have no desire to change things." To cite one more explanation, Azaro speaks of his desire to create new roads from this ever hungry road, a road which he says is famished because of "our refusal to be" (487). Put together the road begins to bear relation to the nation. The nation is in this state of stagnation unfulfillment, because

monster-predators reign, and because the people have no desire to change things so that the nation can become.

The myth of the Might Green Road, becomes a symbolic interpretation of the nation's recurrent cycle of risings and fallings, hopes and betrayals. The prophet of "the people in masks" had a dream of his people building a road to heaven so that they could interact, learn from and become one with the great people of Heaven. He passed on this ideal vision (the vision of making a heaven of the nation) to his people. The people started building this road and have been on it for two thousand years now. During these years several generations have come and gone. Each generation that comes builds a section of the road, and just at the point they think they are completing it, a crisis erupts and the whole structure comes tumbling down. Then a new generation comes along with a new knowledge of the original plans and dreams, and of the mistakes of the past. They become wiser and start again, for "they have an infinity of hope and an eternity of struggles" (330); theirs is a spirit of eternal persistence. But, they end up making "bigger, better mistakes". Destruction comes on the road they have built also.

This is the road of the nation, the spirit child nation. "The road is their soul, the soul of their history" (329). The story of this road then is the essence of the nation's history. The original dream has been to have an ideal nation of corporate fulfillment deriving from prosperity and equity. Okri here suggests that each generation has always striven to build a virile nation, but each time, just as the dream seems to be finding translation into reality, there comes "blood and betrayal". The whole system crumbles. And this in spite of each generation's knowledge of the mistakes of the past the nation seems to be under a spell. Okri offers a poetic dramatization of this idea in "on the edge of time future" published in his collection of poem, *An African Elegy*. In this poem, a new generation of politicians and soldiers rise. They scourge through the nation's mess of the past "reviewed our history, and decided something had to be done". And what do they end up doing? They "resurrected the old blue-prints of vicious time...and learned at last that nothing can be avoided" (48). But despite all their knowledge of the past, the people greatest problem is that they "have the great curse of forgetfulness. They are deaf to the things they need to know the most (330).

The nation as the Old man-child

Let us consider the significance of the title of this novel, *The Famished Road*, For *The Famished Road*, we have already noted that this road is ever hungry, because it was once a river". It remains in essence a river, but a river whose condition changed so that it becomes a road. At a point in the narrative, a mighty rain falls, destroys the road, and we are told that "the road becomes what it used to be, a stream of down primeval mud, a river" (286). Thus, once all the bushes, the houses, the tarmac are removed, the road gets transformed back to a river, and its hunger ends.

The nation then is a road, and it is famished only by an unfortunate process of transformation. The nation is a river in essence, a river with the capacity for fulfillment. The implication here also is that the nation is endowed with the potential for growth. The problem is just this evil transformation and the lack of the desire to change things.

It is significant then that the nation is symbolized as a child-Azaro. A child, of course, has the potential for growth. Of equal significance is the fact that even though an abiku, Azaro reserves the power to will, to return or to stay. In the same way, the nation has the capacity to will, to

remain a nation, to will to grow and attain the heights her potentials assign her. The issue then is basically one of will. The problem is with the nation's abiku condition. She is not ready, not willing to become (487). This is where the symbol of the old man-child becomes relevant. In one of his trips to the spirit world, Azaro sees an old man who had "a face that was both a hundred years and child like...His hands were held up in the air, his neck slightly bent, as if he were carrying the heaviest riddle in the world {bearing the great weight of an invisible enigma on his head" (243).

But Azaro gets hold of a mask and looks at him through this mask. And in place of this old over-burdened hag, he sees "A beautiful young boy whose slender body somehow suggested the passionate weight of a lion; a boy-king of purest innocent with a smile like that of a god. And in place of the anthill from which the old man emerges, there appears the boy-king's "palace of turquoise mirrors" (245).

The nation is this old man-child. It has the potential for growth and beauty (a beautiful young boy), a potential for strength (a lion) and greatness (a boy-king with a palace) and fulfillment (has a smile). But by some process of evil transformations, but it has become unnaturally aged, decayed, wrinkled, and weighed down by a great burden.

What And What Constitute This Great Burden That Weighs Down The Nation:

In examining the symbols that embody the defining features of the nation, let us begin with this symbolic verbal structure that occurs on page 241 of *The Famished Road*. "The surface of the road was uneven with bumps, the tarmac melted under the sun and my soles turned black. The smell of melting tarmac was heady..." One gleans from this, that the road, the nation, has rough, uneven, bumpy surfaces which render it unsafe and uncomfortable to travel, to live in. This roughness results from some bashings, a melting of the tarmac, by the oppressive and destructive sun, the sun of exploitation and tyranny that spoils the normal order of the road - the nation. The heat of oppression so bears down on the tarmac that soles of the people, their lives get burned and charred. And the consciousness of this state of things (the perceived smell of the melting) makes one giddy. It assaults the intellect and maddens the mind, this consciousness.

