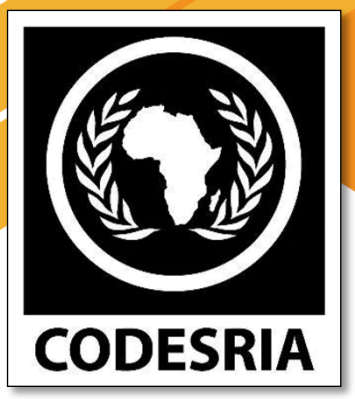

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Myth and Realism in Ben Okri's Prose Fiction

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MYTH AND REALISM IN BEN OKRI'S PROSE FICTION

BY
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CERTIFICATION

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DEDICATION

This doctoral thesis is dedicated to the memory of my parents, Prince John Adeboboye Adeniji and Florence Adebanke Adeniji.

ABSTRACT

This study is an investigation of the aesthetic effects and socio-political import of Okri's consistent use of myth and realism as depicted in the selected novels, namely: *Flowers and Shadows*, *The Landscapes Within*, *Dangerous Love* (re-writing of *The Landscapes Within*), *The Famished Road*, *Songs of Enchantment*, *Stars of the New Curfew* and *Astonishing the Gods*.

The study reveals that even though the two concepts would ordinarily not share a common terminus, they have been forced to co-habit the same aesthetic space in Okri's prose fiction and serve as the burden bearers of his unique aesthetic vision and thematic preoccupations. The analysis embodied in this study has been done through the agency of Philip Wheelwright's semantic theory of myth and Ian Watt's theory of realism. These theories have been used to evaluate the contributions of myth and realism to Okri's prose fiction at the level of theme, characterisation and setting. The two theories also facilitated the analysis of the convergences and divergences between Okri and other writers in the bid to foreground the unique insights which the interface of myth and realism makes available to contemporary writers about art and the society. The research findings include the fact that Okri deliberately fuses myth and realism in his works in his bid to satirise the debilitating or deranging effects which the policies of a visionless and self-serving leadership often foist on the people's psyche. Another finding is that Okri's aesthetic choice is also a search for a Utopia, a society devoid of the malaise of the present social organism. This is what informs his recourse to the abiku symbolism and other myths in works which bear undeniable realist temper.

The study concludes that Okri's use of myth is both revolutionary and "revisionist," and the unusual interface of myth and realism in his works enables him to arrive at new interpretations of the human condition in the neo-colonial milieu.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This study investigates the impact of myth and realism on Ben Okri's aesthetic vision in such works as *Flowers and Shadows* (1980), *The Landscapes Within* (1981), *Dangerous Love* (1996 re-writing of *The Landscapes Within*), *The Famished Road* (1991), *Songs of Enchantment* (1993), *Stars of the New Curfew* (1988) and *Astonishing the Gods* (1995).

Myth and realism, to the average mind, traverse parallel trajectories, each with its associated signification. Even when they occupy the same aesthetic or cultural space, as they sometimes do in the oral tradition and in literature, the "mythic" often retains its super-ordinate status, while the "real" is relegated to a subordinate position. This dichotomy is evident in many myths taken from the oral traditions of many cultures across the world. For instance, the Yoruba myth of creation installs the gods – Ogun, Orisa Nla, etc, – in a privileged position over man and other elements of creation. The same observation is true of the mythic personages in literature, be they the ghosts and apparitions in Shakespeare's *Macbeth,* Forest Head, Aroni and other spirit-beings in Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forest*, or the abiku in Soyinka's and Clark-Bekederemo's poems "Abiku".

In essence, the "real" often maintains a respectable distance from the "mythic", with the former regarding the latter as sacred. As such, mere mortals quake with trepidation when confronted with the gulf between man and the immortals, whether they are gods, ghosts or unnameable spirit-beings. In Okri's works, however, this neat distinction between the world of myth and reality

breaks down, leading to unethical cross-border invasions of the supernatural in the natural realm, and vice versa. The ensuing mélange of realities strikes a contradictory chord in the average reader of Okri's works because his ontological orientation remains fixated on the bi-polar cosmogony of the supernatural and the natural having a gulf fixed between them.

1.1 THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

Consequently, the perceived contradiction between myth and realism and their unusual interface in Okri's prose fiction has led to a misapprehension of his aesthetic vision by some readers and critics. That is why his novels, most especially the recent ones, have been labelled "animist realism", "magical realism", "unrealism", "fantasy", labels which serve to confuse rather than enhance the comprehension of Okri's message. In contrast to the negative implications of these labels, this study demonstrates that the interface of myth and realism impacts positively on Okri's aesthetic vision. In other words, the study explores Okri's marriage of myth and realism in the realisation of his thematic preoccupations as a means of exploding "myths" about the mutual exclusiveness of myth and realism in his works.

1. 2 DEFINITIONS AND MEANINGS OF TERMS AND CONCEPTS

The two key terms in this study are "realism" and "myth". Realism is largely mimetic, demanding the use of certain techniques relating to the wealth of details of character, setting and incident that make a realistic work a verisimilar

and plausible reflection of life. In contrast, myth ordinarily deals with the supernatural – gods, goddesses and the superhuman – reflecting a largely romanticised world, which is ideal but not real, and which is related to man's world only through metaphorical reference. Yet myth and realism are in many ways symbiotically joined at the navel of literature and serve as valuable tools in the creation of works that provide great insights into the nature of man and his world.

Etymologically, "Mythos" meant for the Greeks "Fable", "Tale", "Talk" or "Speech". Contrasted with "logos" and "historia", "Mythos" tends to denote "what cannot really exist' " (*Encyclopedia Britannica* 1132) or what is "unreal" or incorporeal or "impossible" (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* 829). In short, myth did not originally signify a supernatural reality to be approached with awe. Over the years, however, myth has acquired the status of a sacred text because of its association with the numinous exploits of divinities, culture-heroes and hero-gods. This sacral feature of myth is foregrounded in the following definitions of myth which facilitate the working out of a schema of characteristic features capable of resolving the seeming contradiction between myth and realism in this study. The various definitions also demonstrate points of intersection between myth and realism in literature.

The first point where myth and realism interconnect in literature is history. According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*:

> Myth narrates a sacred history, it relates an event that took place in primordial time, the fabled time of the "beginnings". (1133)

The "sacred history" in the above definition is not synonymous with modern history as recorded by contemporary historians who approach their task with a measure of objectivity and scientific verve. This distinct kind of history which relates the primordial or primeval beginnings of man, a people or a race does not purport to be dispassionate or objective and is also exemplified in Malinowski's consideration of myth as "a narrative resurrection of a primeval reality" (Malinowski cited in *Encyclopedia Britannica* 1133). Thus, myth is anchored on some form of reality, the reality of the people who created it, believe in it, and structure their social institutions and conduct in obedience to it. So long as the reality of those who believe the myth as "sacred history" cannot be wished away, the validity of myth as a social reality cannot be impugned. Myths, therefore, are related to reality because the "faithful" in each culture or religion regard them as "true" records of the beginnings of their peoples in history.

Realism shares with myth the concern with history, particularly the fictive re-presentation of history. In other words, the way realism evokes human history dispenses with rigid fidelity to facts and sequence; rather, historical facts and actions are made to pass through the crucible of the writer's imagination to produce distinctive, albeit visionary, human truths. Leonee Ormond illuminates the connection between realism and history by asserting that:

> Fiction and history are kindred forms. Indeed, as late as the eighteenth century, history was regarded as a literary art. Both fiction and history are narrative structures, concerned with the behaviour of human beings and with the passage of time. Modern historians, wary of using fiction as source material, stress the scientific accuracy of their own discipline, although choice and discrimination work to produce an

> individual construct, not a set of statistics. Fiction, on its side, has a strongly historical dimension. Even aggressively contemporary works frequently turn their attention to the past, if only in stating or implying a contrast. (1)

Ormond's observation highlights at least three areas of agreement between realism and history. These are the centrality of human beings in the affairs of the world, the perennial concern of realism and history with the passage of time and their narrative structures. Even though the story of Nigeria has been recorded with facts and figures by many historians, Okri's *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment* are imaginative re-tellings of Nigerian history prior to and after independence. They are neither objective nor factual renditions of Nigerian history but fictive and mythic re-presentations of known history, filled with poverty, social divisiveness and political oppression. Eldred Durosinmi Jones also captures the historical interface of myth and realism in literature when he declares:

> The truth of the past (when we can discover or reconstruct it) is history, while the penumbra cast by an extra-ordinary event or personality – after it has been blurred by fallible memory, modified by corporate convenience, and heightened by imagination and poetry – constitutes the weighty metaphor that is myth. (1)

A logical summation of Jones's position which this thesis agrees with is that even though myth, realism and history often deal with the impact of past events on human beings, myth and realism appeal to the imagination while history targets the intellect. In general literary practice, many literary works are based on historical antecedents. Soyinka's play, *Death and the King's Horseman* is a case

in point. Even literary works that are not based on historical incidents have been inspired by socio-political cataclysms. For example, Tolstoy's *War and Peace* is centred on Napoleon's war with Russia.

Myth and realism also intersect in the ontology which accepts multiple existences and promotes mutual interpenetration of the natural and the supernatural worlds. Myths embroil supernatural beings in conflicts on behalf of man, sometimes in direct confrontation with man. Many works across the genres of literature depict the conflict of supernatural beings and man. For instance, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, many plays of Shakespeare, *Macbeth* and *Hamlet,* for example, the Gothic novels predating realistic novels and many of Okri's works have an unusual cast of men and supernatural beings.

Wole Soyinka infers that the basic motive behind the man-supernature conflicts evident in myth is cathartic, to purge man of his inherent fear of his bewildering environment. To him the conflict of the gods is "a perception of man's efforts to harmonise with his environment, physical, social and psychic" (1). To Soyinka, therefore, the drama of the gods that myths express is man's attempt to make meaning out of his threatening socio-spiritual milieu and an effort to create a fully integrated universe amenable to control through myths and rituals. By creating myths in which man and supernatural beings interact, man initiates a rapport with the unknown, thereby expurgating his latent fear. In sum, both myth and realism depict a universe which accepts the mutual inter-penetration of the natural and the supernatural worlds.

Myth and realism are further joined at the navel of fictiveness because they reflect or mirror life through fictionalization. To reiterate, realism in literature is a literary convention that projects a mimetic rendition of the real world without idealization. M. H. Abrams, however, points out that the mimesis or imitation of life usually associated with realism is no more accurate or objective than the unreal world of myths. According to him:

> The realist sets out to write a fiction which will give the illusion that it reflects reality as it seems to the common reader.... A thoroughgoing realism involves not only a selection of subject matter but, more importantly, a special literary manner as well. The subject is represented, or "rendered," in such a way as to give the reader the illusion of actual experience". (Abrams 153)

That is to say, realism sets out primarily to fictionalise but not necessarily fantasise as in myth. As Abrams shows, realism and myth create fictive or imaginary worlds. Like all fictions, both myth and literature depend on the reader's "suspended belief" (Coleridge), his "experimental submission" (Richards) or his "imaginative identification," (Achebe 99). In essence, both myth and realism mirror the society; myth through metaphor and symbolism, realism through a representation that upholds the illusion of actual experience. Chase affirms that

> Poetry [literature] and myth arise out of the same human needs, represent the same kind of symbolic structures, succeed in investigating experiences with the same kind of awe and magical wonder and perform the same cathartic function. (29)

In other words, myth and realistic literature have similar themes and employ similar stylistic devices in fictionalising the subject to achieve the same goal of purging man of his inherent fear. Consequently, the world created by Okri in his works and the unreal world in myth depend for their success on man's capacity to create fictions through words which set man's imagination on fire.

Another intersection between myth and realism is the pedagogic site, as both concepts attempt to instruct and explain some of the mysteries of nature and the human condition. S. H. Cook and Allan Watts aver:

> Myth is irrational... and comes to mean any anonymously composed story telling of origins and destinies, the explanations a society offers its young of why the world is and why we do as we do, its pedagogic images of the nature and destiny of man.
> (S. H. Cook, cited in Wellek and Warren 191)

> Myth is to be defined as a complex of stories – some no doubt fact, and some fantasy – which for various reasons, human beings regard as demonstrations of the inner meaning of the universe and of human life.
> (Watts 22)

The two excerpts above emphasise the explicit pedagogic feature of myth. To Cook and Watts, myth serves as an instructional manual which a society uses to teach the new generation about the origin of the world and the rationale behind the lores and mores of the society. In other words, society employs stories of anonymous authorship to explain the mysteries surrounding the world and life in general. The pedagogic import is relatively explicit in myth but it is implicit in realism. For instance, a Yoruba myth explains that the sky is so distant from the earth because of the insulting behaviour of men towards the sky. According to

the myth, which is of anonymous authorship, Earth and Sky were siblings and the sky used to be close to the earth to facilitate uninterrupted intercourse between the two. However, men showed great disrespect to Sky by wiping their oily fingers on his face after every meal. In annoyance, Sky distanced himself from his sibling Earth to avoid such indignities. As observed earlier, the pedagogic import of the above myth is quite apparent, which is to explain why the sky is so distant from the earth.

In realism, however, the converse holds true. For example, Okri's *Flowers and Shadows* explains why the Nigerian society is so corrupt, why there is so much injustice and poverty in a land allegedly flowing with milk and honey. Unlike the anonymous mythmaker above, Okri expresses his pedagogic intent indirectly through the creation of characters whose evil proclivities energise the latent spark of evil in every man and perpetuate it. In other words, there is so much poverty, injustice and disorderliness in Nigeria because some powerful men have given vent to their evil desires, thus making these vices the rule rather than the exception in the nation.

Besides pedagogy, myth and realism also replicate and validate social institutions through suggestion and persuasion. They accomplish this by offering models of acceptable behaviour, and by imposing sanctions on violators of societal rules and institutions. The characters in myth, be they spirits, gods or men, provide models of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Realism employs the same technique. In *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment* and *Stars of the New Curfew*, for instance, witches, wizards and bad spirits like unrepentant

"abiku" are excoriated, while good spirits and the ancestors are commended and portrayed as models of acceptable social behaviour to men. In the same vein, the materialistic Jonan Okwe and his Machiavellian half-brother Sowho are held up to ridicule in *Flowers and Shadows*, while Elizabeth and Jeffia, Jonan's wife and son, are held up for commendation by the author for their humane nature.

There is a subtle suggestiveness in both myth and realism that compels obedience. In this wise, both concepts represent man's attempt to attain a utopian ideal in the world. Myth and realism are not only didactic, they are propaganda tools in the hands of those who want to maintain the status quo, or revolutionaries whose object is to install a new order. According to David Bidney:

> The truth of myth is a function of its pragmatic and dramatic effectiveness in moving men to act in accordance with typical emotionally charged ideals. (20)

If myth shapes the physical behaviour and cerebral disposition of man in society, it serves the same function as realism in shaping the outlook of men to life, thus pre-determining their actions and reactions (Bidney 20). In Okri's works, for example, the "abiku" myth is presented as a valid reality that the society believes in. This fact is reflected in the name given to the boy-hero, Lazaro, a corruption of the Biblical Lazarus. It is also evident in the many rituals performed by his parents to persuade or coerce him to stay in his current incarnation. Mum declares emphatically that she has given birth to Azaro five times, including his present incarnation (*The Famished Road* 457).

As propaganda tools, the ruling class, to validate existing power structures in the society, uses many of the ancient myths. That may be the reason why Voltaire and some European philosophers regard myth as "irrational superstition" and "deliberate fictions foisted upon the multitude by the crafty priests" (Bidney 5). However, the modern usage of some of these myths introduces twists which question the *raison d'etre* of existing power configurations. These are counter-myths, deliberate creations to validate one reality while vitiating another. These modern myths are sometimes used to re-write histories, to re-orientate people's attitude to a particular cultural phenomenon. Writers identified with the postcolonial school frequently adopt this technique. Moh explains that the ideological project of post-colonialism is to "challenge those systems which emphasize white superiority" (11).

Even though Okri refuses to be pigeonholed within the confines of the postcolonial school, his use of myth in his works validates the African ontology which accepts the interpenetration of physical and spiritual worlds while not totally expunging the good aspects of European imperialist incursions into the African milieu. Okri believes in the re-creative power of words, but declares that before a new world can be created, "we must first unearth and destroy the myths and realities, the lies and propaganda which have been used to oppress, enslave, incinerate, gas, torture and starve the human beings of this planet" (*Way of Being Free* 110). Okri also avers that a nation is as strong as the stories it tells itself, and that the oppressed of the world can re-create their milieus, re-dream their world by creating positive narratives for themselves and their posterity. He insists that:

> It should no longer be left to the contemporary victors to speak for human history. Whatever resilience has kept wounded people and devastated continents here, alive, can be transformed to make them strong, confident, and serene. They have to question everything, in order to re-build for the future. They have to redream the world. Chinua Achebe put it very succinctly when he wrote that suffering could also give rise to something beautiful. (*A Way of Being Free* 132)

It is evident from the above excerpt that the interface of myth and realism in Okri's works is not by accident, but a literary device to create a counter-myth to the hegemonic narratives of the oppressors which tend to swallow up the oppressed and confirm them in their subordinate position. By freeing the imagination of the oppressed, Okri hopes to wake them from their slumber and encourage them to change the status quo "and build again from the wedding of the best things the world has to offer and the best aspects of their own mythic, aesthetic, spiritual, and scientific frames" (*Way of Being Free* 131). Before that, it is needful to "clear the cobwebs of bewilderment from their eyes, and to demystify the propaganda of contemporary victors" (*Way of Being Free* 131). The liberation of the human spirit is, therefore, the aesthetic goal of Okri in his use of myth and conventional realism.

1. 3 JUSTIFICATION OF STUDY

a. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In solving the stated problem, the following research questions helped to sharpen the focus of the study:

1. What is the contribution of the interface of myth and realism to Okri's thematic preoccupations?
2. How does Okri's re-working of popular myths and other elements from the oral tradition highlight his vision without constituting a total severance from general prose fiction?
3. How does Okri's use of myth and realism in his novels enhance the reader's comprehension of his socio-political messages?
4. How much of realism and myth is reflected in Okri's characterisation, setting and language?
5. What does Okri's experimentation portend for the future of African prose fiction in general?

b. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

In the process of demonstrating that myth and realism are not mutually exclusive but cooperate to animate Okri's aesthetic vision, this research hopes to achieve the following objectives:

1. To assess the contribution of myths and realism to Okri's thematic preoccupations;
2. To explore and explicate the interface of myth and realism in Okri's novels as it impacts on his aesthetic vision;
3. To evaluate the socio-political import of Okri's re-working of popular myths and other elements from the oral tradition;

4. To elucidate the impact of the coalescence of myth and realism on Okri's characterisation, setting and language; and
5. To explore the convergences and divergences between Okri and other African writers who have used the same cultural artefacts.

C. CRITICAL RECEPTION OF OKRI'S WORKS

Okri once described himself as a "child of intersection" (Hattersley 22), but judging by the contradictory critical responses to his works, he is better described as a child of controversy. A survey of the critical reception of Okri's prose fiction corroborates the contradictory perception of his aesthetic vision by critics who play a pivotal role in the comprehension of Okri's works by the general public.

David Cook, for instance, deplores Okri's penchant for yoking together disparate realities, corporeal and incorporeal, as a mere sop to gratify the grisly taste of his international readers. He declares:

> I am very disappointed with Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*. I think Ben Okri is a major writer. The earlier writings of his and also the avant-garde writing that he was beginning to do I think were much more positive. I think *The Famished Road* was largely a work jumping on an international bandwagon which is tired and wants something different and exotic and strange. I think he is going back to the 1960's sort of patronization of African literature. (16)

Cook's outburst raises certain issues that are germane to literary praxis. The least portentous of these issues is Cook's assumption that "avant-garde writing'" is "much more positive" than any other type of writing. In

literary circles, this assertion would be difficult to defend, given the subjective nature of critical practice and the lack of consensus among critics about the parameters of "positive writing".

The earlier writing referred to in the above excerpt are Okri's first two novels and his two volumes of short stories. To Cook, *The Famished Road* appears "inferior" to these earlier works because in it the author adopts a narrative mode which merely seeks to satisfy the taste of his international readers (for obvious pecuniary benefits as the most economically viable), by presenting African reality in an "exotic" manner, as a land of slumbering reality and waking dreams, where hard economic actualities occupy the same geo-political space as myths and superstitions.

While Cook may be right in expressing his displeasure at the casualness with which spirits and men invade one another's worlds in Okri's more recent works, a careful study of *Stars of the New Curfew* shows that *The Famished Road* is the culmination of a narrative technique begun in the short stories, which, Gareth Griffith asserts, demonstrates Okri's disenchantment with the western narrative methods of realism, naturalism and modernism, regarding them as being too narrow and inadequate to accommodate and express his message. More significant, therefore, is Cook's insinuation that the interface of myth and realism in *The Famished Road* serves as a mere background, a backdrop to action, as another critic was to put it eight years later.

Abubakar Liman also denounces Okri's seeming evasion of "certainties", his refusal to proffer clear and "realistic" solutions to Africa's hydra-headed socio-political problems. To critics like Liman, literature, especially African literature, must have a utilitarian value in moving the continent forward in her quest for political and economic emancipation. They agree with Chinua Achebe's declaration that "the [African] writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done" (30). Liman's comment on *The Famished Road* typifies the ideological leanings of this group, and his recommendation to young writers which is an obvious indictment of Ben Okri is that:

> Creative writers in Africa should endeavour to transcend Okri's type of uncertainty in their bid, through the might of the pen, to steer the continent away from the edge of the precipice occasioned by the designs of global capitalism through its neo-colonial agency. (75)

Even though this study does not intend to dabble into such polemical issues as the social use and functionality of literature, it is obvious that Liman's conclusion would have been different if he had not based his assessment of Okri's artistry on *The Famished Road* alone. Had Liman, who wrote in 1997, also considered *Songs of Enchantments* (published in 1993), he would have seen Okri's solution to Africa's socio-economic and political woes. Whether or not Okri's suggestion satisfies his ideological yearnings is another matter entirely.

Liman's comments also invite other questions: how does a writer proffer solutions in his works? Is it through assertive statements or through imagery, characterisation, plot structure or the manner he adopts in effecting his

dénouement? This is an area of interest which subsequent chapters in this study address. Suffice to say at this stage that an author's message emerges through multiple avenues. Consequently, focussing on only one channel may actually be a disservice to literary studies.

It may also interest Liman that some people have found concrete therapeutic values in Okri's works. For instance, Sarah Wheeler, a Briton who used to suffer "from severe depersonalisation disorder and had gone through several months of ill-health" regained her mental composure by reading poems from Okri's collection, *Mental Flight (*Quarmby 1-3). Today, she heads the Mental Fight Club, an organisation which encourages "... people who suffer from mental health problems to join groups that discuss and perform poetry, fiction and art" (Quarmby 1-3). Needless to say, Okri's works take precedence over others. In fact, he is the patron of the club.

While critics like Liman and Cook excoriate Okri's works, especially the later novels, for their alleged lack of utilitarian focus, Adewale Maja-Pearce goes further to query the depth of artistry evident in his prose fiction, thereby casting a shadow of suspicion on Okri's mastery of his craft. To Maja-Pearce, Okri is simply an incompetent writer whose unusual luck gave him the prestigious Booker Prize in 1991. He lambastes Okri's first novel thus:

> *Flowers and Shadows* is not a successful novel. This is hardly surprising when one considers the author's age at the time he wrote it. The problem begins with the prose itself. The description of Jonan's motor accident is typical of the way in which the writing collapses whenever it strives for effects; worse still are those passages where nothing at all is being said, and which simply degenerate into an orgy of mixed

> metaphors, collapsed figures of speech and plain bad grammar. (90)

While Maja-Pearce sees *The Landscapes Within* (1981) as the "heir" to Soyinka's *The Interpreters,* he nevertheless regards it as weak According to Maja-Pearce, in trying to imitate James Joyce's style in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Okri is guilty of "a too-obvious striving for effect" (Maja-Pearce 102). But Maja-Pearce's most vitriolic comments are reserved for *The Famished Road* which he says "fails to live up to the promise contained in *The Landscapes Within*" (102). Maja-Pearce also criticizes Okri's use of the Latin American school's "marvelous – or magical – realism", insisting that:

> There is no organic connection between language and event. The descriptions of the marvelous which occur in almost every paragraph – talking chickens and camel-headed men – are incorporated into the body of the narrative purely for effect, which means that they possess only a spurious, random connection with the narrative proper. (102)

Maja-Pearce's strictures evince the general misperception of Okri's artistic project whenever his works are approached from a unilateral critical perspective. While the parameters of a "successful novel" remain nebulous, it is equally specious to equate age with the ability to write "a successful novel". More importantly, Maja-Pearce's denigration of the "magical elements" in Okri's latter fiction betrays a palpable lack of understanding of Okri's style by some of his critics.

Perhaps the greatest charge against Okri is that he has not communicated his aesthetic vision with sufficient force and clarity to inscribe his message

indelibly in the reader's mind. Okot p'Bitek foregrounds the primacy of communication in the literary enterprise when he says:

> Literature is the communication or sharing of deeply felt emotions. The vehicle of this communication is words. The aim of any literary activity must be to ensure that there is communication between the singer and the audience, between the story-teller and his hearers. (p'Btek, cited in Roscoe 34)

Expressing similar sentiments, Soyinka avers that "... communication itself must be regarded as a primary frontier between the artist and the rest of humanity," (39). Every great writer builds a bridge from the past to the future, connecting the living to the dead and the unborn in a network of transcendental ideas. Those writers who succeed in this generation-bridging task enter the hall of fame; but history is often unkind to the failures, who are simply dumped by the wayside of life. Yet an important difference between the successful writer and the failure is communication. Every creative writer has talent, every writer has a vision, but the ultimate impact of his work – enduring or merely evanescent – lies in the ability of the artist to communicate with his public. In other words, there must be a meeting of minds between the writer and the reader to avoid a breakdown in communication between the writer's intention and the reader's perception. It is the grey area between intention and perception that has engendered so much misreading of Okri's works as mere unrealism for the sake of unrealism. Making such an allegation is Roy Hattersley, who says that Okri's stock-in-trade is mysticism and unreality:

> He represents a world untroubled by hard reality, in which it is possible to pass from human form into spirit and back. It is a dream which thousands of people in

> their flight from cold winter mornings, crowded buses and grocery bills want to share. (27)

Hattersley confirms his (mis)perception of Okri's aesthetic project as the creation of an escapist mechanism by comparing Okri's works to hallucinatory drugs.

> Many of his readers are searching for mystical experience. Some young people chose hallucinatory drugs. Others wisely choose *The Famished Road*, *Songs of Enchantment* and *Astonishing the Gods*. (27)

Hattersley is not alone in this respect. In his review of Okri's latest novel, *In Arcadia* (2002), Alfred Hickling says Okri delights in writing novels "that continually depict a hankering after an exalted plane, tantalizingly glimpsed through the fog of earthbound existence" (Hickling 1). Elizabeth Mitchell observes in the same vein that "Okri creates an intoxicating cocktail of Nigerian lore and hallucinatory images – a sort of Dali in wonderland", adding that "operating on various levels of reality, Okri's writing may for some be an overdose of imagination, while for others a wild trip" (Mitchell 2).

Tim Adams, too, says that Okri's fiction "is being inexorably drawn" towards the "...seekers after enlightenment and cultish holistic healers popularly called 'gropers'" (1). Adams laments that Okri's writing since *Stars of the New Curfew* "tended to ascend to the ether, his flights getting ever more fanciful, his groping more earnest" (1). His conclusion is that: "You don't go to this author for neatness of narrative as much as for a transcendent kind of tone-poem" (2).

These comments, which are representative of the strictures inflicted on Okri's works, bear testimony to the conflicting perceptions of Okri's aesthetic vision by many of his critics because of the intermingling of myth and realism in

his fiction. No doubt, Okri's penchant for yoking together disparate realities creates a lot of confusion in literary circles, and nowhere is this more evident than in the Babel of labels that have been affixed to his works. This tendency to label is apparent even in seemingly positive reviews of Okri's works.

John Skinner, for instance, regards Okri as "the most significant innovator among younger West African novelists in purely conceptual terms" (99). Yet, he classifies *The Famished Road* as "reminiscent of the picaresque and spy narratives of eighteenth-century England" (99). To him, the novel lacks "formal realism or complex psychological patterning" which makes it obviously "African" (99).

Skinner also acknowledges that the mutual interpenetration of the human and spirit worlds in *The Famished Road* is "comprehensive and yet casual", and its saturation with "magic and traditional lore, in a manner … recalls the novels of Tutuola" (99). Even though Skinner concludes that "Okri's novel is … no mere indulgent formal experiment, but returns to the disillusionment expressed by many of its literary predecessors" (101), his classification of the novel as "picaresque" and "spy narrative" is rather pejorative and tends to diminish the valuable contribution made by Okri to myth and realism in literature. The impression that emanates from his critical review of *The Famished Road* is that the "magic and traditional lore" in it are merely decorative and not integral to a holistic comprehension of Okri's aesthetic project.

Harry Garuba considers *The Famished Road* as a remarkable novel which will revitalize the famished genre of Nigerian fiction. He says:

> Despite this background of myth and magic *The Famished Road* is not a fable set in a never-never world of fantastic trivia, but a grim socio-economic tale of poverty and the politics of a neo-colonial state. (23)

Despite Garuba's commendation of the grandness and epic stature of the novel, his classification of the work as "animist realism" is as pejorative and misleading as Skinner's "picaresque" and "spy" labels. The term "animist realism" inadvertently reinforces the impression that these elements from the African oral tradition found in Okri's prose fiction merely provide exotic background without any intrinsic connection to the thematic concerns of the author. In contrast, this study avers that a deep-structure interpretation of Okri's works is impossible without a thorough examination of their mythic content.

"Magical realism" is one of the most popular labels that critics affix to Okri's works, although he has always strenuously refuted the label. The term "magical realism" was introduced in 1798 by the German Romantic poet and philosopher, Novalis, who observed that a "true prophet" was an "isolated being" who is liminal in nature and is best regarded as a "magical idealist" or a "magical realist" (cited in Wayne 3). According to Wayne:

> Novalis's project was a response to the 'disenchanting' logic of the Enlightenment, and provides a relevant, though almost entirely unexplored, point of connection with the ways modern magical realism, similarly responding to a disillusionment with the relentless rational nature of modernity, also seeks ways of resolving the tension between miracle and truth, the magical and the real. (3)

In modern literary discourse, however, the term is mostly associated with the Latin American school of magical realism made popular by Alejo Carpentier's *El reino de este mindo* (*The Kingdom of the World*) and Asturias's *Hombres de maiz* (*Men of Maize*) both of which appeared in print in 1949. In the introduction to his seminal book, Carpentier observed that "Latin America was inherently marvellous, and that it was only through the exercise of faith that outsiders would be able to access *lo real maravilloso Americano* (the marvellous American real)" (Wayne 5). In essence, the forte of magical realism is that it combines realism, fantasy or folktale without making either of the two realms subordinate to the other. Consequently, "a basic definition of magical realism…sees it as a a mode of narration that *naturalizes the supernatural*: that is to say, a mode in which the real and fantastic, natural and supernatural, are coherently represented in a state of rigorous equivalence – neither has a greater claim to truth or referentiality" (Wayne 5).

A superficial reading of Okri's works would lead to the conclusion that he is a "magical realist", given the frequent interruptions of ghosts, spirits and the unborn in the natural course of events in his fiction. Adams, Hattersley, Mitchell, Wayne and Maja-Pearce are some of the critics that have asserted or implied that Okri's works belong to the magical realism school. However, Okri denies this label. He tells Simon Houpt that *The Famished Road* is not really about a spirit-child: "It's about living. It's just the best way that I could use to talk about this living, this mystery of existence," (Houpt 2). In another interview, Okri states that he is trying to project an African worldview which does not regard the natural and

the supernatural as being mutually exclusive: "This is just the way the world is seen: the dead are not really dead, the ancestors are still part of the living community and there are innumerable gradations of reality, and so on … It's a kind of realism, but a realism with many more dimensions" (Ross 338).

Critics such as Ato Quayson, Fraser, Griffith and John Otu have also refuted the classification of Okri as a magical realist. Fraser, for example, declares that:

> Okri's work is inseparable from his overall vision: a projection of hopes for the world based on the release of mankind's as yet untapped mental and physical resources. This is what yokes the heroic struggles of the poor in *The Famished Road* sequence to the large gestures of Okri's poetry, the exhortations of his essays. Early attempts to make sense of this project clumsily explained it with reference to the South America-inspired Magical Realism. But Magical Realism is a technique based on disorientation, whilst Okri's work across a variety of genres is intended to convey an apprehending of real presences behind the façade of everyday events. (Fraser 5)

In essence, Fraser believes that it is misleading to regard Okri as a magical realist because the interface of myth and realism in his works is, ultimately, meant to depict the world as perceived by Africans, a mode of apprehending reality which regards as "normal" the intrusion of the supernatural into the natural. Felicia Oka Moh agrees with Fraser that the magical realist label often affixed to Okri arises from his copious use of artefacts drawn from the African oral narrative tradition. She considers his works a realistic depiction of:

> the pitiable existence of the poor masses, the ever-enlarging chasm between the haves and the have-nots, the oppressed and the oppressor, the exploited and the exploiter who all live side by side in the Nigerian urban centers. (12)

Moh, nevertheless, underestimates the importance of the interface of myth and realism in Okri's works when she declares that his magic realism "is merely a background for action" (12).

The label "magic realism" is as confusing as the term "postcolonial" which Pico Lyer, Griffiths and Jacqueline Bardolph give to Okri's fiction. According to Lyer, writers in the postcolonial school rely heavily on magical realism, thereby grafting into the English language the exotic flavours of their mother tongues. Liman has, however, refuted Lyer's classification of Okri's works as belonging to the postcolonial discourse. He asserts that:

> There is nothing post colonial about the picture of grim realities of existence Okri has represented. His magnification of the microscomic unit of an ordinary family struggling against the overwhelming forces of monopoly capital is typically in place with the normal preoccupation of literary practices in Africa. (Liman 11)

In other words, Okri's use of myth and realism in his works is not an affirmation of the philosophical underpinning of the postcolonial project which explores language and literature as a valid site for challenging the poitical dominance of the metropolitan centre.

On her part, Bardolph's labelling of Okri's works as postcolonial is not as explicit as that of Lyer. In "Azaro, Saleem and Askar: Brothers in Allegory" (45-51), she analyses *The Famished Road* as a bildungsroman which does not live up to its billing because it combines the features of a bildungsroman with those of a

political allegory. According to her, the novel seems "static, repetitive, shapeless … due to an apparent lack of inspiration, a loss of narrative intensity and sense of direction" because "the coming of age is too close to the present to allow for idealization or for any credible projections" (45-51). Her inevitable conclusion is that: "the feeling of anomy, of powerlessness, the loss at times of the very idea of linear progress make the designing of a clear plot, the progression towards some kind of resolution, a daunting task" (45-51).

However, Cam exposes the implicit postcolonial underpinnings of Bardolph's analysis, blaming her unstated theoretical platform as being responsible for her conclusion:

> I believe Bardolph's analysis fails to do justice to Okri's novel precisely because of her assumption that it is a postcolonial novel. To her credit, she does not use this term: nevertheless, her analysis is driven at every point by the theoretical agenda referred to for the sake of convenience as "postcolonial" … The first manifestation of this programmatic reductionism is her reading of *The Famished Road* as Bildungsroman … But Okri's novel does not conform to her expectations. Azaro does not mature, does not transit 'the passage from the delights of early [fantastic] visions to the sobering stages of growing up, from magical gifts to a prosaic assessment of limits…Indeed, none of the novel's characters develop in the teleological manner which might be expected of Bildungsroman. (Cam 3)

From the foregoing, it is obvious that it is often misleading to approach Okri's prose fiction from the standpoint of a particular school or label because he is eclectic and able to harmoniously marry elements from diverse literary

traditions. Fraser, after dismissing the attempts to classify Okri into such schools as "postcoloniality", "postmodernity" and "magic realism" says:

> The trouble with all of the aforementioned terms as applied to Okri is that they tend to absorb the texts into a hegemonic discourse, or set of discourses. Furthermore, these concepts are too ambitious for the writer's expressive and the reader's receptive mind to be able to 'surround' .... the terms postcoloniality, postmodernity, and magic realism are wonderfully smooth to the touch. They are too exceptionally pretty. Their limitation is that they aspire to name the ocean. The reliance of some critics on these conventional indicators is regrettable, since Okri has provided some far more appropriate signposts of his own. (9-10)

Fraser advises critics of Okri's works not to attempt to classify or pigeonhole his fiction in any conventional school but view his works in relation to certain key concepts: "About stories as receptacles of meaning, and about the relationship in all art between the seen and the unseen, the evident and the unsuspected" (11).

Fraser's critique is in consonance with the stance of this study, which is that many of the misleading labels and strictures inflicted on Okri's works arise from the inability or refusal of some critics to plumb the depth of meanings in his works, especially the more recent novels. The confluence of myth and realism in Okri's prose fiction seems to create a measure of complexity that calls for extra effort from the reader. Understanding the myriad of symbols emerging from the interface of myth and realism in Okri's works is, therefore, crucial to a full appreciation of his message. A cursory look at the subject matter and characters in the works selected for this study shows the mutual inclusiveness of myth and realism within them.

Flowers and Shadows is the story of Jonan Okwe who is driven by his fear of poverty to adopt all ethical and unethical means to maintain his position as chief executive of his company, Afioso Paints. These "means" include outwitting his brother and sending him to jail on trumped-up charges, murder, bribery, corruption of the judicial system and involvement in the occult. He lives his life as if money answers all things, but finds out too late that the cost of his overarching ambition to be rich is the loss of his peace of mind and the alienation of his wife and only child, Jeffia. It is interesting that even in this early work which critics often dub "realistic", the involvement of the occult is apparent in Jonan's frequent recourse to his "juju" at critical moments in his life.

The Landscapes Within narrates the struggle of a budding artist, Omovo, against forces, internal and external, that try to extinguish his nascent ambition to be a painter. Assailed by these external forces and his own self-torturing doubts and misgivings about his calling, Omovo becomes a study in aloneness in the heart of a crowded ghetto. He becomes a stranger to his society and to himself until he finally decides to pursue his ambition of being a "life artist" irrespective of family, society and allied forces.

The Famished Road and *Songs of Enchantment* narrate the travails of Azaro, the spirit-child "who did not want to be born, but who will fight with death" (*The Famished Road* 8). Azaro breaks his pact with his spirit-companions to return at an agreed time to the spirit world, thereby incurring the wrath of his spirit-companions. *The Famished Road* and *Songs Enchantment* also narrate the conflicts between Azaro's father, Dad, and supernatural forces like Yellow

Jaguar, the spirit in white suit, witches like Madame Koto and wizards such as the Blind Old Man.

Astonishing the Gods narrates the mythical journey of an unnamed protagonist to a mythic island populated by a group of invisible people. The purpose of the man's journey is "to know why I am invisible. My quest is for the secret of visibility" (*Astonishing the Gods* 4). But at the end of his quest, he accepts the fact that invisibility is not necessarily a bad fate and could be a precondition for achieving a higher state of perfection that illuminates the world without attracting attention to itself, the kind of perfection that "by some mysterious grace transcend so many boundaries and enter to many realms that we occasionally astonish even the gods" (148).

Subject matter aside, Okri's characters also manifest the interface of myth and realism with obvious implications for his thematic preoccupation. In *The Famished Road* and *Songs Enchantment*, the participant-narrator, Azaro, is part-human, part-spirit. He falls in and out of reality at the blink of an eye. Besides his physical senses which perceive sensory stimuli, he also possesses a "third eye" which sees simultaneously into the spirit realm. In these narratives, spirits, spirit-children, and other-worldly characters visit the earth to fight human beings, enjoy beer and pepper soup or buy and sell in human markets. Azaro, therefore, is a liminal character, forever between and betwixt two realities simultaneously. In these novels, there are many occasions when the spirit realm invades the physical world, yet the characters and setting are so realistically portrayed and the issues

concretely relate to the problems of man in society that the realism in these works is unassailable.

Even though *The Landscapes Within* follows the realist tradition in setting and incident, the protagonist, Omovo, is another liminal figure, traversing the landscapes within and the landscapes without. *Astonishing the Gods* resembles an extended parable or a variation of the archetypal quest myth in which a man embarks on a journey of discovery, goes through many trials and wins a boon at the end. The unnamed protagonist of *Astonishing the Gods* is a typical liminal character found in any myth. The same thing goes for the unnamed protagonists in "What the Tapster Saw", "Worlds that Flourish", Arthur in"Stars of the New Curfew" and Ede in "When the Lights Return". What all these characters have in common is the ability to fall in and out of different levels of reality, real and surreal or supernatural, within a twinkle of an eye.

Griffiths observes that Okri's latter fiction:

> ... went further than the [short] stories in embracing and developing a narrative mode in which realistic description mingles with mythical figures and magical explanations. In these novels of the early 1990s, the metaphysical and religious aspects of African cultural practice are given a dominant status, becoming the meta-narrative within which the realist world is contained, and to which it is subordinated. The cultural politics of such a reversal is clear. It rejects the subaltern status of African modes of knowledge, and reinstates an African ontology and epistemology in place of the dominant Euro-American conceptual frame. (326)

As stated earlier, this study argues that myths and other elements from the African oral tradition hold the key to the unravelling of Okri's message. This stance is in

consonance with Griffiths's position above, even though this thesis does not subscribe to the postcolonial theory which informed Griffiths's criticism. As a matter of fact, Richard Priebe's hypothesis about the West African writer's use of myth and realism in their works is closer to the truth than Griffiths. According to Priebe, the works of West African writers manifest "ethical consciousness" or "mythic consciousness" (2). When a writer chooses to set up a direct and explicit relationship between his work and his society, he usually adopts realism and is thus being "guided by …ethical consciousness" (Priebe 2). On the other hand, when a writer chooses an indirect or implicit relationship between his work and his society, he employs myth and "guided by …mythical consciousness" (Priebe 2).

According to Priebe, Achebe's works manifest ethical consciousness while the works of Fagunwa, Tutuola, Wole Soyinka, Ayi Kwei Armah and Kofi Awoonor manifest mythic consciousness. More germane to this study is Priebe's insistence that his theoretical constructs are not watertight compartments but a continuum. "A given work may have elements that are mythic and elements that are ethical, and no writer is bound to write all his works so that they reflect one consciousness" (Priebe 4). Okri's works fall into the last category because they manifest consistent use of myth (mythic consciousness) and realism (ethical consciousness). That is why it is true to state that Okri's aesthetic vision through the interface of myth and realism comes alive in fiction described by the author himself as consisting of, "all that's there, what we see and what we don't see," (*A Way of Being Free* 1).

d. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

From the prededing review, it is obvious that many critical works have highlighted the unusual phenomenon of the mythic in the real in Okri's prose fiction and literature generally. A sizeable number of these critical works proceeds from the premise that the unsual interfaces of the supernatural and the real in Okri's works serve as a literary hook or mere exotic backdrop to his actions. However, this study is unique in its analysis of the interface of myth and realism in Okri's prose fiction because of its emphasis that both concepts are equal partners in the literary enterprise at the aesthetic, social and political levels. In essence, this study approaches Okri's prose fiction from the unusual standpoint that both myth and realism are sine qua non to a comprehensive analysis of Okri's thematic preoccupations and social vision, discounternancing such convenient and popular platforms as postcoloniality, postmodernity or magical realism.

1. 4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Judging by the observations above, it is obvious that Okri's prose fiction, which is a deliberate fusion of myth and realism, would respond rather turgidly to a critical theory which marginalises any of the two concepts. That is why this study adopts Philip Wheelwright's semantic approach to myth and Ian Watt's particularity theory of realism.

a. Philip Wheelwright's Semantic Approach to Myth

Wheelwright's semantic approach to myth is a variant of archetypal criticism made popular by Northrop Frye. According to Frye "… an archetype [is] a symbol which connects one poem with another and thereby helps to unify and integrate our literary experience" (Frye 136). Myths are archetypal images or symbols, as Frye himself declares that the study of the archetype begins with the world of myth, "an abstract or purely literary world of fictional and thematic design, unaffected by canons of plausible adaptation to familiar experience" (Frye 136). Frye's archetypal criticism analyses the structural principle of literature through mythology, especially the way myth operates in various forms of literature, thus uniting "western literature in the context of its Classical and Christian heritages" (Frye cited in Newton 100).

Frye hypothesizes that myth is the extreme end of literary design. It becomes "realism", "romance" and "naturalism" through a device known as "displacement" (Frye 136). Using this device, a purely hypothetical construct similar to Carl Jung's "collective unconscious", Frye draws up a literary schema involving myths and various forms of literature. He says:

> We have, then, three organizations of myths and archetypal symbols in literature. First, there is undisplaced myth, generally concerned with gods or demons and which takes the form of two contrasting worlds of total metaphorical identification, one desirable and the other undesirable… Second, we have the general tendency we have called the romantic, the tendency to suggest implicit mythical patterns in a world more closely associated with human experience. Third, we have the tendency of "realism"… to throw the emphasis on content and representation rather than on the shape of the story. (Frye 139-40)

In other words, the mythical mode revolves around the stories of gods and other supernatural beings, and reflects the imitation of actions at the apogee of human desire. Frye expatiates further:

> The world of mythical imagery is usually represented by the conception of mythical heaven or Paradise in religion and it is apocalyptic, in the sense of that word already explained, a world of total metaphor, in which everything is potentially identical with everything else, as though it were all inside a single infinite body.
>
> (Frye 136)

In essence, heaven represents the apogee of human desires, a world of endless beauty and pleasure in which to desire a thing is to have it. This is the world of myth, in which everything is potentially capable of endless and seemless transformations. Hence, Frye's association of metaphor with myth because in metaphor, the markers of comparison "as" and "like" are absent, paving the way for direct identification of one thing with another.

In contrast to outright myths, realism focuses on "representation or lifelikeness".

> When, for instance we pick up a novel of Dickens our immediate impulse, a habit fostered in us by all the criticism we know, is to compare it with 'life', whether as lived by us or by Dickens' contemporaries.
>
> (Frye cited in Newton 99)

To Frye, therefore, while myth inheres in metaphorical identification, realism, on the other hand is "an art of extended or implied simile" (Frye cited in Newton 100). Nevertheless, he recognizes that recent realistic literature, while being mimetic and ironic, reaches back to a mythopoeic reality (Frye cited in Newton 102).

Fascinating as Frye's archetypal criticism is in its "scientific" (as opposed to impressionistic) approach to the study of myth and literature, his method has been criticized as being "one of classifying than analyzing" (Harding 33). In analyzing the mythic element in Ben Okri's fiction, therefore, this study will rely more on Philip Wheelwright's semantic theory of myth. Wheelwright's theory is preferred to other myth theories because it directly addresses the manifestation of myths in literary texts while other theories like Solarism, Euhemerism, naturalism, functionalism, etc, are more applicable to the study of myths in their socio-cultural manifestations in society.

Wheelwright's semantic theory is a codification of the three main ways in which myths are used in literary works. He states that these ways manifest the three types of myths used by literary writers. The first type is the primary myth, followed by the romantic myth and the consummatory myth. A scrutiny of Okri's works shows that all three types proliferate in his prose fiction.

Wheelwright posits that primary myths developed at an age when the imagery-laden "expressive language" (as opposed to "steno-language") was the common medium of communication (157). According to Wheelwright, steno-language is the language of "plain sense and exact denotation", while "expressive language" is metaphorical and is characterised by a fluidity which merges experiences the way metaphor (he uses the word "diaphor") breaks down the neat compartmentalisation between ideas (157). To arrive at the characteristics of primary myth, Wheelwright, therefore, concentrates on the essential features of expressive language.

The first feature of expressive language is that it is employed in an area usually designated as "sacred", including "those forms of story-making that have enough transcendental reference to be properly classified as "myth" (Wheelwright 157). Another feature of expressive language is that it operated at a stage in man's linguistic evolution when there was no clear-cut distinction between terms and propositions. "Term" refers to the non-assertorial meaning of words. For example, the word "dog" means but does not "declare" in the sense that it cannot be affirmed or denied. "Proposition", on the other hand, is a sentence and, therefore, assertorial. That means it can be denied or affirmed. For example, the sentence "Dogs can bark" is affirmable or deniable. In steno-language, terms are clearly demarcated from proposition, but there is no such compartmentalisation in expressive language because of its diaphoric nature. According to Wheelwright:

> In the mythopoeic mode of consciousness there is a strong tendency of the different experiental elements to blend and fuse in a non-logical way. And not only that, but the selfhood of the worshiper tends to blend with them: that is to say, he becomes a full participant, not a mere observer. Finally, there is blending or partial blending of worshiper and sacred objects and ceremonial acts with certain transcendental presences....." (159)

This means that the world of primary myth is a fluid one, like expressive language, and admits mutual interpenetration of realities, the natural and the supernatural.

The third feature of expressive language is that it possesses "concrete universality or archetypal character" (159). In other words, it is applicable to all human situations and man is its central focus. That is why Wheelwright says that

"at least two of the diaphorically related elements represent human functions and or interests of a deep-going and pertinently associated sort" (159-160). From the features of expressive language, we can more readily adduce the characteristics of primary myth.

First, primary myths are regarded as "sacred", or relate experiences that are regarded as "sacred". The "sacredness" of primary myths arises from its often transcendental reference: that is, it relates the exploits of transcendental characters like gods, goddesses, and super-human beings. Second, primary myths connote a situation whereby the worshiper and the object of worship, as well as the elements of worship are diaphorically fused into one. That is to say, at a certain stage in his worship, the worshiper believes he is "possessed" by the "spirit" of the god or goddess. He can even "invoke" (that is, bring into himself) this spirit under certain conditions. Thus, primary myths give validity to this transcendental experience by relating stories of such possessions or divine visitations.

Third, primary myths rationalize and validate man's belief in and practice of ritual and magic as effective channels of control, not only of nature, but of supernature. In other words, primary myths encode a worldview which accepts mutual existences and the interpenetration of the physical and the supernatural worlds. In this wise, primary myths manifest:

> A certain readiness to address nature, or the mysterious presences "behind" nature, and to open one's mind and heart to the "signs of address" which are given in return ….. (Wheelwright 165)

No wonder Giambattista Vico regards myths as stories that seek to regulate and guide man's relationship with other elements of the universe (quoted in Warren 191).

The fourth feature of primary myths is that they reflect man's need to explain the *tremodom et fascinae* of nature, the supernature, the odd occurrences in life and the seeming imponderables of cosmic phenomena. The mystery of life and death, the source of sustenance of the world and its associated systems, the upholding of man's moral codes and ethical structure are explained by primary myths. It is in this wise that some critics have labelled myths as pseudo-scientific explanations of nature, the supernature, man's moral codes and social organization (Ruthven 10-17).

Finally, and more germane to our project, primary myths reflect man's love for story-telling or for fictions. Wheelwright says:

> Primitive [primary] myths may be regarded as the early expressions of man's story-telling urge so far as it is still conditioned by such proto-linguistic tendencies as diaphoric ambiguity and the several kinds of sentential polarity. (167)

For the students of literature, primary myths represent an early stage of culture which is Edenic in its innocence, simplistic in its lifestyle, uncluttered by the stress and strokes bedevilling sophisticated society. Primary myths evoke a world of complementarities between man, animals, material nature and the supernature. Like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, the world of primary myths represents society's primal stage when man, animals, gods and all cosmic forces were not only in tune, but also attuned one to another. It is a world in which an explanation

could be adduced for every mystery of life and every specimen of human behaviour or moral conduct. In sum, the world of primary myths is like paradise lost but sought. The world of the abiku depicted in the opening pages of *The Famished Road* evokes such an idyll (4). Other primary myths found in Okri's prose fiction include the myth of destiny, the myth of transformation, the myth of human medium, the myth of higher beings and celestial gods, etc. In sum, primary myths relate to man's early child-like state when myths are accepted as the truth in innocence (Mann cited in Ruthven 54).

Romantic myths do not refer to myths narrating the amorous exploits of men, women and the gods. As Wheelwright explains, these are myths used by writers as *"le roman"* a French expression implying a deliberately contrived story or an invented plot. In a sense, the word "fiction" accurately sums up the way in which romantic myths are used by writers. They are regarded as fictive in nature, not sacred stories like primary myths but products of man's imagination. Wheelwright opines that while Ernest Cassirer and Suzanne Langer's view of myth as a "pre-Linguistic tendency of human envisagement" and, "a synonym of the mythopoeic mode of consciousness" fits its primary sense (154), Chase's view that literature and myth arise from the same sensibilities and address the same human problems in similar ways (Chase 27) fits into the romantic myth.