The colonial system is set up as the inaugurator of the great weights upon the nation. It is the original of which all other succeeding political systems are mere duplicates in quality. Okri presents this in several ways; for instance, during the party organized by Madame Koto to celebrate her attainment of new powers, Azaro sees a vision. He sees "ghost forms of white men in helmets supervising the excavation of precious stones from the rich earth... I saw the ghost figure of young men and women, heads bowed, necks and ankles chained together, making their silent procession through the celebrations. They kept moving but stayed in the same place. Over them the celebrants danced to the music of a new era that promised independence" (455). The economic exploitation, slave labour and general subjugation of the people initiated by the colonial system continue even in the era of independence. This renders the promised independence a mere farce.

This is where the story of the blue sunglasses comes in. After independence is granted the nation, a white official of the secret service of the colonial institution comes to realize that "the only way to get out of Africa was to become an African" (483). So he dies the presumed death of colonialism, only to get reborn as a Yoruba man "he was the white man. His face

and his nose and everything was exactly the same except that now he was a Yoruba man with fine marks on his face” (483). The very evils which the white colonialist represented have found incarnation in the black natives, making them whites in heart, though they are outwardly blacks. They are in actuality “black white men”, to echo Gabriel Okara in *The Voice*.

With such men, the gulf between the rich and the poor becomes unbridgeable. This dichotomy is so strong in Okri’s trilogy that it assumes a symbolic structural significance. Part of the dreams the people have in the wake of the political upheavals that strike the nation, for instance, is “of the land suffocating with plenitude while the majority starved” (345). As one character puts it, “some people have too much and their dogs eat better food than we do....” (281)

The rich are symbolized in Madame Koto. Her enormous physical frame represents the obesity of excess wealth. Like Dad in his boxing exercises, the rich and powerful in the nation do “all our eating for us”, eating as if their bodies were “some sort of abyss” (366). While they steadily grow fat, the people steadily lean down. Mum, as a character, on the other hand, is symbolic of the poor. Azaro says of her, regarding her suffering in the marketplace: I saw that her tiredness and sacrifice were not hers alone but were suffered by all women, all women of the marketplace (162). We provide a fuller examination of this juxtaposition in chapter four. For now, let us look at the symbols related to poverty and suffering in the nation.

Mum is groping in the dark room of infinite riches one evening because there was no money to buy a candle. She hits her foot on a hard object. Blood gushes out on the floor. Azaro lights a match. He is looking at the blood when the match burns out. Then he observes “her blood became the colour of the darkness” (79). This is, of course, a matter of the impressionism in the point of view which we shall examine in the next chapter. But at another level, this observation is significant. Blood is a symbol of life. Darkness is a symbol of anything evil. Here then Mum’s life becomes the colour of evil; is steeped in suffering and pain. After this, Mum goes to the backyard and puts a “black stuff” on the wound. It is ash. Ash, in bible typology, stands for sorrow, anguish. But Mum tells Azaro that this black stuff is “poverty”. In this, a significant link is constructed between life, poverty and suffering represented respectively by Blood, Ash and Darkness. Because Mum is poor, life for her is an unending chain of suffering and anguish.

To cite one more example, Dad is carrying heavy bags of salt in the marketplace. As he crouches under this heavy yoke, he stumbles and falls into mud, wounding himself. Azaro observes, “Dad stayed on the ground, covered in mud, not moving, as if dead, while his blood tricked from his back and mixed with the rubbish of the earth” (149).

Poverty bespeaks shame. Poverty bespeaks stagnation, lack of development. Poverty turns one’s life into “rubbish”, renders one’s life of little worth. The novels amply dramatize this. Thus, this is a nation with a system that perpetuates poverty and suffering.

This is so because the land is full of oppression and exploitation. Dad once revealed that his people used to have great spiritual powers. But these powers they have lost, and exchanged for some new powers of selfishness, money and politics. Whoever, therefore, gets the

opportunity tries to oppress others. For instance, in threatening Azaro for insulting her party men, Madame Koto points out a man to Azaro and says “He is a chief. He is going to rule our area, he will swallow you” (240). It appears then that his “inherited” royalty indicates the certainty of his ascendancy to political rulership. And the fact of rulership further indicates the fact of his right to “swallow” people for his convenience.