Going back to his original proposition, Wheelwright explains that romantic myths are symbolised by "steno-language" in which there is a tidy distinction between terms and proposition. Steno-language encourages easy identification of linguistic elements and strict comparmentalisation of ideas and

experiences. It does not admit fluidity, but insist on rigid denotation. That is why Wheelwright says:

> Later myths, and later retelling of the earlier myths, betray their essential romantic character by the degree to which such semantic fluidity and plenitude have been exchanged for tidier narratives relying on firmer grammatical, logical and causal relationships. (167)

Romantic myths, therefore, are a better reflection of contemporary society than primary myths in their insistence on proper behaviour, neater compartmentalization of modes of existence, logical explanations of events and their causes, and the absence of a belief in multiple existences and multiple realities. Romantic myths reflect a society that is self-consciously scientific in attitude and clinical in orientation; a society that prioritises objective realities or empirically verifiable experience, and marginalises the spiritual realm. Man in such a society is divorced from his spiritual anchors and is adrift in a universe perceived to be hostile and meaningless, perpetually at odds with man's deepest yearnings, and complacent or inimical to his goals and strivings.

Two types of romantic myths can be extracted from Wheelwright's definition and explanations. First are those romantic myths based on some well-known primary myths, but modernized to reflect contemporary realities. Such romantic myths are regarded as fictive retellings of primary myths. The second type of romantic myths refers to those "invented" or "created" by the writer entirely out of his imagination. This type of romantic myths has no corresponding primary myths. Both types lack the aura of "sacredness" which clings to primary myths. In other words, romantic myths are not regarded as revealed truth by the

writer and his readers; rather they are regarded as elements of a literary design calculated to enhance the enjoyment and acceptance of the work by a wide section of the reading public. That is to say, both the creators of romantic myths and their consumers know that they are not "true" in the religious sense; they are fictive constructs used to convey the author's message. The myth of the stomach and the myth of the king of the road are examples of romantic myths in Okri's prose fiction.

Unlike primary myths which are integrative – man, animals, plants, the natural world and the spiritual realm exist in mutually interpenetrative worlds – romantic myths portray man at a stage of spiritual disintegration. He is an exile without any abiding faith in the spiritual side of life or in himself. Man's myths at this stage, therefore, reflect his cynicism of the concept and content of his own myths; they also betray his lack of confidence in himself or in his supposedly modern and scientific milieu. Consequently, the romantic myths used in Okri's works are mere escapist avenues to divert attention, albeit temporarily, from the insanity of modern existence. They are conceived and consumed as fictive palliatives for a pressing problem. They lack the spiritual depth of primary myths which assuages the yearnings of man at the early, pre-scientific stage of culture. In sum, romantic myths are symbolic of modern society with its distrust of non-scientific explanations of phenomena and the spiritual dimensions of reality.

Wheelwright postulates that consummatory myths are products of modern man's sophisticated era. While primary myths reflect the innocence of the Edenic stage of culture and romantic myths are the fictive retellings of primary myths,

consummatory myths manifest man's "post-romantic attempt to recapture the lost innocence of the primitive mythopoeic attitude by transcending the narrative, logical, and linguistic forms which romantic mythologizing accepts and utilizes" (Wheelwright 156). In other words, consummatory myths do not stop at mere literal interpretation, but plumb a deeper level of meaning to which primary and romantic myths cannot aspire.

At the consummatory level, myths are regarded as "providing imaginative basis for symbolic interpretations" (Chimdi Maduagwu 39). As symbols, consummatory myths represent modern man's attempts to create a more enduring relationship between himself, the natural environment and the supernature not based on infantile belief (primary myths) or quest for fictive entertainment or escapism (romantic myths). Consummatory myths evince man's deepest yearnings to extract a greater meaning from life through a deliberate fusion of his essence with his environment and the life-forces of supernature. Aesthetically, man's ultimate aim is to use consummatory myths to fill the gulf in his psyche created by a too secular cast of mind which marginalises the spiritual side of the human composition. Maduagwu avers that consummatory myths represent man's "psychological, religious, social, political and aesthetic pre-occupations" (42), and explains further that:

> At the consummatory level, myths are no longer seen as literal realities but artifacts that serve artistic and idealistic (psychological) purposes. (Maduagwu 40)

Expressing similar sentiments, Allan Watts says that myths "create symbolic pointers to deep-lying aspects of man's quest for meaning. Mythic

accounts in literature (from classical times to the present) provide insight into the broad spectrum of activities that define human existence…" (Cited in Maduagwu 22). In other words, consummatory myths are symbols representing the psychological, religious, social and political sides of life. Cassirer says myth as a symbol forms "one of those things (like language itself) which we interpose between ourselves and the outside world in order to apprehend it" (Cited in Ruthven 74). As symbols, consummatory myths help modern man to make more meaning out of his bewildering social experience.

Consummatory myths, as symbols, are also regarded as possessing "curative" powers to assist modern man to make meaning out of an otherwise meaningless and psychologically destabilizing social experience. William Righter observes that most modern writers use myths as a "search for the cure of souls" in "the belief that through myth one touches upon primitive energies, captures elements of the unconscious and sub-rational qualities of the human situation" (43).

Ultimately, Righter opines, each writer will choose the kind of myth which best serves his aesthetic purpose(s):

> For any writer his myth is inevitably chosen in response to the spiritual condition of modern man, to the very fact of existence in a post-mythological age…. the modern poet must seek beneath the well-explored and "radiant" moral world, which may mean in practice the world of complex explanations, reasons and accommodations that man in any civilized context owes to man. (38, 39)

Ultimately, consummatory myths relate the particular to the universal, the modern to the elemental "with the intention of finding a new dimension or level of meaning to life," (Righter 45). Myths, like other "archetypal images", reside in the collective unconscious of all men and perform "psycho-therapeutic" functions in people. Besides its "psycho-therapeutic" effect, consummatory myths enable writers to make trenchant commentaries on man and his degenerate social condition (Maduagwu 45).

More importantly, consummatory myths go beyond psycho-therapy and social commentary to proffer ways out of man's current social malaise. By relating the present to the past through symbols, consummatory myths attempt to chart a rational course through the ruins and ashes of modern institutions and values to suggest a saner and more fulfilling future for modern man. In sum, consummatory myths are used by writers to cure socio-psychic ailments, comment on man's dilapidated institutions and values, and to beat a path through the socio-political and moral thickets. Referring to Okri's *The Famished Road*, Moh observes that:

> Okri brings into the realm of written literature Africa's rich oral tradition, especially in his creative use of myths and symbols. Through this, he depicts the problems besetting the Nigerian nation from the pre-colonial to the present. He takes a historical overview of Nigeria's experiences and interprets the patterns of the nation's historical experiences by the use of myths and symbols. (75-76)

Okri's consummatory myth reaches to the past in his search for a Utopia which is parallel to the Edenic stage of culture depicted in primary myths. This is evident in his use of the abiku as a primary and a consummatory myth.Okri's

myth of the road and the myth of the apocalypse are other examples of consummatory myths in Okri's prose fiction. Before leaving Wheelwright's theory of myths, it is pertinent to state that like Priebe, he sees his typology as a continuum and not a rigid construct. Hence he says some myths may exist at two levels at once, for example, the abiku myth as explained above,

b. Ian Watt's Particularity Theory of Realism

Griffiths observes that in his early fiction as well as in some of his more recent works, Okri "employs realistic conventions of character, incident and diction" (324, 327). *Flowers and Shadows*, *The Landscapes Within*, *Dangerous Love* and some of his short stories evince the realist temper or, in Priebe's words, manifest more of ethical consciousness than mythical consciousness. As stated earlier, this study adopts Watt's particularity theory because it more efficiently facilitates the assessment of the realistic elements in the interface of myth and realism in Okri's prose fiction, especially in terms of characterisation, setting.and language

Watt defines realism as:

> … the narrative embodiment of a premise.... The premise, or primary convention, that the novel is a full and authentic report of human experience, and is therefore under obligation to satisfy its readers with such details of the story as the individuality of the actors concerned, the particulars of the times and places of actions, details which are presented through a more largely referential use of language than is common in other literary forms. (35)

Watt's definition of realism indicates its mimetic nature in the sense that the issues raised in the realistic work must be relevant to the common reader, which is what makes them "authentic report of human experience". The characters must also resemble ordinary human beings and the setting must likewise be described in such details that the common or average reader can easily identify with it or have vivid mental pictures of it. To be able to create such graphic pictures in the mind of his readers, Watt insists on realism's obligation to satisfy the reader with details that will bring out the "individuality of the actors" and the socio-historical context of action (35). That is why he says that in realistic works, the plot "had to be acted by *particular people* in *particular circumstances"* (16, emphasis added). In other words, the characters in a realistic work must be described in such details that they come across as persons and not just as types or ideas. The places of action, be it a room, a church or a dense forest, must be so graphically described that the average reader would have no problem relating to it or mentally installing himself in it.

Eustace Palmer's definition of realism is an amplification of Watt's. He concludes that:

> The important thing is that the world presented in the novel should seem *a reflection of normal human activity*, that *the people should look like realistic men and women and the issues and modes of conduct presented should be applicable to the human race*.... A novel, then, is realistic if it deals with issues and modes of conduct applicable to human beings and if the author, by using certain techniques, convinces us that the world he has created is a world of ordinary human beings, and ordinary human activity. (4, emphasis added)

In essence, Palmer says that realism is a detailed description of places, objects, characters and events in such a way that the average reader accepts the events, the issues depicted in the story and the people involved as "normal".

A perusal of both definitions of realism shows that Watt and Palmer implicitly accept the popular definition of literature as a "reflection of life". However, it is worth noting that some critics have differed from this general notion by insisting that literature is not a reflection but a "refraction' of life. Theo Vincent in his inaugural lecture, for example, argues that:

> A work of literature is a writer's re-creation of life, (the experience of the world) on its own terms through the alchemy of the imagination achieved by the adequate deployment of aesthetic modes .... It is separate from that of author or society. Literature is a fabrication (or revelation), it is not life and does not reflect life. It is an illusion, an unreal mode that lies like the truth. At best, it is a refraction of life through the prism of the writer's imagination. (9)

M. H. Abrams reflects the same view of literature, especially realistic fiction, when he avers that realism creates the illusion that it reflects life from the perspective of an average reader and:

> To achieve this effect he [the realist] prefers as protagonist an ordinary citizen of Middleton, living on Main Street, perhaps, and engaged in the real estate business. (Abrams 153)

Not withstanding critics' position on the debate, the relationship of realistic literature to life is self-evident. The important thing to note about realism is that the author is obligated to create in his work a world which is similar to man's world in every respect and, therefore, believable.

Watt states that realistic novels have certain features in common. Content-wise, realistic novels focus on "common subjects", that is, issues affecting the average reader. The importance of this focus on ordinary issues becomes relevant when it is realised that the art form predating realistic fiction is the Romance which narrates the exploits of the titled class in fantastic and valorising incidents. But the novel is a middle-class art form, created and largely sustained by the patronage of an enterprising mercantile class. Consequently, it had to reflect the philosophy and mercantile interests of its patrons. That is why it is not concerned with the military conquests and battles of honour which the earlier art form dealt with, but focuses on mercantilism, economic concerns and other "ordinary" issues which are within the immediate experience of the average reader. Clara Reeve expresses this idea beautifully in her differentiation between the novel and the Romance:

> The Romance is an heroic fable, which treats of fabulous persons and things .... The Novel is a picture of real life and manners, and of the times in which it is written. The Romance in lofty and elevated language, describes what never happened nor is likely to happen. The Novel gives a familiar relation of such things, as pass every day before our eyes, such as may happen to our friend, or to ourselves; and the perfection of it is to represent every scene, in so easy and natural a manner, and to make them appear so probable, as to deceive us into a persuasion (at least while we are reading) that it is real, until we are affected by the joys or distresses, of the persons in the story, as if they were our own. (Quoted in Allott 47)

A logical summation of Reeve's views is that the subjects of realistic novels are the everyday experiences of the average man. For example, Okri's

Flowers and Shadows deals with the mercantile manipulations of Jonan Okwe, while *The Landscapes Within* and *Dangerous Love* are about Omovo's growing awareness of his artistic destiny and calling. None of these issues would have been considered fit subjects for the Romance.

Another feature of realistic novels is the adoption of a middle-class hero or protagonist. According to Watt, the mercantile patrons of the novel in its infancy preferred to read stories about themselves, with heroes also taken from their class. Almost all realistic novels still follow this unwritten convention of choosing their protagonists not from the royalty but often from the "rank and file" of the human community. In Okri's prose fiction, Omovo, Ede, Azaro, Dad, are all protagonists from the middle and lower classes.

The third feature of realistic novels is the use of a largely referential language, the kind of language which does not aspire to the poetic. As Reeve says in the above extract, the language in novels is not "lofty and elevated" as in the Romance. Lastly, realistic novels usually provide a wealth of details about their characters, the setting and the incidents in their stories that will make these characters, actions and social contexts come alive in the mind of the reader. These features are believed to render a literary work realistic.

Over the years, however, novels have moved away from the "formal" and "domestic" realism of Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, and Jane Austen. For instance, the works of James Joyce, especially *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegan's Wake* (1939) evince the stream-of-consciousness technique which pushes the realist temper of the novels to its limits. Recent novels adopt

modernism or postmodernism as opposed to realism or naturalism. These novels of the post-world war era often violate accepted conventions of the novel by disrupting narrative continuity, subverting the normal ways of representing characters and making narrative language almost incoherent (Abrams 110).

Of all the genres of literature, the romance, with its predilection for heroism and the supernatural, seems closest to myth, especially primary myths. In recent novels, however, writers' recourse to mythopoeia as the superstructure on which the plots of novels are constructed has obliterated the traditional distinction between myth, romance and the novel genre. Maurice Shroder comes to a similar conclusion in his analysis of the novel as a genre. According to him:

> With such authors as Zola and Hardy, the novel opens itself to a process that we might call "remythification", the tendency to see human life in terms of myth and legend, to appropriate the processes and effects which earlier novelists had avoided as the province of poetry.... Joyce and Mann, for example, begin in realism and end in mythopoeia. As realism had burlesqued romance, so the authors of the new fiction turned the process of realistic novels themselves into objects of ridicule. (27-28)

As this chapter has demonstrated, Okri's use of realism depicts its interconnectedness with myth. For instance, the mythical characters and events in his works are so realistically depicted that they come alive in the imagination of the reader. Okri's depiction of the boxing bout between Dad and the spirit in white suit or Yellow Jaguar has all the brawny substance and suspense of his bout with the human boxing legend Green Leopard. His depiction of the physical appearances of the spirits in *The Famished Road*, *Songs of Enchantment* and *Stars*

of the New Curfew is so graphic they come across as "persons" and not just as characters in a novel. The events involving the intersections of the spirit world and the natural are also detailed, even though they refer to mythic phenomena.

Given Okri's leaning towards mythopoeia, therefore, the most appropriate theoretical approach to his work is one that takes cognisance of the interface of myth and realism in his fiction. That is why this study adopts Wheelwright's theory of myth and Watt's particularity theory to assess the interface of myth and realism in Okri's works and their contributions to his thematic preoccupations.

1. 5 SCOPE AND LIMITATION OF STUDY

The seven primary texts selected for this study are: *Flowers and Shadows* (1980), *The Landscapes Within* (1981), *Dangerous Love* (rewriting of *The Landscapes Within*, 1996), *Stars of the New Curfew* (collection of short stories, 1988), *The Famished Road* (1991), *Songs of Enchantment* (1993) and *Astonishing the Gods* (1995). They have been selected because they are fairly representative of Okri's thematic preoccupations and style (consistent use of myth and realism) discernible over twenty-five years of his literary career. Even though Okri has a volume of poetry, *An African Elegy*, and some non-fictional works, *A Way of Being Free* and *Birds of Heaven*, the seven novels have been selected because Okri's reputation is built on his novels which have won him several international awards. However, it should be stated here that this study will make references to his poetics, *A Way of Being Free*.

Besides the texts, the analytical focus of the study is limited to the contributions of myth and realism in the following elements of content and form:

1. Okri's thematic preoccupations in his prose fiction;
2. Characterisation in Okri's prose fiction;
3. Setting in Okri's prose fiction; and
4. Language in Okri's prose fiction.

The scope of the study is limited to these four elements so as not to make the research unwieldy and unmanageable through the inclusion of too many literary elements. In all, this study buttresses the thesis that myth and realism are not mutually exclusive but cooperate to animate Okri's aesthetic vision.

CHAPTER TWO

MYTHIC CONSCIOUSNESS IN OKRI'S PROSE FICTION

2. 1 INTRODUCTION

The introduction to this study dealt with some of the charges levelled against Okri because of critics' lack of understanding of the connection between his mythic vision and the Nigerian reality. Okri has been excoriated by many critics for allegedly indulging in what they have tagged reckless mysticism and crass unrealism. Furthermore, he has been pilloried as merely exoticising the Nigerian reality in order to tickle the taste of his international readers for the grisly and bizarre. He has also been upbraided for a seeming evasion of "certainties", a refusal to proffer palpable solutions to the socio-economic problems besetting the African continent. A logical corollary of these strictures is that there is really no meeting-ground between Okri' s use of myth and the school of hard knocks which constitutes the Nigerian socio-political reality.

In contrast to the above charges, this study argues that Okri's aesthetic vision is firmly anchored on reality, but the relationship between his art and the Nigerian reality, the socio-political import of Okri's aesthetic project, can only be gleaned through a thorough examination of the types of myths found in his works and their multi-layered signification. In other words, this study argues that the interface of myth and realism in Okri's works is not fortuitous but a deliberate artistic device to bear the burden of his thematic preoccupations, most especially his abiding concern for the freedom of man from all forms of bondage.

With the aid of Wheelwright's semantic approach to myth, this chapter demonstrates that Okri employs myth as a satirical tool to ridicule the society and proffer solutions to the identified social problems. He also exploits the pedagogic quality in myth to project his own vision of human life and destiny as a process of unlearning some of the received notions of the past and a deliberate fusion of the gains of the past with those of the present. Furthermore, this chapter shows that Okri explores the intrinsic propaganda value in myth to re-work some of the old tales from the oral tradition or create new myths in order to make trenchant statements about the human condition. Lastly, this chapter demonstrates that Okri's use of myth in his works is a search for a utopia, an ideal society where all the problems of the present social organisation would be totally absent.

Almost all the definitions of myth considered in the last chapter highlight its aesthetic quality. This feature accounts for its popularity with creative writers – poets, playwrights and novelists – who also create fictions through the imagistic power of words. Consequently, creative writers have been inexorably drawn to myth in their bid to depict a society of their dreams. Debo Adejumo says that modern writers, who are often sceptical about the historical, religious, social and moral imperatives in myths still press these cultural artefacts into literary service "because of a certain interest in technique "and to "serve a system of ideas which the author wished to present", most especially the use of myth to interpret the human condition (58).

While Adejumo explores the uses of myth in drama, Okpewho focuses on the uses of myth in modern fiction. According to Okpewho, African writers

manifest the following tendencies in their use of the oral narrative tradition. The first tendency Okpewho labels "tradition preserved" because "the writers concerned have done little more than translate the indigenous tale into a modern European language like English with few liberties" (1). The second tendency Okpewho calls "tradition observed" because the writers involved, D.O. Fagunwa and Amos Tutuola, created contemporary protagonists around which the themes and techniques of the oral narrative tradition are woven. Okpewho states that these two tendencies "reveal a marked bondage to tradition" (2).

The third tendency, which Okpewho calls "tradition refined" involves the graceful abandonment of the tales in their old forms in a revolutionary and critical spirit which is absent in the first two tendencies. According to Okpewho, Soyinka typifies this tendency because in his work, "the element of idyllic delight [associated with the first two tendencies] has had to give way to a tone of painful criticism", and he creates protagonists that reflect the "revolutionary essence of the Ogun figure" in his dual capacities as creative and destructive essence (2). Still:

> However far afield Soyinka strays in his mythic vision of the human predicament, he is nevertheless firmly tethered to a recognizable body of traditional tales that constitute his guide. This body of tales defines or is defined by an integral world-view which is distinctly Yoruba though it may have parallels across the world. (Okpewho 3)

In other words, no matter how critical or revolutionary Soyinka's use of myth is, the Yoruba oral tradition remains his foundation and aesthetic springboard.

The fourth tendency which Okpewho refers to as "tradition revised" is associated with the younger generation of African writers "who are guided by a certain revolutionary conscience and do not think the old mythology provides sufficient answers for the problems of contemporary African society" (3). These younger African writers attempt to overhaul the old tales and do not baulk at creating their own counter-myths modelled on the old tales but more able to serve contemporary social realities in theAfrican milieux. Many of these authors adopt a Marxist-socialist ideology in their rejection of the oral tales, regarding them as "devices by which the ruling class of the traditional society perpetually kept the masses in servitude" (3).

Even though Okri does not subscribe to the Marxist-socialist ideology, his use of myth is a conflation of the third and fourth tendencies. Like Soyinka, he adopts a revolutionary and critical attitude to the cultural artefacts. And in consonance with the new generation of African writers, he not only "revises" the old tales, but also creates his own counter-myths that meet the aesthetic imperatives of his times in his bid to interpret the plight of modern man in a seemingly hostile universe. He declares his stance in *A Way of Being Free* when he advises the oppressed of the world to counter the hegemonic tendencies of the super powers by building again "from the wedding of the best things the world has to offer and the best aspects of their own mythic, aesthetic, spiritual and scientific frames" (*Way of Being Free*131). The following analysis of Okri's mythic vision evinces his revolutionary impetus as well as his tendency to "revise" the old narrative tales in his interpretation of the Nigerian social reality.

As mentioned earlier, one of the most abiding themes in Okri's works is freedom from all sorts of oppressions: spiritual, economic, political, social, etc. This tendency manifests in his use of myth as a satirical device not only to ridicule the society, but to highlight the social institutions and systems that require urgent remedial action. Generally, Okri's humanistic interests place man at the centre of all developmental activities. In this respect, Okri's thematic preoccupations reflect the condition of man as a political, social, economic and religious animal.

At the political level, a major theme in Okri's works is the condemnation of the betrayal of trust reposed in African leaders by their people. Instead of providing the visionary leadership that will move their peoples and societies forward, many African leaders seek to perpetuate themselves in office in order to continue their senseless looting of the treasury. At the social level, Okri thematises the reality of human misery and the endemic nature of corruption. At the spiritual level, Okri asserts the "destructiveness of material acquisitiveness and its resultant effect on a country and its people," (Obi Iwuanyawu 23). From the foregoing overview of Okri's thematic preoccupations which encapsulate his social vision, it is apparent that Nigerian leaders are the butt of his satirical barbs, although the masses are not spared too. The ensuing analysis of Okri's primary, romantic and consummatory myths makes this apparent.

2. 2 PRIMARY MYTHS

Wheelwright posits that primary myths are characterized by a reverence of supernatural personages. They are also regarded as revealed or sacred truth by those who subscribe to the faith which created them. Aesthetically, writers often use primary myths to depict the possibility of establishing an idyllic society, a paradise on earth in which man, animals and spirits vibrate at the same wavelength and interact frequently. As a satirical tool, Okri's primary myths identify the impediments militating against the attainment of such a utopia in Nigeria and the world at large. His reinterpretation of the abiku myth is unique in this regard.

The most important myth in Okri's novels is the myth of abiku and it serves as the major organising principle through which the author projects his message. Essentially, the abiku myth attempts to explain the social phenomenon of the repeated births and deaths of children born of the same mother. The myth evinces the traditional Yoruba belief about the existence of certain beings regarded as "spirit-children-born-to-die", although versions of the myth exist amongst many ethnic groups in Nigeria. For example, abiku is called "aziku" among Auchi people of Edo State (Haruna 31); the Igbo of South-Eastern Nigeria refer to these spirit-children as "ogbanje"; the Ibibio call them "eyen aman akpa"; and the Hausa refer to the same beings as "dankoma jeka kadawo." A scrutiny of the traditional Yoruba myth shows how Okri has adapted and revised it in his works to make trenchant statements about the human condition.

The traditional Yoruba belief states that certain troublesome and implacable spirits exist in the nether world whose demonic delight is to afflict pregnant women with their special blight of repeated births and early deaths. And so when a woman gives birth to children who repeatedly die in their infancy, the traditional Yoruba man immediately concludes that she is being tormented by an abiku spirit. Okri's self-confessed abiku lends credence to this belief when he declares that he could not remember how many times he had been born to the same mother (*The Famished Road* 5).

Writing in Yoruba, Daramola and Jeje elucidate the myth of abiku among the Yoruba of South-West Nigeria:

> A gbo pe awon abiku tabi elere omo maa nrin kiri ni awon ibi kolofin – kolofin gegebi orita meta, bebe odo, ona oko ati ehin aatan. Igba ti osan ba si pon, ti ode si de ni awon eda buruku wonyi maa nrin kiri ….. idi re ni eyi ti a fi maa nwi fun awon abarameji ki nwon ma rin ni iyaleta, losan gangan, ni irole die tabi l'ale. Ohun ti awon Yoruba gbagbo ni pe bi awon abarameji ba ba okan pade ninu awon elere omo bayi, omo naa yoo tele won wa'le ni o si le da nkan ti won yoo maa sin fun odun mewa tabi odun meedogun nitori alailannu eniyan ni awon abiku i se. (Daramola and Jeje 72)
>
> (We are told that the abiku spirits frequent such lonely places as the crossroads, river banks, farm pathways and the back of refuse dumps. These evil beings usually venture abroad in the heat of the day or at night….. this is the reason why pregnant women are advised not to go out early in the morning, in the heat of the day, when the sun is going down or late at night. The Yoruba believe that if a pregnant woman comes across one of these spirit-children, he may "follow her home" (that is, take the place of the foetus in her womb), thereby becoming what they will be afflicted with for the next ten or fifteen years because abiku are merciless beings. (My translation)

There are various points of intersection between Okri's revised version of this myth and the traditional "original" tale. First, the traditional myth says these spirit beings usually swear to an oath in the spirit realm stating the number of years they will live on earth before returning to their companions in the nether world. They rarely miss the date, dying on earth sometimes without any visible ailment, but more often after a prolonged illness which usually exhausts the fortunes of their parents (Daramola and Jeje 73). Okri's abiku, Azaro, confirms that they make such powerful and binding pacts with their spirit-companions before being born on earth (*The Famished Road* 8).

Second, the myth says the first recourse of a family afflicted with an abiku spirit is to the traditional healer, diviner or herbalists. As Daramola and Jeje state, however, very few traditional doctors can prevent the spirit-child from dying. In Okri's *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment*, Dad and Mum try to prevent Azaro's death by consulting a herbalist. Unfortunately, they are too poor to afford the sacrificial elements demanded, and the spirit-child proves too crafty for the diviner (*The Famished Road* 8).

Third, if the diviner fails, parents of an abiku try to "woo" the child to stay by giving him/her such endearing names as Malomo (Don't-go-again), Jokotimi (Stay-with-me) or Igbekoyi (Burial-ground-rejects-this). After his miraculous recovery from his near-drowning experience, Azaro's parents also give him the name "Lazaro" (*The Famished Road* 8). This is shortened to "Azaro" to avoid being mistaken for the biblical "Lazarus." It is noteworthy that the original name of Azaro, given to him at the first naming ceremony is not revealed throughout

the novels. Azaro, therefore, is a "sweet name" like Jokotimi, Igbekoyi or Malomo, to persuade the spirit-child to stay in his current incarnation.

After repeated visits of an abiku child to the same parents, he is perceived as a heartless spirit who deserves a heartless treatment. The traditional Yoruba then change tactics and give it such ugly names as Aja (Dog), Kilanke (What is there to esteem?), Omosaa (Worthless child), or Omolangidi (Effigy). By doing this, the Yoruba believe that the spirit-child may be shamed into staying permanently in this world or in the spirit realm. Scarification, mutilation and cremation await the corpse of even more unfeeling spirit-children. Interestingly, the bodies of some spirit-children are said to bear these ugly marks in their next incarnation (Daramola and Jeje 74-5). Azaro confirms that: "We were often recognized and our flesh marked with razor incisions" (*The Famished Road* 4). These four areas constitute the similarities between Okri's myth of abiku and the traditional tale. However, more elements divide the two versions than unite them.

The purpose of the traditional myth is tripartite. First, the traditional myth of abiku is basically pedagogic, which is to provide a rational explanation for a seemingly intractable phenomenon. Second, the myth is a subtle warning to pregnant women to exercise extreme caution in all their dealings. In this wise, the myth has the power of moral suasion. Third, the traditional version of the myth somehow validates the existing power configuration in traditional society by implying that only "powerful herbalists/diviners" exercise a measure of control over these intractable beings. In other words, this myth indirectly confers

legitimacy and supremacy on the religious establishment in traditional Yoruba society.

In contrast, Okri's purpose is basically satirical and an indirect criticism of the established order in contemporary Nigerian society, comprising an amalgam of mutually suspicious ethnic nationalities. Okri's satire operates at the social and the political level, but the message remains unchanged: Nigeria can be the Utopia of the people's dreams if the leaders are responsible and the followers are proactive. At the social level, Okri uses the myth to condemn the disorderliness and squalor that has become characteristic of the Nigerian society from independence till date.

The nature of the abiku, half-person, half-spirit, confers upon him special powers which fascinate the average reader. For example, the abiku possesses the power of the sense realm as well as extra-sensory perception. He is a child of intersection, able to operate in different realms simultaneously. His spiritual powers include the ability to "assume numerous forms", converse with spirits and animals, will his own death, confound the most powerful medicine-men, read other people's minds and thoughts, smell danger from afar and avoid it. These are features that make the abiku a fascinating phenomenon to the modern reader.

Even more alluring than the person of the abiku is the world of the spirit-child. The world depicted by the abiku is an enchanting one. It is a world in which suffering is unknown, and stress is alien. It is a world in which "there was much feasting" (*The Famished Road* 3), where spirit-children play with "fauns", "fairies", "tender sibyls"and "benign sprites". It is a world bathed by the radiance

of "diverse rainbows," a world of grasslands and magic caves where spirit-children "meditate on sunlight and precious stones" and are "joyful in the eternal dew of the spirit" (*The Famished Road* 5). It is also a world with fields of intense flowers and "sweet-tasting moonlight" (*The Famished Road* 4).

As a primary myth, the abiku world depicted in Okri's revised myth, which is totally absent in the traditional version, represents a sought-after paradise, a veritable Garden of Eden in the beauty of its unalloyed perfection. There is an unaffected innocence about such a world which makes it fascinating. This is more so when the abiku world is contrasted with the ugliness, pettiness and cruelty which characterise the world of modern man. A trip to the ghettoes of the world, whether in Ajegunle, Lagos, or the communities of the poor in Britain, America or Asia reveals the same level of social decay and infrastructural debilitation which diminish the worth of man.

In Okri's prose fiction, the living conditions of the average Nigerian are nauseating. The compound where Cynthia's family lives in *Flowers and Shadows* is dirty and lacking in basic amenities. In *The Landscapes Within* and *Dangerous Love*, Omovo's family of six are crammed into two rooms, and the compound which houses several families in match-box apartments has only one toilet and a bathroom. The same condition exists in Dad's compound in *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment*, where Azaro is brought up. The markets in these narratives where the poor often buy their edibles have unhygienic environments, with the meat and fish sellers displaying their uncovered wares beside refuse dumps and over-flowing public toilets.

Okri's social satire is that such a dirty, neglected and sub-normal environment can only spurn abnormal and paranormal children like the abiku. Of note is the fact that the abiku phenomenon is rampant amongst the poor, whose appalling living conditions cause high infant mortality. In modern Yoruba towns where sound health care facilities are available, the phenomenon is fast dying out. However, it still exists in the slums and ghettoes of cities like Lagos, Ibadan and in many rural areas in Yorubaland. The abiku myth, therefore, emphasises Okri's theme of the reality of human misery, as it is mostly associated with rural dwellers, the down-trodden and illiterate masses of urban slums and ghettoes like Ajegunle of modern Lagos. Ironically, the phenomenon is hardly associated with Victoria Island or Ikoyi, enclaves of the rich, the *nouveau riche* and the *crème de la crème* of the same Lagos society.

At the political level, Okri's satire is entirely on the leaders because he indirectly blames the characteristic poverty, suffering and disorderliness of contemporary Nigeria on the type of social structure that has been put in place by a blinkered leadership interested only in self-perpetuation and self-aggrandisement. The myth also accentuates the themes of poverty, injustice and oppression in contemporary Nigeria. In contrast to the orderliness and beauty in the abiku world, the human society in *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment* is so oppressive that Dad is forced to carry human excrement to enable him pay his rent. It is also an unjust society in which Dad is persecuted by his Landlord for rejecting the latter's Party of the Rich. In this human world, life

is so cheap that Ade's father is murdered and his corpse left unburied for several days for fear of political repercussions.

In sum, Okri infers through his version of the abiku myth that, so long as Nigerian leaders do not pay attention to the welfare of the average Nigerian, for so long will the horrible social, economic and political environment, spurn children who would prefer to die young and go back to their hygienic spirit-world instead of living out their lives in such a topsy-turvy and cruel society as exists in contemporary Nigeria.

Akin to the abiku myth is the myth of Higher Beings and Celestial gods, which the author also revises to convey the main thesis in his works; success and survival for contemporary Nigerians and other Africans depend on a deliberate fusion of the gains of the past with the positive aspects of the colonial and post-colonial experiences. That is, Okri advocates a systematic integration of positive spiritual forces and scientific knowledge as the panacea to the stagnation and backwardness that has enveloped the African continent.

In its traditional form, this primary myth narrates the existence and activities of transcendental personages that are believed to assist the Almighty God in maintaining order and balance in the cosmos. In many religions, except Christianity and Islam, these celestial beings are regarded as lesser gods worthy of worship because of their oversight functions in the affairs of man and the cosmos. Almost all traditional and ancient religions have a plethora of these powerful transcendental gods. They include the Greek gods, Zeus, Jupiter, Bacchus and

Dionysius; the Egyptian gods, Osiris and Ra, and the gods of African traditional religions.

The Yoruba creation myth, for instance, relates how Olodumare (Almighty God) created the earth out of water at Ile-Ife. He was assisted in his task by a god, Orisa-Nla. The same Orisa-Nla also helps God to mould man's bodies which are then animated by God's breath of life (Jeje and Daramola 166). In the Yoruba cosmogony, there are two categories of gods; those created by God and those created by men. In the first category are gods created directly by the Almighty God, Olodumare, incuding Orisa-Nla, Orunmila, Ogun, Esu, etc. Their rank is swelled by a number of Euhemeristic gods like Sango, Orisa-Oko, Ela, Ifa and Yemoja. The second-category gods were once human beings who achieved apotheosis after death because of their outstanding lives on earth (Jeje and Daramola 166-167). Besides gods, the Yoruba cosmogony admits or recognises other celestial beings like the miscellaneous spirits who inhabit trees, rocks, etc., the ancestors who are dead relations and the unborn. The spirit realm in Yoruba cosmogony is divisible into four regions with the Supreme Being at the apex, followed by the spiritual abode of the gods, followed by the ancestors. The lowest region is reserved for the miscellaneous spirits – incubi, sucubi, abiku spirits, etc.

All these transcendental personages are believed to have a continuing interest in man and his world. Hence, they often interfere or intervene at critical moments in men's lives. Primarily, the gods are venerated because they act as intermediaries between man and Almighty God, who the traditional mind conceives of as inapproachable by man (Jeje and Daramola 167). The gods carry

man's requests to the Almighty God, and so must be kept in the right frame of mind to ensure the right response from the Almighty. Other gods are worshipped out of fear, that is, to prevent calamities from striking down the adherents. For example, the Yoruba god Sonpono is worshipped so as to ward off the plague of small pox from the community.

Like the gods, the miscellaneous spirits – fauns, fairies, sibyls, incubi, sucubi, gnomes, etc. – are either beneficial or malevolent towards man. Only the ancestors are conceived by the traditional Yoruba mind as being beneficial to man. The traditional Yoruba cosmogony, therefore, has two main levels, the natural world of man and the spiritual realm, which Soyinka describes as "...the realm of infinity... the natural home of the unseen deities, a resting-place for the departed, and a staging-home for the unborn' (2).

In the Yoruba as in many African worldviews, these two realms are not only contiguous, but interpenetrative, evincing the African belief in "multiple existences". Thus, there is constant intrusion of the spiritual realm into the physical, and the physical into the spiritual (Soyinka 3). In *Flowers and Shadows* which many critics regard as a work depicting literary realism, this belief in the world of spirits is demonstrated in Jonan Okwe's recourse to his "gods" in order to maintain his position as Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of his company, Afioso Paints, (122-124). In "Worlds that Flourished", "What the Tapster Saw", "Stars of the New Curfew" and other short stories, men fall in and out of the spirit realm. In *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment*, there are also many instances when spirits invade the physical realm and men intrude into the

spiritual. In the first work, for instance, the irate spirit-companions of Azaro often chastise him for choosing to stay on in the world in violation of his oath. As an abiku himself, Azaro exists in multiple worlds, able to relate with men and spirits with casual ease. He is, therefore, able to perceive sensations beyond human capabilities and comprehension. Thus he hears his spirit-companions say:

> Come back to us... We miss you by the river. You have deserted us. If you don't come back we will make your life miserable. (*The Famished Road* 7)

He responds by railing at his spirit-companions to the amazement of his mother who comes in at that time but hears only her son's words.

Some critics like Maja-Pearce and David Cook have condemned the casualness with which the spirit world invades the physical in Okri's works. They, however, fail to acknowledge the important fact that the story is told from the point of view of a self-confessed spirit-child who doubles as the narrator. Many intrusions of spirits into the physical realm occur because of Azaro. His unrelinquished spiritual powers facilitate his perception of the spiritual origins behind the most banal physical phenomena (*The Famished Road* 9).

With such a part-human-part-spirit narrator who is able to see into several "worlds" simultaneously, the many intrusions of the spirit world into the physical should not come as a surprise. In fact, from Azaro's perspective, they are "natural". Thus, when Azaro goes to the market, he sees not only the human traders and buyers, but a multitude of spirits masquerading as human beings.

> I shut my eyes and when I opened them again I saw people who walked backwards, a dwarf who got about on two fingers, men upside-down with baskets of fish on their feet, women who had breasts on their backs,

> babies strapped to their chests, and beautiful children with three arms…that was the first time I realized it wasn't just humans who came to the marketplaces of the world. Spirits and other beings come here too. They buy and sell, browse and investigate. They wander amongst the fruits of the earth and sea.
> (*The Famished Road* 15-16)

In *Songs of Enchantment*, Azaro makes the same observation that spirits love to buy and sell in human markets (68-69). They seem to relish the interaction with human beings. They love palm-wine and pepper soup, and frequent Madame Koto's bar for these human treats. To the ordinary human eye, Madame Koto's patrons are normal human beings out for a draught of palm-wine and pepper soup. But to the part-human-part-spirit narrator of the story, many of the patrons are spirits in borrowed human parts who have been attracted by Madame Koto's fetish. Their unquenchable thirst for palm-wine and pepper soup as well as their strange behaviour exposes them. For instance:

> One of them even brought out an eye and polished it and blew on it and dipped it into his palm-wine and pushed it back into his red eye-socket. Then he put his glasses back on. (*The Famished Road* 10)

Besides the constant harassment of his spirit-companions culminating in his encounter with the spirit-with three-heads (*The Famished Road* 324), Azaro is embroiled in conflicts with fairies, the spirits of witches like Madame Koto, and wizards like the Blind Old Man. At a rough estimate, Azaro alone accounts for about sixty per cent of the instances of invasions of the spirit world into the physical in the novels. The remaining forty per cent is taken up by Dad, Koto and the Blind Old Man.

An interesting observation about the myth of Higher Beings and Celestial gods is that many of the spirits encountered in the novels are the malevolent type. Besides the ancestors like Dad's father's spirit who saved his son's life in the land of the fighting ghosts, and the dead (ancestors) who rose up to assist the poor in the people's fight against the thugs of the Party of the Rich (*The Famished Road* 180), many of the spirits are out to destroy humans. This can be easily accounted for. These spirits belong to the category of miscellaneous spirits – incubi, sucubi, fauns, and the abiku spirits – who are attracted to the world by kindred spirits and the dire evocations of witches like Koto. The abiku spirits are on a vengeance mission to re-claim a recalcitrant spirit-companion. Their mission is to cause the death of Azaro and this is the reason for the violence of their manifestations. The same can be said of the spirits brought forth by the evil evocations of Madame Koto and the Blind Old Man.

To some critics, these episodes seem to have been slapped on just for effect without any connection to the narrative proper. However, studied through the agency of the myth of Higher Beings and Celestial gods, the contribution of such episodes to the message becomes clearer. This primary myth encapsulates the African ontology which admits cosmic totality and multiple existences. The myth validates the African worldview which postulates that man is not cut off from spiritual influences and his advancement depends largely on his acknowledgement of his spiritual side. In essence, Okri says through this myth that modern Africa's problems arise from the people's refusal to come to terms

with their spiritual anchors, their obstinate rejection of their innate spiritual powers to create a paradise for themselves on earth.

In many of Dad's boxing tournaments, he receives help from the spirit realm to defeat his spiritual and physical antagonists. Okri also makes the poor people defeat the rich oppressors through an alliance with spiritual forces. These incidents buttress his message in the novels which is that advancement in life is a culmination of physical effort and spiritual help. It is obvious that Okri is advocating a new/old African way, not an ostrich-like burial of the head in the past. He puts this message succinctly in the mouth of the herbalist in *Songs of Enchantment*:

> Return to the old ways, he cried. "Return to the ways of our ancestors! Take what is good from our way and adapt it to the new times! Don't follow these witches and wizards. Watch them carefully. Watch these people with all your eyes! (172)

The above quotation depicts Okri's rejection of negative spiritual forces (witches/wizards) and his advocacy of an alliance with positive spiritual forces, the ancestors. That is why he makes the poor to triumph over the rich, Dad to triumph over Madame Koto's witchery and Azaro to triumph over his spirit-companions, Madame Koto and the Blind Old Man. The message is clear. Modern Africans must embrace the positive aspects of the ancient ways and merge them with the positive aspects of the technological age to create an African utopia. Neither the rejection of Africa's spiritual roots nor a deliberate disregard of the gains of science and technology will work for the modern African.

A major difference between the traditional myth and Okri's revision is that the former is basically religious, while the latter is not. The best assessment of Okri's myth is that it is mystical in nature and not supportive of orthodox religion, modern or traditional. This observation is buttressed by the scepticism which is infused into his aesthetic treatment of modern religions such as Christianity, and traditional religion as well. For example, the ritual murder in *The Landscapes Within* and *Dangerous Love* takes place in a church, which is a desecration of the Christian religion.

In *The Famished Road* the Christian preacher who lambastes Madame Koto's evil acts also accepts an umbrella from her which connotes bribery. In the same narrative, a herbalist gets drunk and misuses his powers, demanding sex from a prostitute before fulfilling his religious obligation. Even though another herbalist speaks Okri's message that Nigerians should fuse the gains of the past with those of the present in order to build a glorious future, it is obvious that he is not advocating a return to traditional religion *per se*, which is itself a satire on the ineffectiveness of religion to satisfy the spiritual yearnings of modern Nigerians, and by extension, all Africans. His rejection of orthodox religion brings him close to the Marxist-Socialist camp, but his leaning towards mysticism distances him from them by the same margin because any appeal to the spiritual is anathema to the Marxist-Socialist.

Proceeding out of the myth of Higher Beings and Celestial gods is another primary myth – the myth of human mediums. Like the spirits, human mediums are divided into positive and negative categories. On the positive side are the

healers, the diviners and the herbalists, while witches and wizards constitute the negative flip side. Traditionally, both groups are regarded with awe by ordinary people because of their superhuman powers. These powers are believed to be imparted by the spirits/ancestors or gods to enable the human mediums to act as bridges between the spirit realm and the natural world. The myth of the human medium, therefore, explains how some human beings acquire and deploy supernatural powers.

According to Soyinka, the vastness of infinity, the gulf between man and the spirit realm "require a challenger, a human representative to breach it periodically on behalf of the well-being of the community," (*Myth, Literature and the African World* 3). This "chthonic realm" Soyinka calls "a storehouse for creative and destructive essences" (7). Consequently, the powers available to the human mediums in the spiritual storehouse are both salutary and destructive. Depending on the source of such powers and the proclivity of the medium, these powers can be used selflessly to uplift the society – to heal, to deliver, to promote – or they can be manipulated to gratify personal greed and self-glory. In the latter case, such powers, witchcraft for instance, are used to oppress and kill fellow men.

However, witchcraft is not the exclusive property of any race. All over the world, different cultures have different myths relating the existence and evil machinations of these diabolic human beings who get their powers by consorting with malevolent spirits. The Yoruba believe that witches inherit their dark powers from their witch-mothers (Daramola and Jeje138). The Yoruba also believe that a

woman who is not a witch by birth can become one by applying to the society of witches. If she is accepted by the practicing witches in her area, the coven, she is initiated into the cult and given powers to operate as a witch (Daramola and Jeje138). Irrespective of the method of initiation, however, a witch is believed to possess and operate spiritual powers of a uniformly negative nature.

Traditionally, these powers are believed to include the power to suck the blood of their victims dry; the power to "share the flesh" of their victims; the power to oppress through dreams; the power of physical transformation; the power of astral travel; the power to tamper with national and individual destinies, thus changing a good destiny into bad; the power to maim and deform. *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment* are replete with demonstrations of some of these powers by Madame Koto and the Blind Old Man.

For instance, Koto comes to Azaro in a dream with the appalling proposition to give her some of his youth because: "I am two hundred years old and unless I get your young blood, I will die soon," (*The Famished Road* 496). When Azaro refuses, her spirit tries to swallow his spirit but is chased away by "a great lion" (496). This story depicts the traditional belief that powerful men and women can renew their youth and prolong their life-spans by exchanging their old and dying spirits with the spirit of a younger person who subsequently ages faster than normal and dies in his prime. The scene above implies that Koto has lived for so long by rejuvenating her youth with the blood of younger persons whose spirits she has "swallowed".

Later in the novel, her driver mistakenly knocks down and kills Ade, another spirit-child. The driver goes berserk with the shock and is himself knocked down and killed by a hit-and-run lorry driver. Offering a spiritual explanation, an old woman explains that the driver dies in the place of Madame Koto (*Songs of Enchantment* 204).

At the height of the battle between Azaro's family and Madame Koto in *Songs of Enchantment,* she imprisons Mum who seeks refuge in her "Palace" after a quarrel with her husband. At the same time, she oppresses Dad and Azaro, especially at night (42). Not satisfied with these torments, Madame Koto later afflicts Dad with physical blindness (213) and places an invisible weight on his head. Simultaneously, the blind wizard hammers a spiritual nail into his ear drums (224). These afflictions resist all medication until the very end of the novel when Dad providentially embraces Ade's father's decomposing corpse (277). Together with the Blind Old Man, Madame Koto afflicts the whole community with blindness and mass hallucinations which require a deliverer before the community can be saved. On his own, the Blind Old Man afflicts Azaro many times. For instance, he once forces his spirit to possess Azaro's body in order to see through his eyes.

> I felt an inner self floating towards the blind old man. Or was it that the blind old man was floating into me, invading my consciousness? I wasn't sure. (*The Famished Road* 313)

Azaro is again providentially saved from the wizard's possession of his spirit and body (314). Throughout the novels, the Blind Old Man also seeks to

destroy Dad. He usually aligns his spiritual powers with Dad's boxing opponents, be they spirit or human. In Dad's last fight with the spirit in white suit, the wizard distracts Dad's attention with his accordion. Dad is unable to win the fight until Ade and Azaro wheel the old wizard away from the scene (474). In all, witches and wizards use their spiritual powers to perpetrate evil. They cause untimely death, and inflict untold spiritual misery and physical hardship on ordinary folk.

However, they are often resisted by diviners, herbalists and seers who also get their supernatural powers from the spirit realm. Herbalists use their knowledge of the curative powers in herbs to cure the sick. They combine medicinal knowledge with spiritual powers to deliver those oppressed by witches and wizards. They enhance the potency of their herbal potions with chants, incantations and invocations to spiritual powers. After his fight with Green Leopard, Dad falls into an agonizing trance for three days. His spirit is said to be trapped in the land of the Fighting Ghosts (*The Famished Road* 414). On the third night, Mum brings in three black-clad women to rescue her husband from certain death. Azaro describes the leading herbalist as:

> A powerful herbalist who had once been a witch and who had confessed in public, and who was stoned. She reappeared a year after her confession, transformed into a strong herbalist who had promised to do some good to the community. Everyone feared her and few trusted her. (404).

In the ensuing spiritual battle, Dad runs out of the house into the forest, pursued by the women. The leader uses her dark powers to levitate and fly like a bird. She later transforms into an eagle and goes in search of Dad (405).

In the final battle, it is the ancestors, rather than herbalists or diviners who intervene to save Dad's life and that of the whole community. Thematically, the myth of human mediums once again reflects that early stage of culture when man is not cut off from spiritual influences. The myth reflects a social system in which man is fully integrated into the cosmic wheel involving gods, ancestors and the spirits in a continual dialogue.

At this stage of culture, every event in life is believed to have a spiritual origin and a spiritual solution, and that explains the constant recourse in Okri's story to higher powers through human mediums. The myth, therefore, demonstrates the bi-polarity of life in traditional thought which perceives anything and anyone as positive or negative, dark or bright, black or white. There are no shades in between. The witches, wizards and sorcerers represent the negative pole, the belief that spiritual powers can be manipulated to achieve personal gains. They operate by the eleventh commandment: My will be done. In contrast, the diviners, herbalists wield their powers to a positive end. They are a more religious side of life which operates by the dictum: Thy will be done. To them, it is taboo to misuse their powers.

Once again, it is instructive to note that Okri's use of this traditional myth is an outright political satire that condemns the sit-tight tendency of Nigerian leaders and the stoic acceptance of the *status quo* by the citizenry. At the political level, Okri uses the myth of human mediums to depict the power configuration in Nigerian society, exposing its division into the powerful and the powerless, the oppressors and the oppressed, the rich and the poor. It is noteworthy that witches

like Madame Koto and sorcerers like the Blind Old Man, belong to the Party of the Rich, while herbalists and the masses have sympathy for the Party of the Poor. Okri, therefore, uses the myth of human mediums to depict the yawning gulf between the rich and the poor, and the tendency for the rich to get richer and the poor to get poorer, no matter the change in government. Furthermore, the myth explains the nation's body-politic as a consequence of a battle of mythologies between members of the "power class" while the masses look on with relative unconcern, unaware that their destinies are being bartered away in the spirit realm (*The Famished Road* 495). Only the perceptive ones like Azaro, Dad and some herbalists realize that there is really no great difference between the Party of the Rich and the Party of the Poor. Dad speaks Okri's message in the following lines:

> He abused the government, he denounced both political parties for poisoning the minds of the people. But he reserved his most furious assault for the people of the nation. He blamed them for not thinking for themselves, he lashed out at their sheep-like philosophy, their tribal mentality, their swallowing of lies, their tolerance of tyranny, their eternal silence in the face of suffering. He complained bitterly that people in the world refused to see properly and think clearly. (*The Famished Road* 420)

Ultimately, Okri uses the myth of human mediums to emphsise his message that it is futile to rely on political messiahs, political promises, political heroes and manifestoes. Whether they use their supernatural powers positively or negatively, the human mediums are manufacturers of realities and re-arrangers of destinies (*The Famished Road* 151-152). Thematically, this myth is a vivid depiction of the fact that political oppression is not only a consequence of spiritual battle but succeeds wherever the oppressed do not resist the oppressors in

their minds and in their spirits. Of the multitude living in the ghetto, only Azaro, Dad and Mum, Jeremiah the ubiquitous photographer, Ade, another spirit-child and his father, the Carpenter, resist spiritual, physical and political oppression. It is, therefore, logical that the deliverance of the community from the "hallucinogenic smoke" produced by the witches and wizards comes through one of them. And in consonance with his thesis, Okri makes Dad to win in the spirit realm before effecting communal deliverance in the physical.

Other primary myths apparent in Okri's works are the myth of transformation, the myth of destiny/reincarnation and the myth of providence. In its true essence, the myth of transformation is a story narrating how a profound spiritual or physical change occurred in the world. As earlier stated, a Yoruba myth relates that the separation of heaven (sky) from the earth was caused by men's disrespectful acts of wiping their oily hands "on the face of the sky.

In *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment*, there are several instances of transformation, from physical to spiritual, and from spiritual to physical. Abiku spirits are capable of endless transformations. Azaro says. "We could assume numerous forms. Many of us were birds "(*The Famished Road* 3). The king of the abiku often takes the form of a cat or a midget. Other spirits could also transform themselves into human beings in order to buy and sell in human markets (*Songs of Enchantment* 15-17), and to drink palm-wine and eat pepper soup. Human beings also transform into other physical shapes or animals. The witch-turned-herbalist who transforms herself into an eagle in order to search out Dad in the forest has already been mentioned (*The Famished Road* 405).