This brings us to the sun as a symbol of the oppressiveness of life in general, caused by the oppression of the weak by the powerful. The sun symbol captures the harshness of life as on pages 160 and 161. Azaro tells us “...under the persistence of the yellow sun, with everything naked, I was frightened by the feeling that there was no escape from the hard things of this world. Everywhere there was the crudity of wounds. The sun burned the reality of our lives and everything was so harsh”. Azaro notes later, “sometime it seemed that the brightness of the sun burned people out of reality” (270).

The sun becomes a symbol of economic oppression on page 242. Sacked road construction workers go on protest march. Suddenly, an anti-protest squad sets upon them and beats them. Azaro observes: “The sun was remorseless. Shadows were deep. Where the sun was brightest, objects were blackest. The sun here is the oppressive system of slave labour which is remorseless in subjugating its victims. It is significant that the sun is often qualified in this novel in its superlative extreme terms; for instance “the sun was merciless on our flesh”(242). These extreme qualifications underscore the extreme intensity of the oppression the people suffer.

In chapter four of book 7 the thugs of the party of the rich are thrashing the people. Azaro makes the following remarkable statements:

The thugs whipped themselves into future eras. They whipped themselves into future military passions...under the fevers of their new ascendancy, the certainty of their long future rules, and their inevitable transformation into men of power, the thugs made the air crackle with their contempt for those of us in the outer darkness, whose faces all seemed like one, and who threatened the party with nothing but chaos (451).

This not only reveals the unqualified political violence and oppression in the nation, but the fixed recurrence of this situation through all historical periods.

This is a nation where the powerful sustain their lives and maintain their hegemony by exploiting, by “eating up people”, like the king of the roads, or “swallowing” them, like the chief who is to rule Azaro’s ghetto area. Madame Koto herself needed Azaro’s youthful blood to keep alive. So she comes in the spirit and thinks to swallow up Azaro. This is exploitation. Okri uses the rat-symbol to present this feature of the nation.

Jeremiah, the photographer, tells Azaro that rats “are never satisfied. They are like bad politicians and imperialist and rich people ...they eat up property. They eat up everything in sight. And one day when they are very hungry they will eat us up” (233).

Rats here are predators that can even eat up people. There was a legion of them in Azaro’s house. He tells us that these rats keep chewing away their lives. These rats are politicians, imperialists and the rich. They exploit the people as noted by the narrator “Madame Koto offered me money it turned to liquid in my hands. She offered me gold, which turned black and

thickened into wax and flowed down my arms”(43). He builds Koto’s bar, thereafter, he is ordered out of it by the thugs of the party of the rich. He is refused to drink in a bar he built, just like Ben, Ocholla and the rest of the “hands” at the construction site of Nairobi’s development house in Meja Mwangi’s *Going down River Road*, In the latter work, men described as “crummy bastards who ended up building hotels they would never afford a cup of tea in and offices they would ever be allowed into once completed” (28). This is the fate also of the poor in Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*; they are a deprived, exploited lot.

Finally, let us look at the duplicity of the men of wealth and power. The story is replete with objects and men going through “transformations”. Things appear to be one thing, while they are really something else. A man that looks normal is soon discovered to be terribly abnormal, perhaps with the face upside down on his neck. Often these transformations are meant to deceive, to disguise the real nature of things, for here we have men with “a greater mastery of the secrets of human disguise”. (273) For instance, the freakish, grotesque beings that kidnapped Azaro in Madame Koto’s bar reappear later in a different appearances. Azaro says of them: “I recognized them all beneath their transformed appearances” (133).

The transformations here are used to depict, in particular, the duplicity of politicians. The politicians’ milk of bad politics is a central symbol here. The politicians in their electioneering campaign came to the ghetto area with promises and with milk. The promises pointed to better things to come as the free milk promised such nourishment and fulfillment to which the poor were strangers. But the milk turns out to be fake. It is rotten and sickening. And all who take the milk, all who believes the politicians’ promises, become sick. “All the jollity and good feeling of Sunday-the day of promise, gave way to groans....” (130). It was all the rotten milk of deceit, of hopes betrayed, which, the wise writer of Proverbs says, makes the heart sick. (13:12)

This then is a nation of the politics of hypocrisy. For instance, the two thugs that murder a man in the forest reappear in Madame Koto’s bar looking no longer like thugs, but like “modern businessmen, contractors, exporters, politicians” walking about “with the dignity of honourable crooks” (220). The men of power here, despite their gentlemanly, humane appearances, are at best mere “honourable crooks”.