Thematically, however, the most important transformations in *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment* are those of Yellow Jaguar and the spirit in white suit. Yellow Jaguar was a former boxer who lived and died three years before Dad took to boxing. Like Dad, he was from the ghetto (*The Famished Road* 358). As Dad is training one night, "a huge man stepped out of the darkness" (355) and challenges him to a boxing contest. Asked to identify himself, the man replies: "They used to call me Yellow Jaguar" (355.) Knowing that Yellow Jaguar died three years earlier, Dad is certain he is about to fight an impostor or the spirit of a dead man in temporary human form. The latter proves to be the case, judging by what happens at the end of the contest which Dad wins:

> The yellow eyes dimmed. Then they shut. When his eyes closed it became darker all around, as if a mysterious lamp had been blown out. Then like a tree that had waited a long time after its death to fall, the man keeled over slowly. And when he hit the earth with an unnatural thud, the strangest thing happened. The man disappeared. Into the earth. Into the darkness. I have no way of telling. Steam, tinged with yellow, like low-burning sulphur, rose from the wet earth. (*The Famished Road* 357)

Dad's fight with the spirit in white suit ends no less dramatically. After enduring inhuman punishment, Dad wins the fight by tearing away the spirit-boxer's white suit. Denuded of his gentleman's dress, it is discovered that. "He had long thin legs, the legs of a spiderous animal" (473). At the end of the fight, all attempts to carry him prove abortive, so, they leave his "inert form" outside the tent. Like Yellow Jaguar, he too disappears, never to be seen again. (*The Famished Road* 474) A long period of physical debilitation and spiritual battles

usually follows Dad's boxing bouts with the transformed spirits. Even after the fight with Green Leopard who is a human being, Dad has to contend with the spirit-with-seven-heads in the spirit realm. The latter spirit is sent to kill Dad by Green Leopard's dead mother. An interesting observation about these bouts with the spirits is that Dad usually emerges stronger physically and spiritually after recovering from his illness. Like Jacob who wrestled with an angel and prevailed (Genesis 32: 22-32), Dad always emerges with greater boxing skills and a more tenacious spirit which prepares him better for the next battle.

Thematically, Okri avers through the myth of transformation that Africans need to grapple with the past before they can transform their harrowing present into a blissful future. Dad speaks Okri's message through the myth of transformation when he declares: "Maybe you have to overcome things first in the spirit world before you can do it in this world, eh?" (364). This is the mythical view of African advancement because it integrates the living, the dead, the unborn and the gods in an unbroken cycle towards success. It echoes the Biblical scripture which says that the things which we see were not made by things which are visible (Hebrews 11:3). It is a deliberate privileging of the spirit realm over the physical, the mind over matter. Like Dad, Okri says through this myth that Africans will begin to conquer the neo-colonialism spearheaded by vapid post-independence African leaders only after they have mastered their past, and reconciled themselves with their ancestors, the dead. This message is in consonance with the point made by the herbalist in *Songs of Enchantment* that

Africans should take what is good in the past and merge it with what is good in the present age for a glorious future (172).

The myth of destiny comprises stories in many cultures and religions dealing with predestination issues. These stories explain success or failure in life as a consequence of a pre-determination before birth. The myth privileges a supernatural power that controls the cosmos and decides beforehand or before the birth of every individual what will happen to that individual in life. Some people call this power fate. To strict fatalists, all events have been fated or destined to happen. Other people, however, feel that such strict fatalism makes nonsense of personal freedom and individual will, thereby placing responsibility for all events, especially negative life issues, at the feet of Fate, God or the gods. Every race has its own myth of destiny. Some destiny myths are strict, in which man is no more than a puppet in the hand of fate. Other destiny myths portray man as a free moral agent who can choose to actualize God's purpose for his life or work counter to it.

The Yoruba myth of destiny, for instance, says that every unborn spirit preparing to come down to earth is required to go into a room filled with "heads" ("ori"' in Yoruba). Each unborn spirit must pick just one "head" out of the multitude of heads in the room. According to the myth, God ("Olodumare" or "Olorun" in Yoruba) has already inscribed different destinies on these heads. So the head that an unborn spirit picks contains its destiny or fate on earth, such as that of a medical doctor or an auto mechanic or a diviner. He can never deviate from it.

Interestingly, this notion of strict destiny exists side by side with another, more relaxed myth of destiny among the Yoruba. The latter relates that an individual who does not like his destiny can exchange it for a "better head" after consultation with a diviner and the offer of stipulated sacrifices. The Yoruba also believe that some pernicious spirits and human beings can tamper with or delay the fulfilment of one's destiny. Witches and wizards belong to this opprobrious class. However, the Yoruba also believe that these witches and wizards cannot stop one's destiny from being actualized; they can only delay its realization. In his works, Okri presents the two strands of the myth of destiny, but privileges one over the other.

Strict fatalism is presented in the opening pages of *The Famished Road.* Azaro says that all spirit-children make pacts before birth to return to their companions in the spirit realm at the first opportunity (4). In other words, their death is "fated" before they are born. The course of a spirit-child's life is also predetermined by the king of the abiku, who "decrees" what each will experience in life. To Azaro, he says:

> You are a mischievous one. You will cause no end of trouble. You have to travel many roads before you find the river of your destiny. This life of yours will be full of riddles. (*The Famished Road* 6)

In consonance with the King's "decree," Azaro's life is a turbulent one. He staggers from one crisis to another. He is pursued and pestered by irate spirits, witches and wizards. He gets lost many times. He is nearly drowned at a point. He is drugged in a market. He is kidnapped and imprisoned by a policeman and

his wife. He is also kidnapped by spirits transformed to human midgets. Following his many scrapes with men and spirits, Azaro causes his parents no end of trouble. His life is full of riddles that no one, least of all Azaro himself, can explain. He does "travel many roads" before he decides to live out his current incarnation in violation of his pact with his sprit-companions. He had been born to his mother five times before he finally chooses to stay (*The Famished Road* 443).

As it has been mentioned earlier, Okri's use of this myth is far more political than the religious use which the traditional myth prefers. This is traceable to Okri's distrust of the traditional ruling class that probably uses this myth of destiny to bolster its authority and continued oppression of the masses. A scrutiny of the strict myth of destiny definitely supports the *status quo* whereby the rich will continue to lead because it is their destiny and the poor will also continue to serve the rich faithfully and joyfully because it is their destiny. However, Okri breaks this unequal yoke by privileging the loose-knit myth of destiny over the strict one because it serves his artistic purpose and conveys his message that, ultimately, a man's destiny is in his own hands. In other words, every man has the capacity to redream his world. No matter how lowly a man's birth and station in life, no matter how warped a destiny "fate" has handed to him, he can disentangle himself from the silvery cords of a trammelling fate by redreaming his world mentally. Bob Marley, the late reggae star, captures this message in one of his songs entitled "Redemption Song." In it, he admonishes his fellow men thus:

> Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery
> None but ourselves can free our own minds (Marley)

Dad, Mum and most of the characters in *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment* belong to the urban poor. They reside in a ghetto that dehumanises them physically. In this grimy locale, poverty is their bedfellow and lack their most intimate friend. They are also harassed physically and mentally by power-mongers – the politicians of both parties, witches, wizards and sorcerers. Most of them are uneducated and without any hope of either improving their lot in life, or providing their children with a springboard capable of launching them into a better future beyond the ghetto. A whole generation of these ghetto dwellers is, therefore, likely to live and die in the ghetto. This fact is graphically depicted by Okri in the market scene where Azaro sees a grandfather, his son and grand children carrying loads for a pittance (*The Famished Road* 147-148).

Based on the two sides of the myth of destiny, all the ghetto dwellers can be split into two groups, each representing an aspect of the myth of destiny. A majority of the slum dwellers subscribes to the myth that destiny is fixed; it cannot be changed and so must be endured. In the Yoruba destiny myth, an adage often used to justify this attitude to life is "Ayanmo O gb'oogun' (destiny or fate cannot be cured/redressed/changed through rituals). In obedience to this myth, therefore, many of the poor accept their fate as hewers of wood and drawers of water for the rich and the powerful. Even though they put up a token resistance once in a while, as in occasional riots, they are generally passive to the point of docility. They never challenge the powers that be or attempt to change the *status quo*. By their attitude, they accept that they and their children are destined to serve the rich and be the cannon fodder of the powerful all their lives.

In contrast, a few ghetto dwellers subscribe to the flipside of the myth of destiny which states that a bad destiny can be amended through rituals and sacrifices. One of the attributes or cognomens of God in Yoruba is "A T'ori se" (One who changes a bad destiny to good). This cognomen expresses the belief that a man can change his destiny or that a man's destiny is in his own hands. Dad, Mum and Jeremiah the photographer represent this aspect of the myth in the novels. Mum refuses to be cowed by party thugs who evict her from her stall in the market because she refuses to support their party (*The Famished Road* 168-170). Jeremiah refuses to be intimidated by party thugs who seek his life and destroy his studio. But more than anyone else in the novel, Dad represents this spirit of unfettered independence, constant struggle for a better life and the belief that one can change one's destiny for the better. First, he takes to boxing to liberate himself and his family from the poverty-ridden life "fate" has handed to them. Realizing the futility of solitary resistance, he tries to mobilize the ghetto dwellers into a formidable party capable of challenging and dislodging their oppressors. He fails in this task but receives the spiritual revelation that, to change one's destiny, one needs first to consciously redream one's world. Dad tells his son after his mythical journey into the land of fighting spirits:

> We can redream this world and make the dream real. Human beings are gods hidden from themselves. My son, our hunger can change the world, make it better, sweeter. (*The Famished Road* 498)

The charge to redream one's world and make it real is Okri's message to all the oppressed people of the world. They are not to accept the *status quo* or bewail their fate. Even in captivity, their spirits can remain unfettered, as Dad's

spirit is, even though Koto's weight shrinks his neck. Ultimately, Okri maintains, they will free themselves when they learn to redream their world, creating in the spirit realm a better world which with tenacity of will can be physically created by them. Okri's thesis ultimately implies that it is futile to blame only the white colonisers or the black neo-colonialists for Africa's woes. He accentuates this point when he declares in *A Way of Being Free*:

> The real quarrel of the oppressed is not with the oppressors. The real truth they have to face is the truth about themselves. Hope and striving have magic in them. Those who have much to strive for, much to resolve and overcome and redream, may well be luckier than they think. The struggle is the life. And there is something awesomely beautiful and history-making about those who have set out to climb the seven mountains of their predicaments toward the new destinies that lie beyond, with the star of hope above their heads. For in their patience and in their egalitarian triumph they can teach us all how to live and how to love again and could well make it possible for us all to create the beginnings of the first true universal civilization in the history of recorded and unrecorded time. (133)

In *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment*, Dad represents such a "questing" spirit, eager to change his destiny by redreaming his world. He is a pragmatist, who takes appropriate actions to actualise his dreams.

Okri also uses the myth of destiny to eulogise about love and the brotherhood of man. It is instructive that love, rather than sacrifices and "the short-lived promises of special treatment" (*The Famished Road* 5) that persuades Azaro to stay. Love is one of the most important themes in Okri's prose fiction. It is generally held to be a consuming, all-encompassing passion. By making Azaro stay through love rather than ritual sacrifices as the myth stipulates, Okri tacitly

endorses the notion that love conquers all, thereby advocating it as a panacea to all inter-personal and societal problems. Okri speaks this message through Dad in *Songs of Enchantment* when he declares: "And where there is love there is no fear" (46), a statement which echoes the Biblical scripture which says perfect love casts out all fear (1 John 4:18).

In *The Famished Road*, Okri vividly depicts the power of love even over death. Dad beats Azaro mercilessly for wandering away from home, and Azaro decides to heed the call of his spirit-companions. He begins to will himself to death. The spirit-with-three-heads sent by his spirit-companions hurries him towards the spirit realm. He probably would have crossed the sea with the spirit-with-three-heads if Dad and Mum had not whispered words of love into his soul, forcing him to pause and re-examine his uncritical cooperation with the spirit. Dad pleads:

> My son, my only son, we are poor. We have little to give you, but our love. You came out of our deepest joy. We prayed for you. We wanted you. And when you were born you had a mysterious smile on your face.... We have sorrow here, but it is the sister of love and the mother of music. (*The Famished Road* 237)

These simple worlds of love spoken from a sincere heart and accompanied with contrite tears effect what beatings with a belt and the denial of food could not. Azaro decides to come back to his parents because of the love they show to him even when they are angry with his costly childish pranks. In fact, he realises later that discipline is also a manifestation of their love for him.

In contrast to the love showered on Azaro which undoubtedly contributes to his decision to stay, the harsh treatment meted out to Ade by his father eventually forces him back to the spirit realm. Ade's father may have relied heavily on his charms and spiritual powers to prevent Ade, another abiku, from going back. But he fails and his failure accentuates the ultimate victory of love over charms and rituals. When the myth of abiku is examined as a consummatory myth, it will become obvious that love is central to the destiny of nations. Suffice it to say here that Okri posits that love enhances the destiny of nations, insisting that the wars, social strife, poverty, political, technological and spiritual backwardness in many nations today arise from the absence of love.

In sum, Okri uses the myth of destiny to project two important themes and messages. The first is that love conquers all; without it national and individual growth may be stunted, personal and societal destinies may be delayed or aborted. Okri also uses the other aspect of the myth to admonish his contemporaries to emancipate themselves mentally, redream their world and make the dream real by taking their destiny in their hands.

2. 3 ROMANTIC MYTHS

Romantic myths, as earlier explained, refer to the types of myth which are deliberate creations or inventions of the writer. They do not possess the sacral feature of primary myths in that they are not regarded as transcendental truths, nor do they relate the beginnings of any people or race. Rather, they portray a culture which is modern but more cynical of itself and its roots. Romantic myths are not

integrative, neither do they attempt to resuscitate or refurbish a desirable past as an ideal-essence worthy of human aspiration.

These myths, according to Wheelwright, are basically of two types: those concocted by the author from his imagination and those that are retellings of primary myths. Both types of romantic myths reflect a society without an abiding faith in the spiritual side of life. Romantic myths are symbolic of modern society with its distrust of non-scientific explanations of phenomena and the spiritual dimensions of reality. Nevertheless, they are used by authors to convey their social and aesthetic visions. Specifically, Okri's romantic myths continue the satirical exposure of the irresponsible leadership that is sucking the nation dry.

The myth of the stomach in *The Famished Road* is supposed to explain how hunger came into the world. As the story goes, a man without a stomach worshipped annually at a great shrine. Then he met a stomach without a body which fastened itself upon him. He had not got to his destination before he started to feel hungry but refused to eat. The stomach ordered the man to feed him, but the man refused, saying:

> When I didn't have you I travelled far, was never hungry, was always happy and contented, and I was strong. You can either leave me now or be quiet.... (*The Famished Road* 80)

The pedagogic intent of the tale is obvious, but a deeper consideration shows that satire, not pedagogy, is the aesthetic purpose of the author. In other words, the author uses the myth to confirm his argument that the warped vision of selfish Nigerian leaders traps the people in a socio-economic miasma, and there is

an urgent need for the masses to break free from such bondage. Essentially, the myth of the stomach is a story told by Mum to divert Azaro's attention from the pangs of hunger gnawing at his stomach. Hitherto, the family's financial fortunes have taken a significant dip because of the worsening social conditions foisted upon the nation by a leadership that is bent on its kleptomanic mission instead of pursuing the interest of the generality of Nigerian peoples. Consequently, the family can only afford one meal a day. Mum and Azaro have not eaten all day (*The Famished Road* 79) and are waiting for Dad's return at night to share the only meal the family can afford. In the interval, Azaro complains of hunger and Mum tells him the myth of the stomach to divert his attention away from the pain in his stomach. Mum succeeds because:

> Somewhere around that point in the story, I fell through the back of the chair and I flew on the back of the cricket and I was the man without a stomach heading for a feast on the moon. And then I found my eyes open and there was a candle lit on the table. Dad was standing above me, swaying. He looked both crushed and stunned. (80-81)

A scrutiny of the myth of the stomach shows its satirical purpose. The myth of the stomach accentuates the gap between the rich and the poor in the Nigerian society and the failure of successive Nigerian governments to bridge this gap, despite the trillions of naira appropriated and spent by federal, state and local governments annually since independence in 1960. According to the Department of International Development, Britain's agency for fighting global poverty, ninety million Nigerians live below the poverty line and have access to less than a dollar per day (*The Punch* 27). A recent World Bank Report also puts Nigeria as the

ninth poorest nation in the world despite her global status as the sixth producer of crude oil in the world (*The Punch* 3).

In a country rich in mineral resources where a few well-heeled people like Madame Koto eat to surfeit, the myth of the stomach vividly shows that millions of other Nigerians merely "exist" below the starvation line. The poor – Dad, Mum, Azaro and other habitués of the ghetto are condemned to hard labour in the house of hunger and their social debilitation is worsened by political oppression because the most menial jobs available to the poor and uneducated require the right political credentials. Dad laments:

> Now they want to know who you will vote for before they let you carry their load..... If you want to vote for the party that supports the poor, they give you the heaviest load. I am not much better than a donkey. (*The Famished Road* 81)

In contrast to the Nigerian poor who are condemned to hard labour in the house of hunger, Nigerian leaders are condemned to blithe pleasure in the house of stolen funds. This is the socio-political environment that engenders lack in Azaro's family to which Mum responds with the myth of the stomach. Fictive though it is, the myth is an important key to the unravelling of the themes of poverty and political oppression in *The Famished Road.*

The myth of the king of the road arises in similar circumstances and reinforces the same themes. The political atmosphere has thickened. Dad and Mum find it difficult to make substantial income due to their political views. Both stubbornly refuse to endorse the Party of the Rich which controls business at the markets. At home, they face worse political tyranny in the person of their landlord

who unilaterally jerks up their rent for not supporting his political party, the Party of the Rich. They are the only tenants in the compound to suffer this astronomical increase, as all the other tenants have been cowed into submission by the landlord (*The Famished Road* 198).

If life has been difficult hitherto, living becomes almost impossible for the poor in the emerging post-independence regime in Nigeria. Mum complains that they would have to "sleep on empty stomachs" to be able to pay the new rent (258). To take Azaro's mind off the impending austerity measures, Dad tells him the myth of the king of the road. In the Yoruba oral narrative tradition, Ogun is the king of the road because he was the first god to construct a highway from the spirit realm to the earth with his iron implements. But while the traditional myth demonstrates Ogun's creative as well as destructive propensities, Okri's King of the road has no redeeming features.

The king of the road, Dad narrates, was a terrible monster with a huge stomach and an insatiable appetite. He extorted sacrifices from human beings who passed over all roads but remained hungry. He took to eating human beings, trees, animals, anything to assuage his hunger. Men, to get rid of him, later poisoned him. Instead of dying, however, he melted into the road where he is still growling in hunger.

The pedagogic thrust of the story is ostensibly to explain why accidents happen on the roads. Dad adds that it is also "why a small boy like you must be very careful how you wander about in this world" (*The Famished Road* 258-261). But a perusal of the environment which engenders the myth betrays Okri's

satirical objective, which is also a manifestation of his deep-seated concern for the freedom of modern man from political oppression. At a basic utilitarian level, therefore, Dad uses the myth of the king of the road to divert Azaro's attention from the imminent food shortages occasioned by the exorbitant rent recently slapped on the family by the landlord. However, Okri's aesthetic purpose is to depict the theme of political oppression and injustice in the Nigerian nation. It does not take any stretch of the imagination to identify Dad's landlord as the king of the road who is insatiable and who may have to be poisoned before his tenants can be free of his greed and political tyranny. According to Moh:

> The King stands for the archetypal predator who has such an insatiable appetite that he preys on everything and everyone for self-preservation. The road is famished because the rulers are monsters and oppressors. The road becomes a symbol of the Nigerian nation which has unjust predatory rulers. (77)

Okri accentuates the interpretation of the King of the road as a representative of the ruling class in Nigeria by making Dad's landlord a staunch member of the ruling Party of the Rich. Other human embodiments of the King of the road in *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment* are Madame Koto and the Blind Old Man who are also members of the Party of the Rich. Koto's name in Yoruba means "Not enough" or "Never satisfied". She is an ambitious, grasping woman who lives by Niccolo Machiaveli's dictum that in the affairs of nations, the end justifies the means. She engages in witchcraft to achieve power and wealth. The Blind Old Man also oppresses the poor by putting his diabolical

powers in the service of the rulers; his counsel and powers are permanently geared towards confirming the poor in perpetual servitude.

Okri's satirical project becomes more telling when it is realised that forty-five years after independence, there are many Madame Kotos and Blind Old Men in positions of authority in Nigeria. Like Koto, many government functionaries are sucking the life-blood of the nation dry through their embezzlement of funds and money-laundering. The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) is currently prosecuting two state governors, those of Plateau and Bayelsa states, for money-laundering running into billions of naira. A former minister of works is yet to account for about three hundred billion naira given to his ministry. A former head of state has also refused to account for billions of dollars oil windfall during his "emperorship", while the Abacha loot, also running into billions of dollars, is yet to be recovered in full by the current regime. More recently, a former Inspector-General of Police was prosecuted and jailed for embezzling funds amounting to billions of naira. Two state governors, those of Anambra and Oyo states, have been removed principally because they had quarrelled with their political godfathers who demanded a large portion of the monthly allocations to those states as their own share of the national cake.

Besides numerous Kotos, Nigeria's political landscape is replete with uncountable Blind Old Men, especially those campaigning for a third term for the Obasanjo regime. Like the Blind Old Man in Okri's narrative, these campaigners have a way of surviving short-lived governments, preaching the same sit-tight gospel. It is interesting that many of those campaigning for an extension of the

current regime were those who also campaigned for the former Nigerian tyrant, late General Sani Abacha, to rule for ever.

These are human manifestations of the King of the road, and Okri's remedial action is a "revolutionary' one: the King of the road will have to be poisoned by the people before they can obtain their freedom from his economic and political strangulation. In other words, Nigerians and all the oppressed of the world must be ready to fight for their freedom because history makes it clear that the oppressor rarely, if ever, confers liberty on his subjects. One wonders if the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, which resorted to hostage-taking to force the Nigerian government to address the monumental neglect of the Niger-Delta people and environment is enacting a script based on Okri's prescription.

The last romantic myth to be analysed in this chapter is Okri's myth of the invention of death. This myth is a refinement and "revision" of a Yoruba myth explaining how death became men's burden. It is vividly narrated in Amos Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkerd* where the protagonist captures death in a bag and releases him in the town. Okri's myth is similar in form but different in details and aesthetic goals from Tutuola's myth. Ostensibly, this origin myth is supposed to explain how death entered the world. According to the myth which Mum tells Azaro human beings never used to die at the beginning of creation.

> When it was time for them to change, a light would surround them, and a bird would fly out from the centre of the light. At that moment the person was being re-born-sometimes in the same place, sometimes in another. (*Songs of Enchantment* 74-75).

Human beings continued this idyllic existence until one day when a rainbow suddenly appeared in the earth. The covetousness of a young man to own the rainbow caused the first killing. This act broke up the harmony in the world to the extent that God sent Death to reside with men in the hope of scaring them back to the path of reason. Unfortunately, men ignored Death and in anger, he began to kill indiscriminately. To kill Death, God sent a little blue bird which transformed into a child and challenged Death. He said he would kill Death through love, which he deposited in the hearts of men. The didactic import of the myth is that only love can kill Death (*Songs of Enchantment* 75-77) and anyone who has love in his heart should not be afraid of death.

In Okri's *Songs of Enchantment*, the immediate utilitarian value of the myth of the invention of death is to allay Azaro's fears that the family will soon perish as a result of the unrelenting privations experienced by them. However, Okri's socio-political message is that love is the panacea to man's social malaise, including physical death. More importantly, Okri avers through the myth of the invention of death that Nigeria will survive her crisis of nationhood and being if only there is genuine love in the hearts of the leaders and the people. That is to say, unless there is genuine love amongst all the tribes and ethnic nationalities making up Nigeria, the nation will for a long time remain a mere "geographical expression", in the words of late Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the Yoruba political sage. In sum, the value of love cannot be downplayed in the political arena because a leadership that is truly patriotic will not engage in the insane looting of the nation's common wealth, a factor that has kept Nigeria from living up to her

sobriquet as the "giant of Africa". This analysis is validated by the actions of the youngman in the above myth whose covetuousness parallels the looting that go on in government today. By implication, such greed can only lead to death in the society.

2. 4 CONSUMMATORY MYTHS

While keeping in view the main thesis of this study that myth and realism are not mutually exclusive but cooperate to animate Okri's works, this section demonstrates that Okri's consummatory myths are apocalyptic in nature. They are aesthetic constructs by the author to envision a Utopia not only for Nigeria, but also for the African continent and the world at large. Even though the satirical content of the myths are still evident, Okri's panoramic vision goes beyond the precincts of satire to project an optimistic future for man and his institutions.

Wheelwright postulates that consummatory myths are products of modern man's sophisticated era which uses symbols to recover an idyllic state of innocence presumably lost in the march of modernity. While primary myths reflect the innocence of the Edenic stage of culture and romantic myths are the fictive retellings of primary myths, consummatory myths manifest man's "post-romantic attempt to recapture the lost innocence of the primitive mythopoeic attitude…." (Wheelwright 156). In other words, consummatory myths, as symbols, go deeper than primary or romantic myths to give man a reason for his being.

Consummatory myths discernible in Okri's novels include the myth of the road, the myth of abiku, the quest-myth and the myth of the apocalypse. At one

level, the road is symbolic of African history in the last two thousand years. At another level, it is symbolic of Nigerian history from pre-colonial times to the present. Okri foregrounds the myth of the road by using it as the title of his major work, *The Famished Road*. According to Okri, the road was originally a river, symbol of rejuvenation, plenitude and renewal, but became an arid road in the process of transformation. Consequently, the road is hungry because it has become the opposite of what it was originally created to be.

The road represents African history, which is also characterised by alternating spells of sanity and bloodletting. Okri accentuates his continental vision when he declares that the people in masks "have been building that road for two thousand years" (*The Famished Road* 328). This figure represents the two thousand years of recorded African history pockmarked by enslavement by African notables, colonialism by Western imperialist adventurers and neo-colonialism by the new African oppressors. The figure also echoes the title of Armah's novel *Two Thousand Seasons*, which is an aesthetic retelling of African history in the last two thousand years. A scrutiny of several features of this myth reveas its symbolic similarity to African history.

First, the road has been under construction for two thousand years without any sign of completion. This is similar to the African social, political and economic experience in nation-building. The goal of achieving individual liberty, economic prosperity, political egalitarianism, technological advancement and social justice continues to elude many African nations because of a cycle of wars, coups and counter-coups, and natural and man-made disasters. Second, some of

these vision-killing catastrophes were imposed upon the continent by external forces (the colonialists), but in the main, Africans themselves contributed much to their own stagnation. African rulers, like the King of the road, feed insatiably on the resources of the continent while the people look on with stoic unconcern. According to Okri, the road is uncompleted and will remain incomplete because of the reticence of the people, their refusal to change their world. Okri laments through Dad that "Our road is hungry" because "we have no desire to change things" (*The Famished Road* 451). Moh observes that "Long periods of colonization by African notables and the white colonizers have left the citizens with a slave mentality which shuns positive remedial action" (77). Elsewhere in the novel, Dad has cause to lambast the masses for their docility.

Third, the road is being built with precious stones of unusual and other-worldly beauty such as amethyst, chrysoberyl, carnelian and patterned turquoise (*The Famished Road* 330). One stratum of interpretation points to the abundance of natural resources in the African continent: gold, diamond, crude oil, etc. Another level of interpretation points to the "heavenly" source of these precious stones, as some of the precious stones mentioned above are found in the Bible, specifically chapter 21, verse 19 to 20 of the Book of Revelation, which describes the physical beauty of "The New Jerusalem":

> The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with all kinds of precious stones: The first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third chalcedony, the fourth emerald, the fifth sardonyx, the sixth sardius, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysopase, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst. (*Holy Bible*, Rev.21:19-20, NKJV)

Symbolically, the African people did not work for the natural resources, but they were blessed or endowed with them from above. Instead of using these valuable endowments to advance themselves economically, the greed and material acquisitiveness of generations of African rulers have throttled this dream of economic and political emancipation.

Fourth, like the people in the mask, Africans, both the leaders and the led, are cursed with pathological amnesia. Instead of learning from the mistakes of past leaders, contemporary African leaders repeat the mistakes of history, stubbing their toes on the same stones that made their forebears stumble and fall. The economic and political woes of the African continent are a recurrent cycle of the same mistakes made over and over again by generations of African rulers, even though they are familiar with "all the earlier mistakes" (*The Famished Road* 330). Okri then concludes that the dream of an African utopia will remain just a dream because "[Africans] have the great curse of forgetfulness. They are deaf to the things they need to know the most" (330). Hence, "They will never finish the road that is their soul and they do not know it" (330).

On the political scene, every newly-elected African ruler or successful coupist mouths the same platitudes, promising social justice, economic growth, political and technological advancement which all the rulers before him have promised and failed to actualise. Yet, the people hang onto these promises even though they, too, are aware of the failure of past leaders to actualise them. It is a cycle of promises, hopes and betrayals which the African continent seems incapable of breaking.

Okri buttresses the symbolic interpretation of the road as representing the nation's chequered history at several points in his novel. For instance, he declares that: "The road is their soul, the soul of their history" (*The Famished Road* 329), adding:

> When they have built a long section of it, or forgotten the words of their prophet and begun to think they have completed it, landquakes happen, lightning strikes, invisible volcanoes erupt, rivers descend on them, hurricanes tear up their earth, the road goes mad and twists and destroys itself, or the people become distorted in spirit and start to turn the road into other things, or the workers go insane, the people start wars, revolts cripple everything and a thousand things distract them and wreck what they have built and a new generation comes along and begins again from the wreckage. (330)

Moh also interprets the myth of the road as a symbol of the travails of the Nigerian nation. She observes that: "The road becomes a symbol of the Nigerian nation which has unjust predatory rulers" (77). She says that every generation knows the original dream of making Nigeria great. Each new set of leaders promises to rid Nigeria of corruption and inefficiency, only to revive the blueprint of violence and deprivation (Moh 78). Whenever this dream is about to be actualised, there will always be betrayal and bloodshed, either through coups or counter-coups. Moh's conclusion, which this thesis extends to the whole of the African continent, is that:

> In this satire against society, Okri describes the ineptitude of the predatory rulers who exploit the masses leaving them famished. He is no less angry with the masses who complacently refuse to do anything about their exploitation. So long as the rulers display their insatiable appetite for wealth and so long

> as the masses are complacent, the original dream of making Nigeria a land of unity (in spite of tribe and tongue) where there will be equitable distribution of resources will never be achieved. (78-79)

Fascinating as Moh's interpretation is, it does not fully represent Okri's message. Okri's positive vision is that people, especially, the masses, must be politically alert to detect the hollow ring in the promises of each new political messiah, be they military or civilian or military in civilian garb. Further, the masses must rise up in unity to break the cycle of betrayals and bloodshed, instead of retreating into isolationist cells, or relapsing like Dad into the futility of individual resistance against a well-entrenched evil system. In *Songs of Enchantment*, Dad is able to effect the deliverance of himself and the whole community because, "We dreamt him on, calling on the road to guide his feet" (276). This is the African way that Okri is preaching. His message is that individual enterprise backed by communal participation is the best way forward for the African continent.

Okri is not a reckless optimist, however. He readily admits that the task is enormous and that "no true road is ever complete" (*The Famished Road* 488). That is why he deliberately inverts a Yoruba cosmogony myth to create a consummatory myth. The Yoruba cosmogony myth relates how the god Ogun singularly demolishes the obstacle blocking the path of the gods as they travel from heaven to be reunited with men below. With his iron implements, Ogun created a wide path through the chthonic thicket, thus erecting the first road or highway connecting heaven to earth. Symbolically, Ogun represents individual

creativity and enterprise. He succeeds because he is a god, and thus imbued with supernatural abilities. Okri, however, makes his own road proceed from the earth to heaven, and makes the protagonists men rather than a god to accentuate his belief that men must be ready to take their destiny in their own hands before they can expect any help from above.

The aim of the road is to seek completeness, a utopian ideal which may not be achieved. According to the prophet of the people in masks, a great people live in heaven, and the people in masks should build a great road so that they could visit those people (in heaven), and that those people could visit them. In this way, they would complete one another and fulfill an important destiny in the universe (*The Famished Road* 329). Unknown to the people in masks, however, the road is not to be completed, because if it is, "They will have nothing to do, nothing to dream for, no need for a future. They will perish of completeness, of boredom," (329). Unlike Ogun's task, the process of building the road is a goal in itself. As the people build collectively, unlike Ogun, "They tend to become wiser," (330). That is, their collective effort, not individualistic railings against a brick wall, will greatly improve the African society, even though they can never achieve the Utopia of their dream, the same way that no society or race on earth has ever achieved a Utopia. So long as they work as one people, Africans "have an infinity of hope and an eternity of struggles. Nothing can destroy them except themselves..." (*The Famished Road* 330). However, no true road is ever complete, just as no society in the history of the world has ever achieved completeness. Those who think they have reached the apogee usually succumb to

internal paralysis occasioned by their loss of the will to struggle. The resultant effete race then becomes easy prey to a less-endowed but struggling race which devours it. The fall of the Greek and Roman empires to those they regarded as barbarian hordes is an example. Okri's message, therefore, is that Africans must never stop struggling because the struggle is the life, as Ola Rotimi says in the Prologue to *The Gods Are Not to Blame*.

The perception of the road as symbolic of a desirable African utopia is reinforced by a Biblical interpretation of the myth of the road. Given its vertical orientation as proceeding from earth to heaven, the road is symbolic of the tower of Babel in the Bible. In Genesis 11:1-9, the nations of the world spoke one language, and with one accord, they decided to build a tower that would reach heaven, and so make a great name for themselves, "lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth," (Genesis 11:4). But God put a stop to the whole exercise by disuniting them through a confusion of their language. He did this so that men, with their evil propensities, would not suddenly achieve the status of gods and then "nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them" (Genesis 11:6).

The Tower of Babel narrates two important ingredients of nation-building. One, the people must speak as one; two, they must act with one accord. These conditions represent an ideal route back to the Garden of Eden. Earlier in this thesis, it was explained that consummatory myths usually point backwards towards an ideal and seek to recapture a lost state of innocence. The myth of the road therefore symbolises man's yearning for a perfect society in which man

touches heaven like the gods. Okri says that if the people in masks successfully complete their road and connect earth to heaven like the Tower of Babel, they will know the truth which only the gods know: "Only all of the gods united in to one God can know all of the truth. The people will have to become gods, and they are not ready" (*The Famished Road* 332).

The quotation is an echo of Psalm 82, which refers to men as gods:

> I said "you are Gods and all of you are children of the most High. (Psalm 82:6)

By inference, Africans will become like the gods and establish a unique society on earth, if only they are united and speak as one. The Tower of Babel, therefore, represents man's attempt to grasp an ideal, to recapture a lost essence and re-create an Edenic society on earth in which men live in unity and harmony, in which corruption, wars and other evils are banished. Such a society will be like the New Jerusalem of the Bible whose foundation is laid with precious stones such as beryl, jasper, emerald, etc (Revelation 21), and the inhabitants will be as wise as the gods, knowing all truth. The slippery nature of such an ideal should not dissuade Africans, indeed all men, from aspiring to it. Okri concludes *Songs of Enchantment* with these inspiring words, which encapsulate his message that men should aspire towards a better society:

> Maybe one day we will see the seven mountains of our mysterious destiny. Maybe one day we will see that beyond our chaos there could always be a new sunlight, and serenity. (297)

Elsewhere in the novel, Okri declares emphatically that: "One day there will be a new earth and a new night" (287). This statement evokes the biblical New Jerusalem of Revelation chapter 21, the first verse of which says, "Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth." As a consummatory myth, therefore, the myth of the road reaches back through the chaos of the present age to recapture a lost paradise for the future.

The next consummatory myth, the abiku myth, relates more closely to Nigerian history than to African. As previously explained, an abiku is a spirit-child, a part-time human being with one leg hovering over the world of the living and the other planted in the realm of the spirit. Straddling these two worlds, the abiku is able to commune with man and spirits simultaneously. In Okri's prose fiction, Azaro, the spirit-child narrator of *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment* is the epitome of the abiku condition. He traverses the natural world and converses with supernatural beings; he trucks with men and wrestles with spirits. He does not want to be born, but fights with death. Azaro, then, is the quintessential abiku, a part-human, part-spirit being. Okri symbolically links Azaro to the nation, Nigeria, when he declares that:

> In his journeys Dad found that all nations are children:
> It shocked him that ours too was an abiku nation,
> a spirit-child nation, one that keeps being reborn and
> after each birth come blood and betrayals...."
>
> (*The Famished Road* 494)

Ade, another spirit-child says virtually the same thing:

> Ours is an abiku country. Like the spirit-child, it keeps coming and going. One day it will decide to remain. It will become strong. (*The Famished Road* 478)

One of the features of a spirit-child is that he does not wish to be born. Azaro declares at the beginning of *The Famished Road* that: "There was not one amongst us who looked forward to being born" because "We feared the heartlessness of human beings, all of whom are born blind, few of whom ever learn to see" (3). Azaro describes himself as "an unwilling adventurer into chaos and sunlight, into the dreams of the living and the dead" (*The Famished Road* 487; *Songs of Enchantment* 4). He extends this symbolism to include nations, civilisations, ideas, people, discoveries and historical events, all of whom "Partake of the condition of the spirit-child" (*The Famished Road* 487).

It thus becomes clear that the reluctance to be born is the first condition of the spirit-child. It is also a pre-condition for the spirit-child nation like Nigeria. Historically, the different ethnic groups that constitute what is called Nigeria today did not agree to become one nation. Lord Frederick Lugard, the colonial administrator of the then Northern and Southern Protectorates, simply amalgamated the two parts in 1914 for administrative convenience, while his wife-to-be gave the emerging amalgam the name, "Nigeria", a coalescence of "Niger area". Since then, many Nigerians feel no genuine sense of belonging to the nation because they were not consulted before its birth. So, tribal and ethnic loyalties often over-ride national patriotism

An abiku does not want to be born, but once born, he fights with death. Throughout *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment*, Azaro has to constantly fight his spirit-companions to remain alive. In the same vein, the

Nigerian nation once born has resisted all centrifugal forces seeking to tear it apart. There have been many such events in the nation's history: the 1966 coup and counter-coup; the 30-month civil war of attempted secession by a part of the polity; the four-year reign of terror of late General Sani Abacha which constantly threatened the very existence of the nation; the 1998 mysterious death while in custody of late Chief M.K.O. Abiola, the acclaimed winner of the June 12, 1993 Presidential election. Any of these events could have sunk the ship of state. Yet, like a wily abiku-nation, Nigeria has survived so far.

Azaro's unstable and chequered life also mirrors the nature of Nigerian history. His life follows an endless pattern of crisis, escape and resolution. The inconstancy plaguing Azaro's life is also the bane of Nigeria, the abiku country. It is a country rich in human and material resources, the sixth largest exporter of crude oil in the world. As a result of frequent changes of government, however, there is no working or workable national policy for the country. Each new government jettisons the projects and policies of the preceding one in favour of its own often hare-brained schemes. Moh says:

> The nation like the abiku has remained in a precarious state of uncertainty and continual crises because no effort has been made at fully addressing and solving its problems. It is a nation for which "No adequate preparations were made to sustain its momentous births" (487). Adhoc and precipitate measures are taken to handle the symptoms of its internal maladies. Attention is not paid to the causes of those crises. (83).

Traditionally, only sacrifices and love can persuade an abiku to stay in the world. Even though Azaro's parents are too poor to afford all the sacrifices

required, their love and affection persuade Azaro to stay in his fifth visitation to the world of the living. But in the case of Nigeria, none of the mutually suspicious tribes is ready to make any sacrifice to sustain the nation. Worse, there is no love lost amongst them; certainly none they can extend to the nation. The leaders are only interested in lining their pockets while the masses are locked in a death-battle over the leftovers. In such a state of anomie, no one seriously addresses the problems of the nation. Rather than tackle the major problems which threaten its peaceful existence, the leaders adopt interim solutions. And so the nation continues its rhythmic existence of birth (hope), betrayal and death (bloodshed) (Moh 80)

Agwonorobo Eruvbetine captures the essence of the abiku condition foisted on the nation by its self-serving leaders in the following excerpts:

> The *Abiku* as politician is ethnic-neutral. Its loyalty is to no tribe but to fellow politicians in all the ethnic groups. Ethnicity is only a means to an end; it is something to hang on to in order to gain political power in religious, economic, social, business, industry, educational, and environmental spheres amongst others.... Political parties (military or civilian), instead of addressing policies and projects that improve the living standards of Nigerians, concentrate on ethnic differences, projecting ideas about zoning, national character and ethnic dominance. (27)

Yet, all hope is not lost for the spirit-child nation. At this consummatory level, the abiku myth points to a future greatness for the Nigerian nation when its citizens will unite to keep Nigeria one. Ade hints at this possibility in his earlier-quoted assertion that one day the spirit-child nation will decide to stay, and then it will become strong (*The Famished Road* 478). As Dad discovers in his journeys,

the abiku nation will keep coming and going: "Till we have made propitious sacrifices and displayed our serious intent to bear the weight of a unique destiny," (494). In sum, Nigeria will become great when all the tribes become united and are prepared to address and solve the multifarious problems that have plagued the nation since inception. Like the myth of the road, therefore, the abiku myth points to a utopian ideal for the nation, a New Jerusalem in which love and harmony will engender uninterrupted social, spiritual, economic, political and technological advancement. Like other myths, this consummatory myth buttresses the themes of love and communal participation as a panacea to the nation's ills.

The quest-myth is regarded by myth-critics as the most important in myth studies. Ruthven says:

> By far the most popular monomyth among literary critics has been the quest-myth, especially since 1951, when Northrop Frye first identified it as the central myth of literature and the source of all literary genres. (76)

Essentially, the quest-myth narrates the search for an ideal, a symbolic object, by a hero or a group of brave men. In Fagunwa's *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmole* (translated as *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons* by Soyinka), the brave hunters embark on a perilous journey to get Wisdom with which they will advance their society. They are confronted by all sorts of obstacles and challenges, and some of them perish along the way. A handful eventually reaches their destination, acquires the valuable wisdom to heal their land and advance their people. There are many versions of this monomyth, or archetype of all archetypes, but the essential features remain unchanged.

These features include the search for an essence-ideal, a perilous journey, a hero or heroes who are not only brave but possess bull-dog perseverance, an eagerly awaiting people whose destinies depend on the success or failure of the heroic enterprise, and a reward for victory which often includes the hand of a beautiful lady in marriage.

In *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment*, Dad's mythical journey into the land of fighting spirits is a type of quest-myth, a spiritual odyssey. The main purpose of the journey is to seek the solution to the problems of the black man, the poor and the oppressed in the society.

> He saw the scheme of things and didn't like it. He saw the world in which black people always suffered and he didn't like it. He saw a world in which human beings suffered so needlessly from Antipodes to Equator. (492)

To redress the situation and bridge the gap between the haves and the have-nots, Dad embarks on a mythical journey in the spirit realm, asking for justice:

> He argued in three great courts of the spirit world, calling for justice on the planet. He argued with fantastic passion and his case was sound but he was alone. (492)

In this mythical journey for justice, Dad travels far and wide into the spirit realm, "Seeking the restoration of our race, and the restoration of all oppressed peoples" (494). He seeks justice and a full life now, but learns that, "Time and truth always come round" but not necessarily now. At the end of his mythical journey, Dad warns of an imminent but inevitable catastrophe (498). The ultimate

insight he brings to relieve the harrowing condition of the poor is that victory lies in the spirit realm, not in the physical. Dad tells his family when he wakes up:

> Before everything was born there was first the spirit. It is the spirit which invites things in, good things, or bad. Invite only good things, my son. Listen to the spirit of things, to your own spirit. Follow it. Master it. So long as we are alive so long as we love, everything in us is an energy we can use. (499)

Ephemeral as it may seem, Dad's quest is not worthless. His insight, though ignored by his contemporaries, serves as a fountain of wisdom to the seeking heart, a draught of cold water to a parched tongue. Since the spirit realm determines the physical, all the poor and the oppressed need to change their status is to be more conversant with their own spirit, and then they will effect the desired change in the world. This insight does not lead to passivity, but a kind of activism which actualises a more lasting but silent revolution in the society. This conclusion is in consonance with the African ontology which projects that success in all human endeavours requires the collaboration of human and spiritual forces. Dad has spent his adult life up to this point fighting injustice, poverty and oppression physically. That is why he takes to boxing in a bid to box goodness and equity into an unjust world (Moh 92). But after his spiritual journey, he understands that spiritual powers are behind the physical manifestations men call poverty, injustice, etc. Hence, he does not fight anyone after returning from his mythical journey into the spirit realm. Okri's message, therefore, is that people must stop fighting the shadows and attack the substance, the spirit behind all things. As the Bible says, "Not by might, not by power, but by my spirit, says the

Lord of hosts" (Zechariah 4:6). A logical summation of Okri's message is that men must first learn to love one another and master their own spirit before they can hope to master the world.

The quest-myth, therefore, affirms Okri's message that the spiritual side of life is more important than the physical. He uses the myth to deflate the usual call for a bloody and violent revolution to change the oppressive system in the world. Instead, he advocates a spiritual revolution. Dad's boxing career could not effect any change in the power configuration in the society, but the insight gained from his mythical journey better prepares him for the role of a deliverer to his community when the witches and wizards strike the people with mass blindness. This myth accentuates the theme of futility of mere physical resistance to oppression without a sound ideological foundation. The quest-myth also affirms the themes of love and communally-oriented solutions in Okri's fiction. Dad's dangerous sojourn which lasts three days in a death-like repose is born out of love for the oppressed, but he fails to effect justice now partly because "He was alone" (492). And he is alone "because he didn't see the others, the multitudes of dream-pleaders, invading all the courts of the universe, while struggling in the real hard world created by the limitations in the minds of human beings" (493).

Astonishing the Gods also depicts the characteristic features of a quest myth. Essentially, it is the story of a nameless protagonist who discovers that he and his people are invisible (3). His discovery of their invisible status came by accident, after learning how to read and write (3). He the resolves to find out the root cause of their invisibility. The protagonist carries out his scheme and travels

for seven years in his quest for visibility and an identity for himself. After seven years, he arrives at a nameless island populated by an invisible race. Contrary to logic, he chooses to stay behind while the ship departs.

. He has three invisible guides at different times in his travails on the island. They communicate with him in a sort of telepathy. It is an island filled with riddles and paradoxes. For instance, the inhabitants do not place much value on names. According to his first guide, a child:

> We don't believe in names. Names have a way of making things disappear.... When you name something it loses its existence to you. Things die a little when we name them. (6)

On that island:

> Courts were places where people went to study the laws, not places of judgement. The library was a place where people went to record thoughts, their dreams, their intuitions, their ideas, their memories, and their prophecies. They also went there to increase the wisdom of the race. Books were not borrowed. Books were composed and deposited. (67)

Their hospitals were places of laughter, amusement and recreation, where medical personnel excel in humour and the arts because "the masters of the land believed that sickness should be cured before it becomes sickness" (66). The goods in the market places are thoughts, ideas and possibilities. Money is alien to them. "With a fine idea, a house could be purchased. With a brilliant thought, rooftops could be restored" (71). Philosophies, inspirations, intuitions, prophecies, enigmas, riddles, paradoxes, visions and dreams are the goods sold and purchased at the market (74).

All quest myths involve some tasks which must be performed to prove the mettle of the protagonist. The first task of the unnamed protagonist of *Astonishing the Gods* is to cross an ethereal bridge which only the person crossing it holds up by the power of his mind (16). It is a bridge which is sometimes visible, sometimes invisible, sometimes made of stone, at other times it transforms into fire, water, air and dreams. His second test is to kill or heal a wounded bird (99-100). His third test is to resist the love advances of a beautiful woman (119). At last, he passes all these tests and is admitted into the holy of holies, the palace of the Illuminators, rulers of the Invisibles. There, he witnesses a contest between three masters. To his amazement, the most eloquent presentation was greeted with a deafening silence. It takes him a while to understand that:

> The silence was the applause, the highest applause that the congregation of the Invisibles could have given to one of their most venerable illuminators. (143)

His final test is to solve a set of riddles which he does by answering in the spirit of the island – paradoxically.

In the end, the protagonist acquires the boon which is the knowledge that invisibility is not necessarily a liability, but a precondition for doing the highest good without seeking worldly recognition or fame. As his last guide says:

> We live quietly, as if within a sacred flame, and no one outside this island knows we exist. In our silence we dedicate ourselves to the perfection of our spirits, consecrated to serving the highest forces in the universe. We do not want to be remembered, or praised. We only want to increase the light, and to spread illumination. (149)

This insight that invisibility could also lead to something positive is the boon that the invisible protagonist acquires at the end of the narrative. He learns that he is a special breed, destined by God to achieve the highest state of grace and benefaction to the human race.

It is not surprising that at the end of the novel, the protagonist accepts his invisibility with equanimity. Okri's message seems to be that all the oppressed people of the world who are consigned to the margins of history, the periphery of civilization, can still achieve greatness by transforming their suffering into something beautiful.

> The most important things are the things you don't see. The best things are in the invisible realm. It has taken us much suffering, much stupidity, many mistakes, great patience, and phenomenal love to arrive at this condition...the best things are always growing in secret. (53)

Like the quest myth in *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment*, *Astonishing the Gods* reinforces Okri's thesis that the spiritual side of life takes precedence over the physical and deserves greater attention and cultivation. It also buttresses the theme of love which runs through all of Okri's works. In the universities of the Invisibles, for instance, love is the most popular, the most sought-after, and the most important subject.

The island of the Invisibles also represents a kind of Utopia to the human race. Its enigmatic existence between a paradox and a riddle, between a dream and a vision magnetises the modern man as it echoes Edenic bliss. Its symmetrical and serene urban space, the untarnished beauty of its architectural designs and the

unvarnished simplicity of the wisdom of its inhabitants make the island especially alluring. It is a place of love, scientific advancement and spiritual illumination that men of all ages have sought in dreams and myths of an El Dorado. It is a veritable Garden of Eden where men, animals, angels and other supernatural essences vibrate on the same wavelength.

In sum, the quest-myth is a search for a better life for the people, a search for the elixir that will transform this unjust and oppressive world into a paradise regained, the New Jerusalem of the Book of Revelation which is glorious: "But there shall by no means enter it anything that defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie...." (Revelation 20:27).

The last consummatory myth, the apocalyptic myth, is also derived from Biblical archetypes, even though Douglas Maccabe argues quite brilliantly that New Age spirituality rather than Christianity "is the most important cultural vector shaping *The Famished Road* ..." (2). This myth explains the symbolic roles of Madame Koto as the whore of the Apocalypse, the Blind Old Man as the false prophet, the Masquerade as the Beast and Dad as the second Adam or deliverer. Generally, the apocalypse refers to revelations about the future of the world. Specifically, it refers to the last book in the Bible, recording the revelation of St. John about the end of the world. In this book is foretold the fall of Babylon, also known as the whore of the apocalypse, the short-lived reign of the Beast and the false prophet, and the final victory of Christ over the combined forces of Satan in the battle of Armageddon.

Madame Koto's symbolic role as the whore of the apocalypse is hinted by the Christian priest who denounces her as "THE GREAT WHORE OF THE APOCALYPSE" (*The Famished Road* 377). The symbolism is also evident in the shared attributes between Koto and the Biblical whore also known as Babylon The Great. First, Koto is a harlot and the mother of harlots. She has no morals herself and through her establishment promotes fornication and immorality. She has no known husband yet she is pregnant and will eventually give birth to "Three baby Masquerades "(*Songs of Enchantment* 142). Koto's palm-wine shed is later transformed into a brothel where prostitutes ply their ignoble trade. Through her brothel, the moral tone of the community is lowered as she encourages men to spend the little they earn on beer and illicit sex to the detriment of their families. The Biblical whore is also an immoral woman. The Bible describes her as "BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH" (Revelation 17:5). The whore of the apocalypse loves money, jewels and general merchandise. The Bible says, "The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls" (Revelation. 17:4). Madame Koto, too, loves money to distraction, and often decks herself in finery and jewellery to a ridiculous extent. She is the epitome of her name "Koto" which in Yoruba means "Not enough" or "Never Satisfied". In other words, her material acquisitiveness is insatiable.

Like the whore of the apocalypse, Madame Koto loves power. The Biblical whore is wicked but powerful in secret arts. She uses her wealth and magical powers to lure the power brokers to adulate and worship her. The Bible

says she is: "The great harlot who sits on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth committed fornication" (Revelation. 17:1-2). Madame Koto, too, practises magic, joins the Party of the Rich to lure the rulers into her orbit and becomes so wicked she seeks to suck Azaro's blood to rejuvenate her own decripit system. She is later known as the "Queen of nights, protector of the strong, creator of new rituals, guardian of women's forces, controller of witches and sorcerers" (*Songs of Enchantment* 140). She is also known as the bride of future presidents.