In the same bar on another occasion, Azaro is watching the politicians and the prostitutes as they dance. He says they appear human when in point of fact they are “animals in disguise, part-time human beings dancing to the music of ascendant power...those who would wreck our hopes for two generations”. (460-461).

In sum then, this nation is a land of stifled dreams and growth, perpetual hunger, of unmitigated oppression, of unabashed deceit, and in which men’s lives keep turning on the same “axis of anguish”. The question then is, caught in this vicious tangle, what does the individual do? What is the response? Does he sit back and mean? Or does he, as Achebe’s Okonkwo would, take up a stick and break the head of his oppressor?

Symbolic Projection Of What Constitutes An Adequate Response To The Anguish Of Life And Adequate Response To Evils Of The Nation.

With his life adorned with the crudity of wounds, Dad learns that “this life he thinks is a joke which is not really a joke. Even mosquitoes know they have to survive” (413). Dad’s first

solution then to the problem of injustice and oppression is to fight it physically. A boxer from youth, he sets out to box the whole foolish and terrible world, to patterns of goodness and fairness. So all through the novels, Dad is a fighter. He fights policemen, party thugs, greedy neighbours, spirit beings animals, etc. But the more he fights injustice, the more intense it grows and the more devastated he gets-economically socially and physically. It is all futile.

The suffering ghetto dwellers also try collective report. For instance, in their fury over the rotten milk given them by the party, they stage a crushing attack on the party men. They beat the thugs and overturn and burn their van of bad politics. But all this amounts to an “important rage”. They are considered “destabilizers of the imperial government and enemies of the party” (156). So the powers that be swoop down on them, arrest and torture them to docility. The photographer in particular, who is the symbol of the writer, the consciousness of society, suffers serious reprisals. His studio is destroyed. This is to show “what powerful forces in society can do if anyone speaks out against their corruption” (182). He is forced to go into hiding, and remains a minted shadow through the novels.

This futility of rising against the eternal hegemony of the powerful is given a symbolic dramatization in the attack on Madame Koto and her abominations by the “self-anointed prophet of the new church”. A kind of revolutionary leader, the head priest of the church mobilizes his white congregation, and leads, them in denouncing Madame Koto and her inhuman capital abominations. These reformers succeed that day in blocking the bar so that business comes to a standstill. So their mission appears to be succeeding. The following day, several more people are drafted into the revolutionary force to ensure a complete destruction of the oppressive power structure. But something happens. Suddenly, disagreements arise among the people. In the midst of this comes a symbolic reprisal from above rain and thunder bolts. The people scatter and desert the prophet. He goes on defaming Madame Koto. Eventually, Madame Koto arrives with her party men in a fleet of cars. While the rain drenches the prophet, the men of power walk into the bar with umbrella. He accepts it, and goes on defaming her. But he has lost. The people, his flock, jeer at him. The whole mission of social change fails ignominiously.

Once physical confrontation fails, Dad, after recovering from his great fight with the dreaded thug, green leopard, decides, to try something else. On his sick bed his spirit traverses several regions of existence in search of answers. Dad wakes with a new idealism. His vision is to form his own political party and take over power and then completely transform the ghetto, providing the people with all the basic necessities of life at affordable price. This also, proves a dismal failure.

The futility of Dad’s idealism is pictured in his symbolic effort to clear the rubbish of the area, the rubbish in the people’s heart. Dad organizes beggars to do this job, and beautify the streets. The beggars will clear one and dump the rubbish at the other end. They crush the flowers they are to plant. Dad’s personal efforts are just as futile:

...when he had cleared a bit of rubbish, and dumped it in the swamp, people would litter the section he had cleared up. In one week his efforts seemed to have resulted in there being more rubbish around. The street got worse. People began to think it more natural to dump their garbage on the street (410).

Social change then in futile, Okri seems to say. The system of oppression and unethical social values is fixed and cannot be truly changed.

If social change is futile, what then is the answer? This is where we return to the symbol of the Mighty Green Road. The supreme knowledge the people lack is the fact that “no true road is ever complete” (488). Their prophet had said that “the road cannot be finished” lest the people perish of completeness, of boredom” (329). But they never understand. Okri here develops an intriguing metaphysics. He suggests that this eternal recurrence of “building” and “destroying” is a natural cycle from which no man, no nation can ever escape.

One may then ask “if all the struggles of a man, of a generation are only a preparation for another certain demise, where then is hope?” While Okri sees no end to this cycle, there also appears some glimmer of hope. This hope derives from the people’s growth towards the realization of the very hopelessness of life, its absurdity, and their resolve to becalm their anguish and sense of despair, and like the suffering bird caught in an eternal tangle of spider’s web, rise above the situation.