The whore symbolizes Babylon in the Bible, while Madame Koto represents Nigeria. Both countries are desecrated with uncontrollable lust for material acquisition and endless wickedness. The whore sucks the blood of saints and martyrs while Koto sucks the blood of the innocent. Her cult is rumoured to engage in human sacrifice and cannibalism. She is also accused of "drinking human blood to lengthen her life..." (*The Famished Road* 374). Both of them are pregnant with the abominations they have wrought amongst men, and will eventually be devoured by their own offspring. For instance, the whore of the apocalypse will be devoured by the ten horns of the scarlet beast which carries her (Revelation 17:16-18). Koto, who is impregnated in the spirit realm by the Jackal-headed masquerade (*Songs of Enchantment* 143) gives birth to three baby masquerades in her dream, "children who spent their lives divided, warring against each other, fighting for their mother's milk, savaging her breast, and tearing her apart in a bizarre, incestuous and greedy rage" (142-143).

The three baby masquerades represent the three dominant tribes in Nigeria – Ibo, Hausa, Yoruba – whose rapacity and disunity may catalyse their mother's early demise. As a symbol of the whore of the apocalypse, Madame Koto represents the devastating effects of material acquisitiveness in the Nigerian society. She is a symbol of the predators in every society who oppress the poor to increase their wealth. Moh says:

> She is the representative of one of the segments of society against whom Okri directs his derision – the newly rich, politically successful Nigerian. Significantly, she is a woman. But the virtues, which are associated with her sex, like gentleness, kindness and considerateness are all twisted and distorted. In the city, there is chaos of identity and personal ideals are mutilated.... Power and money, however, do not bring joy and fulfillment. So Madame Koto is shown as an unhappy woman. Okri shows through her that wealth, especially ill-gotten wealth, does not guarantee happiness. (88)

In the final analysis, Madame Koto falls, just like the whore of the apocalypse. The whore is destroyed by the beast, while Koto's reign of terror is terminated by the coalition of human and spiritual forces with Dad as the arrow-head. Her fall is foretold by the cross-eyed herbalist, who cries after her with a bell, shouting:

> WHEN A PERSON'S FAME REACHES ITS GREATEST AND STRANGEST HEIGHT... VACATE THE SCENE BELOW, FOR THERE MIGHT SOON BE A GREAT CRASH!
> (*Songs of Enchantment* 172)

Her fall is also symbolic of the eventual victory of good over evil.

The jackal-headed masquerade erected by Koto in front of her bar is symbolic of the Beast in the book of Revelation. The Bible refers to the Beast as a manifestation of satanic powers. He performs signs and wonders, making fire come down from heaven to deceive the multitudes. He gives life to the image of the first beast, and forces men great and small to receive the number of the beast, 666. Without this number, no one can buy or sell (Revelation 13). Like the Beast, the jackal-headed masquerade is a manifestation of the supreme height of satanic powers. The Masquerade is the invisible censor over the community; it spies on every citizen, ferreting out their secret thoughts and deeds. It also metes out instant punishment to those who oppose Madame Koto and her ascending power, the same way the Beast in the Bible kills and punishes those who refuse to take the mark of the beast on their forehead or on the back of their arms. Azaro laments that:

> Those who opposed the party, or who spoke ill of it, and suffered inexplicable pains, whose children fell to vomiting, who became temporarily blind, seemed to prove to us the greater powers of the invisible masquerade. Every illness, every fever, every failure in endeavour, the rain flooding our rooms, men who raved for two hours and returned to a stunned normality, convinced us that we were surrounded by an implacable force. (*Songs of Enchantment* 178-9)

With the aid of these demonic tactics, the masquerade succeeds in bringing the whole community to its knees before Madame Koto. It controls the people's thoughts, and ultimately controls their behaviour towards the party and towards one another (178).

The Blind Old Man aids the masquerade in its diabolic task. He is symbolic of the Biblical false prophet in the book of Revelation "who worked signs in his [the beast's] presence, by which he deceived those who received the mark of the beast and those who worshipped his image," (Revelation 19:20). The Blind Old Man is a sorcerer of great powers. The spirit-child narrator describes him as a "master-sorcerer" who "crowded the air with apparitions of our fears, materialising our terrors, converting our cowardice and anxieties into concrete bestial forms that wreaked havoc without mercy" (*Songs of Enchantment* 144-145).

The Blind Old Man, like the false prophet, puts his powers at the service of ambitious presidents and generals whose army barracks, "will be famed for future coups and secret executions" (146). He paves the way for the mass blindness of the people by controlling their minds, making them unprepared for the coming invasion earlier prophesied by Dad. Azaro avers that:

> His power wore a pernicious web of rituals and beliefs that froze the minds of kings, deafened their ears to the words of the soothsayers and sages blessed by the jewels of radiant gods, who uttered innumerable prophecies about the invasion by the white peoples. The rituals confused our minds with too many manifestations, too many gods, too many dreams, confusing us in order to rule us, till our history became our nemesis. (*Songs of Enchantment* 146)

By the time Koto, the masquerade and their allies strike the community with a plague of blindness, the people's will to resist has been sapped by the evil manifestations of the Blind Old Man, symbol of the false prophet of the book of

Revelation. The community remains blind for several days until a deliverer emerges in the person of Dad who breaks the spell cast over the people.

Okri casts Dad in the mould of deliverer, but he is a combination of Christ-like essence and raw traditional energy incarnated from ages gone by. Dad suffers untold physical hardship in the hands of Madame Koto and her party. Besides several physical assaults by the thugs of the Party of the Rich, Koto oppresses him with her magical powers. In spite of this assaults, Dad remains a vocal opponent who openly denounces Koto and her party. He is a rebel with a cause, who refuses to kowtow to the likes of Koto for any pecuniary or material benefit. For his outspoken rebelliousness, Koto inflicts the full fury of her magical powers on Dad. First, she presses him down with the weight of her spirit. She puts an invisible weight on his head which shrinks his neck painfully. Still Dad refuses to cave in. Instead, he carries the fight to Koto's bar and denounces her openly in a loud voice.

> Monsters. You are all draining our people of sleep. You are stealing our powers, taking over our lives. I am not afraid of you. My name is Black Tyger and I eat stones first thing in the morning. I eat rocks last thing at night. My hands are made of tree trunks. You can only conquer people who are afraid of you.... You monsters with crocodile faces, I shit on you.... The only thing you stupid people like is war. Trouble. Confusion. You will destroy this country before we are even free. (*Songs of Enchantment* 210)

In anger, Koto inflicts physical blindness on Dad, but unlike the rest of the community, which is cowed by Koto's plague of mass blindness, Dad's spirit still remains unfettered. Eventually, the ancestors come in the form of a leopard to

lead Dad out of his room into the bush where the decomposing corpse of Ade's father still lies unburied. Dad continues to defy and revile the wicked forces in a loud voice as he goes. He thereby unknowingly breaks "the seven chains" holding the community in bondage and the people dream him on towards their deliverance. He regains his sight by embracing, providentially, the putrefying corpse of the carpenter (277). Thereafter, the plague of blindness is lifted from the community. It is noteworthy that Dad's deliverer stature is infused with Biblical overtones when, like Adam, he begins to name everything and everyone anew the way Adam named everything in the book of Genesis.

> He named the different trees, the Obeches, the Irokos, baobabs, sacred trees whose great presences extended the monumental serenity of hidden deities and who were old with history and unheard stories... he gave me a new name, a long one for a long life, which meant KEEP REDREAMING THE WORLD WITH MORE LIGHT. (*Songs of Enchantment* 280)

Like other consummatory myths earlier analyzed, this apocalyptic myth points to a better future for the people. In this future, witches and wizards like Koto and the Blind Old Man will be absent. That is, the class of vampire-like rulers who oppress the poor to increase their wealth and power will have been eliminated by the re-awakened spiritual powers of the people. In this future paradise, wickedness, injustice and poverty will be banished forever. In the apocalypse, the beast, the false prophets and Satan himself will be thrown into the lake of fire, and a New Jerusalem will emerge to replace this corrupt world. Okri's apocalyptic myth infers no less. Dad implies this when he names the old

gods of the community as fear, poverty, injustice, etc, and replaces them with the counter-gods of wealth, justice, etc (277-281).

2.5 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, an overview of Okri's dexterous use of primary, romantic and consummatory myths demonstrates that a thorough understanding of his fiction is best pursued through the analysis of his mythic imagination. Through myths, Okri conveys his message(s) and vision to the reader. Also, he successfully expresses his thematic concerns through the different myths. These themes include his assertion that love conquers all, even an abiku child or abiku nation; success in life is a collaboration of human and spiritual forces; a man's destiny is in his hands and he can redream his world; life is a struggle from which no man can withdraw, but communal collaboration avails much; ill-gotten wealth brings no joy; and the victory of good over evil is certain. More importantly, this study has so far demonstrated that Okri does not engage in reckless mysticism and exoticism of the Nigerian reality, but revises many traditional myths to satirise the nation and envision an African utopia.

CHAPTER THREE

HUMAN CHARACTERS, MYTHIC PERSONAGES: THE INTERMINGLING OF MYTH AND REALISM IN OKRI'S CHARACTERISATION

3. 1 INTRODUCTION

In the last chapters, Wheelwright's semantic theory facilitated the evaluation of Okri's dexterity in using myths to convey his thematic concerns in his prose fiction. The principal focus in this chapter is the assessment of the inter-weaving of myth and realism in Okri's characterisation, thereby foregrounding its impact on his aesthetic vision and message. Essentially, this chapter assesses Okri's continued use of satire as a powerful aesthetic tool in conveying his vision to the reader by creating characters that he invests with specific symbolic attributes which depict the institutions and class that he wishes to reform. The major argument in this chapter is that Okri's characters embody his thematic preoccupations and belief that advancement in life requires the alliance of the physical and the spiritual, though not in the "religious" sense of contemporary orthodox religions. It is this duality in Okri's goal, one political and the other mystical, which informs the tension in Okri's prose fiction, and nowhere is this tension more palpable than in his creation of characters that are both real and liminal.

Okri's humanistic concerns, as stated in the previous chapters, include his quest for freedom for all men from all forms of bondage and the establishment of a utopia in which this desire can be actualised. Consequently, his political themes evince his deep abhorrence of avoidable suffering and poverty; his conviction that unbridled materialism breeds wickedness in men and women; and his disenchantment with greed-driven leadership in many societies as well as the docility of the average man. At the spiritual level, his belief in the mutual interdependence of the physical and the spiritual realms manifests in his message that the oppressed of every tribe and race can change their destiny by re-drawing the map of their world through an alliance of positive human effort and constructive spiritual forces. This chapter assesses Okri's success in using his characters to demonstrate these thematic interests.

3. 2 REALISTIC CHARACTERISATION

According to Abrams, characters are the fictional persons involved in the plots of narrative works to whom readers ascribe moral and emotional qualities based on their actions and conversations (20). In realistic novels, characters, most especially the main characters, are expected to be distinctly drawn so much so that they come across as life-like persons. Abrams also avers that the realist creates an illusion that the world he depicts in his narrative is a "reflection" of the real world from the perspective of the "common reader"; the common reader refers to the merchandising middle-class. Realistic characterisation, therefore, is the process of creating fictitious persons whose actions, conversations and philosophical

dispositions the average reader can identify with because they reflect his basic outlook on life.

Watt says the canons of realism demand that the author of a realistic novel provides the readers with enough details about his characters to particularize their identity and individuality in the reader's imagination. That is to say, the author of a realistic novel should "make his readers so intimately acquainted with his characters that the creations of his brain should be to them speaking, moving, living human creatures" (Trollop cited in Allot 285). One way of doing this is to supply the reader with descriptions of the physical appearances of the characters, most especially the major characters. Thus, Okri's characters are rendered realistic by the author's description, though sparse, of their physical appearances and his supply of details relating to their social backgrounds. The following analysis of major characters in Okri's works confirms this assertion. It must be noted from the outset, however, that these details have to be pieced together to achieve a meaningful picture. Nevertheless, the emerging image is no less compelling and relates characterisation to the author's social vision.

Dad is portrayed as a huge, well-muscled man. Apart from being blessed with a large frame, his training as a boxer and his job as a carrier of heavy loads enhance his physique. He is presented as a very strong man. He once beats up two colonial policemen and can only be subdued by six policemen (*The Famished Road* 10). He is the son of the Priest of the god of Roads, but his mercurial temper and ox-like, untameable strength precludes him from stepping into his father's shoes (70). He, his wife and son live in a room in an unnamed Lagos

ghetto. He has no formal education and is unskilled for any professional job. Anyone who has ever been to a Lagos market would easily recognise Dad amongst the heavy-muscled, low-income load carriers eking out a living by carrying bags of salt, rice or cement on their heads, shoulders or backs.

Mum is depicted as a frail woman, a former village belle now fallen on bad times. As a result of the privations she has suffered, her physical stature has shrunken considerably. According to the author:

> She looked much leaner and her blouse hung from her shoulders as if she had shrunk in her clothes.... As she went off on her arduous journeys she seemed so frail that the slightest wind threatened to blow her away into the molten sky. (82)

This frail, unattractive picture of Mum is only intermittently relieved when she is happy and content with life. For instance, Mum's appearance metamorphoses dramatically when she and Dad prepare to go out visiting.

> ...When Mum was ready she was entirely transformed. All the tiredness, the overwork, the boniness of her face, the worry expressions on her forehead, had gone. Her face sparkled with freshness, lipstick, and eyeshadow. Her skin-tone had been softened with foundation and rouge. And I saw in Mum something of the innocent beauty that must have made the village air lustrous when Dad first set eyes on her. (130)

As if to confirm that real beauty lurks behind her haggard physique, Mum tells Dad: "We may be poor, but we're not ugly" (130). She adds much later: "I was the most beautiful girl in my village..." (443). But now her beauty is faded. She looks bonier than slim because of the poverty and starvation in the family. Like her husband, Mum has no formal education. She is unskilled, a petty trader

whose total income is paltry. She hails from the same village as her husband. The rapidity with which Mum's beauty faded due to the poverty ravaging the family is Okri's graphic criticism of the social system which reduces the life span of the average woman or man. Both Dad and Mum epitomise Okri's anger with a society whose leaders frolic in ill-gotten wealth while the average man wallows in the mire of avoidable poverty.

In contrast to Mum, Madame Koto has a big frame which tends to obesity as she gets wealthier and more powerful. In the beginning, Koto is depicted as a "massive" woman, strong enough to lift up a full-grown man bodily up to the sky and slam him onto the earth (36-37). In spite of this unusual ability, her big frame seems filled with bonhomie as she helps her poor neighbours, Azaro's family. In conformity with Okri's characterisation of the oppressive proclivities of the rich, Koto's appearance changes for the worse as she increases in wealth and power. The author says:

> Madame Koto grew distant. Her frame became bigger. Her voice became arrogant.... she walked slowly, like one who has recently acquired power. Her face had taken on a new seriousness, and her eyes were harder than ever. (269)

At the height of her power, she is so obese that the back door to her bar has to be expanded to accommodate her elephantine bulk. She now looks and comports herself even more arrogantly, as befits the Queen of the ghetto:

> He face had become big and a little ugly... there was a patch of rough darkened skin on her face which made her expressions sinister. She had become more severe, more remote more powerful... Her stomach was bigger. Her eyes were fierce and disdainful. (360)

Okri's description of Koto paints the picture of the *nouveau-riche* who brims with sheer arrogance at her success and the failure of her less-fortunate neighbours.

In the narratives, Okri casts aspersions upon the rich and the diabolic sources of their wealth by linking Koto to witchcraft. To accentuate her characterisation as a witch, Okri describes her as a woman possessing "beards" (82, 101). In traditional African thought, only witches have beards. Not even Koto's love for finery and jewellery escapes the author's ire; it is as if he is saying that the rich array themselves in clothes stolen from the common man. As she gets wealthier, her style becomes gaudier, thus indicating that the rich become demented and warped in taste because they have appropriated the "national cake" meant for the whole nation and have become constipated thereby. On one occasion:

> She wore a new lace blouse, an expensive wrapper, coral beads round her neck, copper bangles round her wrists. She wore eye-shadow, which darkened her eyes, and powder on her face.... (239)

Towards the end of the narrative, she dresses like a chief in "golden volumes of lace attire, feathers in her headgear. She had a new walking stick with a metallic lion's head," (451). The author derides her vanity and, through her, the vanity of the rich, when he asserts that her expensive clothes only magnify the poverty of her neighbours (360) and "made the beggars ill" (495).

Koto's background is shrouded in secrecy, which is appropriate to her characterisation as a mythical figure. Nobody seems to know where she springs

from, and she stokes the embers of mystery when she herself declares: "My father was an Iroko tree. My mother was a rock" (*Songs of Enchantment* 190). Like Dad and Mum, she is uneducated. Unlike them, she is rich, the owner of the local bar which later metamorphoses into a brothel.

The physical description of major characters in *The Landscapes Within* (and *Dangerous Love*) follows the pattern enunciated above. For example, Tuwo is described as

> ... a dark-skinned man, robust, on the squat side and good looking in a fortyish way. He spoke with a poorly cultivated English accent. (*The Landscapes Within* 5)

Tuwo is a pensioner who lives on an insufficient income. He has the reputation of a rake and a lecher. He was once married but divorced. Now he preys on small girls young enough to be his daughters, and other men's wives. The plight of Tuwo is a reflection of Nigerian pensioners who had spent most of their active years in government service with the hope of a handsome pension on retirement. Like Tuwo, they have been abandoned by an uncaring government and often fall dead while on the queue to collect their meagre and infrequent pensions.

The author's description of Dr. Okocha's physique brings out his striking personality:

> Dr. Okocha, as he was fondly called, was thickset like a wrestler. His face was strong and sweaty and his massive forehead was a deep dry brown. His small nose, snub and blunt, repeated the curves of his rather large, friendly lips. He was reminiscent of some crude bark-brown paintings of Igbo wrestlers. He had reddish-brown white eyes that were piercing in their depths and over which were thick eyebrows. His hair was thinning and had white straggling strands. A

> brown threadbare agbada covered his thickset frame and made him seem shorter than he really was. (13)

Dr. Okocha is a struggling artist with a family he finds difficult to adequately cater for through his chosen profession as a painter/sculptor. He augments his earnings from art with sign-writing and wall decorations, a job which is a chore to him. From the author's description of his threadbare "agbada" which makes him look shorter than he is, the perceptive reader senses Okri's anger at the condemnation of the artist to a beggarly existence by a social system which discountenances creativity while it rewards and lionises the brazenly corrupt.

Okri's description of Ifeyinwa is a portrait of a magnetizing African beauty.

> Her face was lean and longish, pretty, a clear coffee-brown. Her eyebrows, thin and dark, were neat fine black lines; and her eyelashes were long, thinly curved and shining. She had small firm lips and a straight, finely modelled nose. Her black hair was neatly plaited. But it was her eyes that did wonderful things to him. They were fairly large, intelligent and hopeful. They seemed to have different depths to them. He looked into those eyes and he again felt that wonderful and dangerous something rise within him. (26)

However, Ifeyinwa is beauty in the grip of the beast. Her marriage to Takpo is sequel to her father's death which forces her to withdraw from school. The ensuing privation is the main force behind her marriage to a man she does not love and never sees till the day of her betrothal. Ifeyinwa, therefore, is a living criticism of the subjugation of women in the society and the urgent need for women empowerment. Had her mother been financially able to stand on her own

after her husband's sudden death, she would not have forced her daughter into the glorified prostitution which marriage eventually became to Ifeyinwa.

In contrast to Ifeyinwa, Takpo her husband is described as a crude, suspicious, uneducated and violence-prone man.

> Takpo was a shortish, menacing man, very black, with darting ruthless eyes and a large elastic mouth... (17)

> He was tall and hairy chested, with a prominent forehead and small lizard-like red eyes. His skin was parched and his mouth was wide for his face.... His cheeks were like small knotted fists and his nose was sharp and solid as an elbow. (106)

Takpo seems to be a victim of ill-luck. According to the author, he is the least-educated and the only unsuccessful person of all his father's sons, even though he is the first-born. Everything he touches collapses until he is reduced to a petty trader, eking out a living selling provisions in the ghetto. All these woes have a terrible effect on his physical appearance. He laments, "...look at me now, I am older than my age" (234).

The Nigerian society is littered with many Takpos, hard-working men who are physically emaciated as a result of the harsh economic climate in the country. Through the description of the physical appearance of Takpo, Okri criticises the government's economic myopia, which forces budding entrepreneurs like him to the margins of survival. Given the right education and the right economic climate, the Takpos in the system will be assets instead of liabilities.

Besides physical description and bio-data, Okri's characters are rendered extremely lifelike through action and dialogue. At the level of action, both major

and minor characters manifest their innate nature. Azaro's other-worldly nature is vividly depicted in his extra-sensory perceptions of voices and visions that are beyond human discernment. Azaro's actions depict him as a human bridge; he has one leg rooted in the world of men while the other is anchored in the world of spirits. He serves as a perfect example of Soyinka's "multiple existences" and mutual interpenetration of the physical and the metaphysical worlds. Even in the midst of the most banal physical acts, he traverses easily into the spirit realm and back. For instance, as he watches his father smoke one evening the scene dissolves into Madame Koto's bar (*The Famished Road* 59-60).

Azaro has a restless spirit which makes him wander all over the world in the forests and in the belly of the road. He is a strong-willed, if not a stubborn, child. His refusal to return to his spirit companions demonstrates this stubborn streak. This stubbornness also leads him into many spiritual clashes with his spirit companions, the midgets, the spirit-with-three-heads and others. It is also the cause of his quarrels with his parents, especially his equally strong-willed father, and his many scrapes with Madame Koto and the Blind Old Man. His audacity, which sometimes borders on a lack of manners, becomes obvious in instances when he throws a stone at the Blind Old Man to stop him from distracting his father's attention during the latter's fight with Green Leopard (397), and when he, with Ade, wheels the Blind Old Man into the forest during Dad's fight with the spirit-in-white suit (472). In spite of his inconstant nature as a spirit-child, Azaro demonstrates his deep love for his parents by coming back to them after his near-death encounter with the spirit-with-three-heads (326-339). According to Azaro,

his spirit companions fail to lure him back to the spirit- world because "they did not count on the love that made me want to stay on earth" (*Songs of Enchantment* 4).

More than Azaro, Dad is depicted as a man of action. In fact, his penchant for spontaneous fistic excesses prompts two wits in *The Famished Road* to describe him as "Big man...with no shame. Big muscles... with no brain" (367). Their comments are, however, tinged with jealousy. Dad is an idealist, though not the perpetually dreamy type. His passion is to raise the standard of living of the world poor, establish justice and equity in the society. To do this, he tries to rehabilitate the beggars to earn a decent living through community service (487). When this fails, he sallies into the political arena with the sole aim of using political power to re-construct his battered society along the lines of fairness, justice and human dignity. Dad anchors his campaign for societal improvement on mass education:

> He was going to build a unique school for beggars. He was going to supervise the education of all poor and illiterate people. He said they needed education the most.... He talked of turning all the ghettoes into special secret universities where the most effective knowledge in the world would be made available. (*Songs of Enchantment* 8)

Since he cannot give what he does not have, Dad first embarks on a self-improvement course with Azaro reading books on diverse subjects to him. These books include the Bible, the *Arabian Nights*, *Shaka the Zulu* and many other books on philosophy, politics, anatomy, science, astrology, Chinese medicine, Greek and Roman classics (*The Famished Road* 409). Thematically, Dad's

pugilistic expressions are palpable manifestations of Okri's dissatisfaction with the *status quo* and his desire for positive change. Okri makes Dad fail in his physical efforts, but he learns the vital lesson that he has to conquer in the spirit realm before he could conquer in the physical world. This revelation empowers him to win the spiritual battle with the negative forces of Madame Koto and the Blind Old Man who later strike the community with a plague of mass blindness.

Though presented as a gentle and frail woman, Mum's actions depict her as a morally strong person. She is not lazy, but goes about selling her wares, thereby contributing to the economic well-being of the family. Her actions portray her as a low-income earner, but a caring wife and mother. She spends all she has to keep Azaro from dying and to rescue him from the policeman's house of ghosts. She also searches for her husband whenever he gets lost. Mum possesses an inner strength which she displays when she opposes the thugs of the Party of the Rich who assault her in the market because she is not a party member. Eventually, she chooses not to sell in the market rather than vote against her conscience (*The Famished Road* 168-170).

She takes part in the fight against the thugs and the police, and assumes legendary status when her photograph appears in the papers after the riot. Mum is kind, even though she is poor. She gives of the family's meagre resources to the beggars, saying: "We are too poor to be wicked and even as we suffer our hearts are full of gladness" (444). She is so honest that she does not take any money from her son until he declares its source. According to her: "…. We are not thieves in our family. We are royalty. We are poor but we are honest" (372). In

consonance with her portraiture as a low-income wife of a low-income earner, Mum does all the cooking and washing for the family. She also darns Dad's socks and stitches torn clothes for the family. In sum, Mum is realistically depicted as a loyal wife and a responsible and caring mother, even in her poverty. Through Mum, Okri inverts a social thesis which says the wives of poor men are prone to infidelity. Mum is hereby erected as a model for Koto and her prostitutes who choose to sell their souls and bodies in order to become rich.

In contrast to Mum, Madame Koto's actions portray her as a hard-hearted, dyed-in-the-wool capitalist. Initially, she displays some goodwill towards Azaro's family in the form of financial assistance, and the provision of food, and care during Mum's and Dad's illnesses. But her evil intentions rise to the fore when she demands that Azaro should reciprocate her gesture by using his spiritual power to attract customers to her bar. This and similar incidents in the narratives evince Koto's abiding philosophy that "nothing goes for nothing". Seemingly humane acts are geared towards pecuniary gain. Koto's Machiavellian attitude had been commented upon earlier. She is ready to crush any clog in the wheel of her moneymaking machinery. She beats up a man who will not pay for his drink (*The Famished Road* 36). She also beats up a madman who strays into her bar and is scaring her customers away (84-85). Much later in the novel, she orders her prostitutes and thugs to beat up the beggars for obstructing commerce in her hotel. She degenerates to the point of hiring prostitutes to boost her profit, thus making merchandise of human misery and degradation. To boost her growing wealth, she aligns herself with the Party of the Rich, even though she too suffers the diarrhoea

occasioned by the party's bad milk (135). All her rituals and charms are targeted at her financial empowerment, as the incident of the spirit customers depicts (136-7).

The depth of Madame Koto's moral bankruptcy is revealed in her act of getting pregnant for an unknown man who is not her husband. In fact, she has no husband throughout the narratives, a feat which baffles traditional minds and affronts societal norms and etiquette. In this and other acts, Madame Koto displays her total disregard for traditional morality. Her actions portray her as a lawless woman whose god is mammon. She tells Azaro: "You think I don't want to build a house, to drive a car, you think I don't want servants, you think I don't want money and power, eh?" (251). She is so realistically depicted through her actions that the average Nigerian recognizes in her "the witchy, bitchy proprietress of the local bar" (Garuba 23).