In conclusion, Okri’s philosophy of life in almost all his novels is that life is a pain. Yet one must learn to adjust to it, to accept life as it is, and find peace within oneself, so that in the midst of the pain one flows with the music of fulfillment, attaining the plenitude of the self. Like Jaffia in *Flowers and Shadows* and Omovo in *The Landscapes Within*, Azaro, Dad and Mum, in the trilogy, come into this realization in the end. And beauty comes into their anguished life as a result. Dad in appealing to Azaro not to return to the spirit world says “You have seen how sweet even our sorrow can be our life appears to be a sad music ...we have sorrow here. But we also have celebration” (337). We find an echo of this in “An African elegy”, the title poem of one of Okri’s collections:

Do you see mystery of our pain?
That we bear poverty
And are able to sing and dream sweet things
... We bless things even in our pain
We bless them in silence (41)

This is the paradox of life that laughter can co-exist with pain. The mask is a relevant symbol here. Azaro finds this mask in the forest of his hallucinations. It is said to resemble “a skull sliced half and black with tar” (244), and looked frightening from one side and contorted at the front in ecstatic laughter. This is life, at once a pain and a joy. For instance, as the compound people bemoan their collective fate, Azaro observes that “all around us voices raised in laughter and in pain” (281). Their song is likened to the “celebration of an old pain” (282). The people are bruised, but not crushed in spirit. They know how to celebrate their sorrow.

Of the mask, we are further told “it was the face of one of those paradoxical spirits that move amongst men and trees, carved by an artist who has the gift to see such things and the wisdom to

survive, them” (244). The paradox of the mask, of life, is the paradox of the artist. He sees all the horrors, but, once behind the mysterious mask of creativity, heads able to celebrate the horrors. He is able to perceive pattern and beauty in this pain called living. Azaro remarks, “When I looked out through the mask I saw a different world” a world with “music

everywhere, and dancing and celebration rose from the earth” (245). But once he takes off the mask “the world turned and the trees seemed be falling on me ...” (245).

The implication then is that not until one transcends the pain and horrors of the apprehensible world, and willfully creates music out of sadness, light out of darkness, joy out of pain, living remains a futile struggle. Hope and fulfillment reside, not in boxing the world nor in a vain idealism, that seeks to change the permanence of the pain of life, “the enshrined in justices of the world” (3), but in this emergence of the consciousness into the oasis of this paradox of celebrating pain.

Works Cited

- Armah, Ayi Kwei. *The Beautiful one are not yet Born*. London: HEB, 1970. Print
- Bhelly-Quenum, Olympe. “All Child in the Bush of Ghosts”. *Jazz and Palm-wine*. Wilfred F. Feuser. Essex, England: Longman, 1981. Print
- Blackburn, Alexander. *The Myth of the Picaro: Country and Transformation of the Picaresque Novel: 1554-1954*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 1979. Print
- Haupt, Simon. “Ben Okri: The Landscape Within” *African Literature Association Bulletin*. 18:3 (1992). 37-39. Print
- Kunene, Mazisi. “The Relevance of African Cosmological System to African Literature”. *African Literature Today*. Ed. Eldred Jones. II. London HEB, 1980.190-205. Print
- Maduka, Chidi T. “African Religious Beliefs in Literary Imagination: *Ogbanje* and *Abiku* in Chinua Achebe, J.P. Clark and Wole Soyinka” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*. XXXI: 1 (1987): 17-30. Print
- Mwangi, Meja. *Going Down River Road*. London: HEB, 1976. Print
- Okonji, M. Ogbolu. “Ogbanje (An African Conception of Predestination). *The African Scholar*. 1.4 (1970) :1-2. Print
- Okpewho, Isidore. “Rethinking Myth” *African Literature today*. Ed. Eldred D. Jones. II. London: HEB, 1980. 5-23. print
- .”Myth and Modern Fiction: Armah’s *Two Thousand Season*”. *ALT*. 13. 1983: 1-23. Print
- Okri, Ben. *Flowers and Shadows*. Essex England: Longman, 1980. print.
- -- *The Landscapes Within* Essex England: Longman, 1981. print..
- -- *The Famished Road*. London: A Vintage Book, 1991. print.
- -- *An African Elegy*. London: Cape, 1992 print.
- Soyinka, Wole. *Myth, Literature and the African World*. Cambridge: CUP. 1978. Print.
- Stevick, Philip. Introduction. *The Theory of the Novel*. Ed. Philip Stevick. NY: The Free Press 1967: 65-84. Print
- Tindall, William. York. “Excellent Dumb Discourse”. *The Theory of the Novel*. Ed. Philip Stevick. NY: The Free Press 1967: 65-84. Print