Jeremiah the photographer is depicted as an unsuccessful businessman. His unbridled love for his art pushes him to take photographs on credit, not bothering to ask for a down payment from his customers. He ends up in great debt and starvation stares him in the face. He takes out his frustration on the children, by chasing them away from his "show glass" (141-143).

Jeremiah shows his bravery by taking photographs during the riot and having them published in the newspapers. He is arrested and detained by the police for his "subversive" photographs. When he returns, he says he has been tortured in prison, but is not cowed by his harrowing experiences. He becomes "louder and more fearless" (155). He is attacked and wounded by the thugs of the

Party of the Rich, and is subsequently forced into hiding. Still, he will not be intimidated into abandoning his life's vocation. He says:

> I took photographs of women at the market being attacked by thugs. The women fought back. I took pictures of riots against our white rulers. I took pictures of a policeman taking bribes. The policeman saw me and pursued me. (232)

Jeremiah assumes a mythical status by appearing at night, only to disappear before dawn. The utter destruction of his studio and his practice do not deter him from enlisting in the war against the oppressors. He is eventually forced to flee from the ghetto, but vows to continue to "take photographs of the interesting things I see" and to "display them to the whole world" (262). Like Koto, the average Nigerian recognizes in Jeremiah the old-time local photographer whose profession and instrument of office elicit intimations of the magical in ordinary mortals not familiar with the technology.

Through Jeremiah, Okri commends the fraternity of the pen, those who risk their lives to pursue and publish the truth. Amongst them are writers, reporters and photo-journalists, who have suffered persecution in their relentless pursuit of the truth. The travails of Jeremiah in the hands of the thugs and the secret police recall the tenacity in pursuit of the truth and subsequent assassinations of Dele Giwa, editor-in-chief of *Newswatch* magazine and Kaltho Bagauda of *The News* magazine. Dele Giwa was assassinated by a letter bomb during General Ibrahim Babangida's regime, while Kaltho was arrested by security operatives during the Abacha regime and has never been seen again. Both are believed to have been killed by government agents for their unremitting search

for the truth. The subsequent flight of Jeremiah into the underground is also reminiscent of the hounding of journalists and writers during the reign of terror of late General Sani Abacha.

In *The Landscapes Within*, the actions of many of the characters reflect and buttress their personalities. Takpo's suspicious and vengeful nature culminates in his hiring of thugs to beat up Omovo for having an affair with his wife instead of going to court. Tuwo's characterisation as a lecher finds palpable expression in his love affair with Blackie, Omovo's stepmother. Omovo's dad's vengeful nature manifests in his murder of Tuwo for sleeping with his wife, and Omovo's aversion to corruption is shown in his refusal to cooperate with his bosses to oil the wheel of corruption in the chemical company where he works. However, Omovo also comes across as a person with a contradictory morality. On one hand, he abhors the disorder and corruption in his society, but is himself too morally weak to avoid the snares of adultery. The fact that Iffy is young and married to Takpo, an older man with reprehensible habits, does not give Omovo the moral right to have an affair with his wife.

Dad's landlord is a perfect example of a minor character and represents the class of urban landlords with its insatiable greed for money. This class does nothing without financial gain in sight. They have no other occupation or business venture besides milking their tenants dry through their ever-increasing rents. Predictably, they usually gravitate towards a political party that will advance their wealth profile: Dad's landlord is a member of the Party of the Rich. Urban landlords, especially the Lagos type, are not above political arm-twisting and

often threaten their tenants with illegal ejection or astronomical increases in rent if their political choices are rejected. Dad's Landlord does exactly that in *The Famished Road*. First he tells Mum:

> I have told this to all my tenants. Anybody who wants to live in my house, under this roof that I built with my own hands, should vote for my party. Did you hear me?.... if you have ears, listen. If you want to be my tenant, when the election comes you will go and vote for my party man. (198).

To press home the futility of resistance, the landlord adds that secret eyes will monitor how they vote although:

> Whether you vote for our man or not we will win anyway. But if you don't vote for him there will be trouble. You might as well begin to look for another place now.... Tell this to your husband. (198)

Dad refuses to comply and says so publicly. Consequently, the landlord slaps an astronomical increment on him. Personal harassment and bodily injury are the stock-in-trade of this heartless class whenever its pecuniary interest is threatened. Hence, when Dad's rent expires, his landlord disfigures his door and smears some obnoxious materials on it. In typical Lagos style, such a landlord could remove the door entirely. If the tenant still remains recalcitrant, the landlord would remove the portion of the roof covering his room as well. Exposed to the vagaries of the weather and any passing vagabond, the tenant will succumb to his landlord's wish or pack out. In extreme cases, some Lagos landlords have been known to obtain kangaroo court judgments without the tenant's knowledge and eject the unrepentant tenant with the aid of thugs disguised as policemen. In *The Famished Road,* landlord visits Mum in the company of three such thugs:

> He had three other men with him. They were very big, with well-developed muscles, and the mad eyes of political thugs. They wore matching uniforms and they came into the room and stood, side by side, with legs planted wide, their backs against the wall. They folded their arms and looked at us with the sort of contempt reserved for insects. (197)

Dad's landlord personifies the avarice of his class. However, we know little about his family, background in life, his fears and aspirations. Other minor characters also reflect Okri's social vision. Koto's driver represents subservience and arrogant greed, while Green Leopard is emblematic of the depravity of our political system. Green Leopard used to be an armed robber, but transforms into a political thug in the time of politics. He is representative of all social miscreants – robbers, rapists, petty thieves and "area boys" – who transform themselves into political thugs to earn a living during political campaigns, only to revert to their criminal "professions" after the elections.

These political thugs have well-developed muscles but no morals. They usually obey the commands of their master of the moment. Their god is their belly. They are hardy, rough, violence-prone, living only for today without a thought for tomorrow. There are many Green Leopards in the Nigerian political landscape.

Tuwo, Dele, Okur, Umeh, Okocha and Blackie are examples of minor characters in *The Landscapes Within*. Tuwo represents lechery, while Dele, Okur and Umeh typify the modern African youth who belong to a "wasted generation". These young men feel betrayed by their nation – no jobs, no business prospect, no educational prospects. They prefer to emigrate to the industrialized nations of the

West instead of staying at home without any hope of gainful employment. Blackie typifies the classic "Sisi Eko", the archetypal Lagos lady who is loyal when the cash is flowing but immediately transfers her affections to a more fortunate man when rain clouds darken the horizon.

Okri's insight into the psychological make-up of some of his characters deepens his realistic portrayals. Azaro's spiritual journey into the dreams and thoughts of these characters is the method used by the author to give the reader an insight into his characters' thought-life. Through such a spiritual trip, the author exposes the unfulfilled yearnings and motivations of the old man. The protagonist-narrator says:

> I followed the blind old man in spirit, circling round him as he passed the presidential mansions, the army barracks that would be famed for future coups and secret executions. I followed him knowing that he was reaching the zenith of his power's manifestations.... I knew his fear of spontaneously combusting.... And I saw his sadness in having someday to leave this realm behind.... I saw his despair, his invisible tears, and his misery beneath his walk of an impeccable gentleman, a diplomat on an evening's stroll. (*Songs of Enchantment* 146)

In short, the Blind Old Man is propelled by fear and despair. He knows that he has only a limited time to live, but would have preferred to live a little longer to exercise more power, more dominion over the common man.

Azaro's spiritual flight into Koto's dream, however, shows that the fear of poverty and her craving for love and affection are Koto's driving force. As he follows her dream, Azaro declares:

> Her awesome desire... her robust desire of years without rich release drove her on obsessively.... On and on she went, seeking the giant love story hidden in the flesh of all our agonies, the love between her powerful beating heart and a being or a god worthy of impregnating her with offspring that could command and concentrate the minds of men and women and nations, and possess their dreams and affect their realities. Offspring that could be myths and deities who would extend her powers, offspring worthy of her ancient blood, a blood as old as oral history.
>
> (*Songs of Enchantment* 141)

In essence, Koto's tough exterior masks her innate desire for a fulfilling relationship and family life. Throughout the narratives, Koto is unable to establish a "normal" family life, no husband, no children, no brothers or sisters or parents. This lack of normal family life obvioiusly fuels her inordinate quest for wealth as a psychological compensation.

Dad's dream-vision while in a coma is the technique used by the author to provide psychological depth to his personality. In his coma, he searches for justice for the poor of the world and a new world order. This secret passion provides the motivation for some of Dad's physical eruptions. With the insight provided by the author's exploration into Dad's dream, we are better able to appreciate that his desire to free his family and fellow human beings from the shackles of poverty and political oppression is the motive force driving Dad to boxing and violence. As Moh observes, his primary aim is to box justice and equity into an unjust society (92).

Azaro's frequent forays into Mum's dreams are another technique used by the author to provide necessary psychological depth to her personality. As for

Azaro himself, the author deepens his character through his "spoken" introspection which serves as a window to his soul. His many queer actions are comprehensible only in the context of his nature as a spirit-child, and the many battles he fights to stay alive in contravention of his vow to his spirit-companions: Azaro's self-confessions provide a credible psychological background and increase our understanding and acceptance of an otherwise problematic phenomenon

In *The Landscapes Within*, the many cerebral musings of Omovo on the squalor and corruption in his society and his role as an artist provide sufficient psychological backdrop to Omovo's actions (or inaction, sometimes). In fact, Omovo lives more within himself than within his society, and the narrator seems to peep out through Omovo's sensitive eyes. More often than not, Omovo is depicted as a lonely figure forever pondering over one thought or another, analysing his own actions or feelings. Okur's poem, for instance, sends him on a thinking trip:

> Omovo's mind went round and round on a point. The poem spoke to him; and he spoke to the poem. His mind went in these circles for a long time; reaching back in memory and trying to connect scattered threads or to weave some pattern. He thought to himself: life has no pattern. Life is not a series of threads. It is futile trying to weave something through this whole maze. (69)

As mentioned earlier, Omovo's pristine nature abhors corruption. It is therefore surprising to the reader that he who condemns the immorality and corruption in his society still engages in adultery with his neighbour's wife.

Omovo's dad is depicted as a hard, unbending and authoritative husband and father. He often beats Omovo's mother and his two elder sons any time they transgress. He later sends the stubborn sons out of his home for talking back to him. He gives everyone the impression that he is in control of his house and his business, and will never look up to his children for sustenance. His killing of Tuwo and his expulsion of Okur and Umeh are in line with his arrogant and mercurial temperament which brooks no opposition. However, the author makes the reader understand that all this is mere bluster, a cover-up for his bruised ego owing to his inability to provide for his family. In the end, Omovo's dad begs his son for a loan to pay the rent.

> I need... I am a little out of immediate funds. I want some money to manage this month's rent. Can you manage the money, I mean as soon as you receive your salary? (205)

He later breaks down when Omovo inadvertently calls him a failure.

Takpo is another character who gives the reader the impression of hard, unbending authoritarianism. He tries to break his young wife, first through gifts and later through beatings and cruelty. He fails and has to slip sedatives in her drink before he can have sexual intercourse with her. He is so slovenly in his habits that he spews chewing stick spittle all over his sitting room. He, too, does not brook any contradiction at home, and often hires thugs to "discipline" any man who makes passes at his pretty young wife. Yet the same man bursts into tears and begs his wife for love and respect:

> He was crying a kind of cry that she had never witnessed before. It was all so unreal and frightening.

> He was like an unbalanced actor bungling the lines and acting out his deepest fevers and darkest passions. He looked grotesque and absurd "All I want is for you to love me like a good wife, love me and help me fight these battles, eh. Love me like a good wife, serve me like a good wife, don't make me look like a fool...." (234-5)

Earlier in the same scene, Takpo reveals the reason for his unyielding exterior and violent ways. According to him, he is the eldest of all his father's children, but the least-educated and the most unsuccessful. He attributes his bad luck in life to a curse placed on him by his father for some undisclosed disobedience. The bitterness over his succession of business failures has moulded Takpo into the violence-prone man that he is in the narratives.

Ifeyinwa and Blackie are two female characters who play major roles in the narratives. While Ifeyinwa evokes pity in the reader, Blackie attracts mostly ire. In spite of Ifeyinwa's adulterous fling with Omovo, the reader pities her for being a victim of an arranged marriage to a man whose personality and habits nauseate her. The only person who seems to have made some pecuniary gains in the whole affair is Ifeyinwa's mother. Like the Jews in Prophet Jeremiah's days, Ifeyinwa's mother ate the sour grapes, while her daughter got the sour taste. Her death later in the story confirms Omovo's sense of loss and his philosophy about the futility of being an African. The author devotes several pages to Ifeyinwa's thoughts and feelings about her marriage of inconvenience and the hopelessness of her situation (98-106). For instance, the author reveals that:

> Her young mind was trapped in her maze of desires, hates, compromises and recent discoveries of a whole fresh world of loving .... In between these heightened

> moments were hours and hours of what was for her a dreary and wasted life .... She was revolted by the gradual decay of life about her .... Desperation filled her daily. Her patience and dangerous quietness cracked. In this state her mind worked strangely, She sometimes acted out in her mind fantasies about killing her husband .... She was shocked at the depth of her hatred and revulsion. (104-6)

In between these clearly individuated characters is a host of background characters: tenants, party thugs, sorcerers and herbalists, traders, politicians and prostitutes. According to W. J. Harvey, these background characters typify social trends, "... without them society itself will tend to become hopelessly abstract and external," (236). As Palmer, Forster and Harvey observe, realistic fiction demands the involvement of these three major types of characters because their interaction is a more vivid reflection of life itself (Forster 75-6). Background characters create a credible social context for the plot and vivify the story more than any photograph. Harvey says the most important context in any realistic novel is "the web of human relationships in which any single character must be enmeshed because no man is an island unto himself" (232, 250). Okri subscribes to realistic characterisation by creating a social organism in which major characters, minor characters and background characters freely interact, as people do in real life.

The tenants in the ramshackle buildings in the ghettoes display all the attributes of a social group bound together by shared poverty. They show courage and cooperation in the fight against the thugs after the incident of the bad milk. They show love and generosity to Azaro's family, bringing them gifts when Dad is sick, and rejoicing with them when Azaro is "resurrected". Yet, the same group

of people shows cowardice in its running battle with the murderous night-runners, the manipulative landlords and mind-bending sorcerers like the Blind Old Man and Madame Koto. They also manifest the indecisiveness of a group until a strong, purposeful and daring leader emerges in the person of pugilistic and intrepid Dad.

As a group, the politicians in *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment* have the same self-serving philosophy as typical Nigerian politicians. Their manifestoes are mere rhetoric meant to hoodwink the electorate. Their parties and orgiastic celebrations evidence the insincerity of their election promises. There is no palpable difference between the Party of the Rich and the Party of the Poor in their *modus operandi.* Both groups employ thugs and the crippling efficacy of terror to numb the electorate into submission. Bribery, harassment and rigging are the call cards of Nigerian politicians in real life and in the narratives. The bad milk distributed by the Party of the Rich is a bribe to the impoverished ghetto dwellers. Thugs chase Mum away from her stall in the market because she does not belong to their party. They tell her bluntly: "If you don't belong to our party you don't belong to this space in the market" (*The Famished Road* 168). Dad's landlord, who belongs to the Party of the Rich, indicates his party's readiness to rig the upcoming election when he taunts Dad saying, "Whether you vote for our man or not we will win anyway" (198). A customer in Madame Koto's bar insists that the Party of the Poor is no better. According to him:

> They are all corrupt. In my home-town they [Party of the Poor] killed a man because he wouldn't support

> them. They too are trying to rig the elections. They have thugs who beat up people in the markets. They take bribes and they help only themselves. (211)

This speech is a summary of the operating system of Nigerian politicians up to the present. Okri's portraiture of this group is, therefore, true to life. Thematically, Okri links the politicians and the landlords to destroyers and parasites through his rat metaphor (Rausch 1). Thus, he compares the nation's rulers to vermin who have no independent existence of their own other than to steal the "national cake" just like the rats in Dad's room. Okri suggests violent resistance to them, the way Jeremiah the photographer used rat poison to exterminate the physical rats in Dad's room.

The thugs and the prostitutes represent the very dregs of the society, the most morally debased. The thugs live by violence and have no permanent friends or foes. Whoever pays them is their master for the moment. Most of the assaults in the narratives are committed by the thugs, including the murder of Ade's father (*Songs of Enchantment* 212) and the attempted murder of Dad. The thugs kill for money and have no morals. The prostitutes have no morals too as they sleep with any man for money. Their moral bankruptcy is revealed in the coarseness of the following dialogue between two contending prostitutes:

> "Rumour is a cheap prostitute."
> "So what are you?"
> "I am not cheap."
> "You're cheaper than shit."
> "What about you, eh? The men say your anus smells"
> "Your cunt smells."
> "Even chicken can fuck you."

"Rat fuck you."
"Dog fuck you."
"Shut up."
"You too shut up."
"Pig fuck your mother."
"Goat fuck your mother and produce you."
(*The Famished Road* 294)

The preponderance of four-letter words like "fuck", "anus", "cunt", shit" in the above extract characterises the prostitutes as a crude, uneducated and immoral group.

As explained earlier, Okri's realistic characterisation is not an end in itself, but the key that unlocks the thematic preoccupation of the author. Structurally, *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment* mimic the folktale. Folktales are, generally, didactic in nature. Consequently, the characters in the three texts are divided into two camps: the good and the evil. In the camp of the evil are Madame Koto, the Blind Old Man, Dad's landlord and other politicians, and thugs. In the camp of the good are Dad, Mum, Azaro, Jeremiah the photographer and the poor. Like all folktales, Okri affirms the victory of good over evil by making the characters in the camp of the good to triumph over the machinations of those in the evil camp.

Azaro the spirit-child is symbolic of the Nigerian nation with its chequered history of political instability and social restiveness. He objectifies the author's belief that in spite of the travails of this "abiku country", one day it will decide to remain. It will become strong (*The Famished Road* 478). Otu affirms this belief when he says:

> ... that the abiku – Azaro decides tacitly to remain in the mundane world barring the harrowing poverty and topsy-turvy of events (*The Famished Road* 487) is significant: Enduring change in our society is in sight. Seen within this purview, Okri is not Eurocentric, he does not pander to the whites' ever-bulging appetite to scoop up sleazy aspects of African life for denigration. He has merely isolated a people's myth, African myth of abiku to describe our social, economic, political and religious situations. (19)

As mentioned in the last chapter, Dad symbolises man's unfettered spirit of freedom, independence, and self-actualization. Through his actions, Dad demonstrates Okri's message that the poor can always break free from the shackles of poverty and deliver themselves through constant struggles. Otu adds:

> His (Dad) taking to boxing as a vocation which initially draws the ire and cynicism of his wife is to be able to help the poor. It is his uncanny faith in struggle, change and willpower to effect this desired change. It is noteworthy that Okri makes Azaro's father come tops in all the bouts, a pointer to the unflagging optimism of the author that the poor could break loose from the confounding shell of complacency that they could even up with the rich; and not only that, but also be the doyen of our society's restoration period. (19)

Okri uses Dad to condemn the apathy and complacency of the poor, advocating communal participation and positive action to remedy their worsening plight. Dad urges his family (by extension, the poor) to take active interest in politics and "become spies on behalf of justice" (*The Famished Road* 498).

Mum's role in the narratives reflects the author's belief that, women can play an active role in salvaging their nation. Instead of being the docile, servile,

politically subjugated housewife of traditional narratives, Mum is cast in the mould of a responsible, loving, dutiful but active wife. She joins in the fight against the police and the oppressive system they uphold. She also resists the thugs in the market. In all these, she comes out as "The symbol of suffering motherhood" (Moh 88). She is also the prototype of the modern African woman who joins forces with her male counterpart in the struggle to establish an egalitarian society in which the line between the rich and the poor is increasingly indistinct.

Jeremiah the photographer changes in the course of the narrative from an eccentric recorder of sundry ghetto celebrations to the chronicler of the nation's history (Garuba 23). He emerges as a representative of the artistic class (Moh 93) whose independent spirit and stand for the truth cannot be extinguished by torture, harassment and imprisonment. Thematically, therefore, Okri through Jeremiah's characterisation demonstrates the role of "art as an affirmation of the noble human spirit in the humiliating circumstances of life," (Iwuanyawu 39).

Madame Koto the "Witchy, bitchy proprietress of the local bar" (Garuba 23) is the arrowhead of the camp of the evil. According to Moh:

> Okri portrays the corrupting influence of wealth and power by describing the advancement of the acquisition of riches and influence is accompanied by an inner spiritual decay and moral decadence. (88)

Madame Koto therefore objectifies Okri's theme of the destructive effect of material acquisition and its resultant hopelessness in a country and its people (Iwuanyanwu 27).

Along with the politicians, Okri uses Koto to condemn the oppressive tendencies of the rich. Okri's unflattering characterisation of the politicians as half-human, half-beasts is a condemnation of the moral decadence of the whole class. He laughs at their political sloganeering as the "Party of the Rich, friends of the poor" (*The Famished Road* 123). Okri's characterisation of the Blind Old Man as the devil incarnate and the spiritual power behind the Party of the Rich also serves to confirm his thesis that the rich oppress the poor not only through financial instruments, but through an unholy alliance with evil spirits and other negative forces of nature. Though this class oppresses the poor throughout *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment*, Okri still makes the poor come tops through communal/collective resistance to their evil dealings. Otu asserts that:

> Okri sets about putting paid to the seemingly interminable goings and comings of Abiku, Azaro, in his society i.e. challenging the prevalent dichotomy that exists between the rich and the poor. (19)

He does this by using the abiku metaphor to invigorate, "The poor through the revelations of Azaro in the spirit world and his father's unflinching resilience in making them cognizant of their poverty-battered conditions" (Otu 19). Dad's most famous declaration in *The Famished Road* is: "We can redream this world and make the dream real. Human beings are gods hidden from themselves. My son, our hunger can change the world, make it better, sweeter" (498).

In *The Landscapes Within*, Omovo personifies Okri's theme that art is a search for meaning in a meaningless world. The seeming rebellion or "otherness" of the artist in relation to his society is really the artist's struggle to harmonize the

landscapes within, which is idyll, with the landscapes without, which is pock-marked with corruption, abandoned babies and ritual murder within the church and outside, a world of unrelieved filth. Omovo also signifies the theme of social responsibility and duty. By being "different" from his contemporaries, he serves as a mirror or the conscience of the nation, reminding his people of what they should or should not do, not by preachments, but through his art and his personality, by simply by being different from the norm. Okri says that Omovo is

> ....what the artist in his progression through time, through age, through experience would end up.... He's an ideal filter, a prism: in that sense he's an ideal artist. He's a complete contrast from the artists who have ideas, distort the world in terms of their ideas, and then reflect an idea-distorted universe. So it's not the world they're really writing about but something produced from a refusal to see. (Quoted in Wilkinson 81)

Although Okri's implied disparagement of artists with ideas is not entirely justified, his characterisation of Omovo as the ideal artist is realistic and fulfils his artistic vision.

Ifeyinwa objectifies the theme of feminine exploitation and the idea that life is filled with inexplicable losses. She lost her right to education early in life because of her father's death. Consequently, she lost her right to choose her own husband in order to alleviate the poverty of the family occasioned by her father's demise. Then she lost her right to love; finally, she lost her life itself in her bid to right some of the wrongs that have dogged her all her life. While Tuwo personifies the theme of moral decadence in the narratives, Takpo and Omovo's dad are used by the author to depict life as a meaningless struggle:

> There is too much unnecessary struggle about. A fucking struggle to live, struggle to wake up in the morning, struggle to go to work .... Even a struggle to die and a struggle to be buried. A fucking struggle to be born as well. (*The Landscapes Within* 126)

Both men as well as many other characters in the novels depict the theme that mindless poverty often engenders mindless violence in people. For instance, both Omovo's dad and Takpo are cuckolded by their wives, largely for economic reasons, being trapped in the maze of poverty from which they could not extricate themselves. Both men resort to physical violence in response to the bruises inflicted on their egos because they have no confidence in the legal system.

Dele, Okur and Umeh represent youth's disillusionment with the corrupt and rudderless ship of state and the readiness of African youths to emigrate rather than stay in a continent which seems to compound horror with hopelessness. When Dele learns of the murder of the unknown girl in the park, he laments: "See how Africa kills her young ones .... Africa is no place for me. That's why I'm going to the States" (*The Landscapes Within* 60). The feeling that youths in Africa belong to a "wasted generation" is echoed in the title of Omovo's stolen artwork, *Related Losses*.

3. 3 INTERMINGLING OF MYTHIC AND REALISTIC CHARACTERISATION

So far, the focus of the critical exploration of Okri's characterisation has been on his fidelity to the canons of realism and its implications for his thematic

concerns, most especially, his satiric intention. However, this exploration will be incomplete without a critique of his use of liminal characters and the consequences of liminality on his aesthetic vision. Liminality implies a threshold, the ability to exist in two realms at once, or the possession of a psychic sensibility which admits both physical and spiritual stimuli by the same character. The word conjures a cross-border experience, the ability to bestride two worlds and function effectively and simultaneously in both.

Griffiths observes that works written by new transcultural writers such as Okri, Rushdie and Marquez often: "question the idea of stable and fixed national and even cultural boundaries, and focus on the liminalities which define much of modern experience in an increasingly dislocated and diasporic world" (309). Cooper adds that "magical realism" reflects liminal features in the sense that it

> ...conflicts with the unities and purities demanded by nationalist strategies. The magical realist plot, with its strange relationships, weird linkages and multidimensional spaces contests boundaries, seamless unities and ethnic purities and can co-exist only uneasily with cultural nationalism. (216)

As mentioned earlier in this study, Okri's recourse to mythopoeia (the intermingling of myth and realism) in his works evince his disenchantment with the limitations of European literary realism. He says in a radio interview:

> Everyone's universe, everyone's perception of the world and of time is unique to them.... An important part of my tradition is that we do not believe that the dead die .... We believe that when people die, they go to another realm .... And as I listened to people and

> read and encountered others, I found it wasn't just me .... It's a new wind that is spreading across the world .... It's a new yearning and a new discovery that is slowly occupying the old tyranny of the mean description of reality. We are now becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the linear, scientific, imprisoned, tight, mean-spirited, and unsatisfactory description of reality and human beings. We want more because we sense that there is more in us.... The thing is that it's time we started healing the human spirit by giving back to it its full, rich, hidden dimensions. And that is all I am trying to do in my fiction – to restore the kingdom, as I said.
>
> (Quoted in Ogunsanwo 40)

Ogunsanwo, taking cognizance of Okri's statement and obvious "hybridization" of content and form in his fiction avers that Okri, "apparently .... finds the methods of conventional realistic representation of life grossly inadequate, and believes that imaginative narratives should give back to the human spirit "its full, rich, hidden dimensions" (40).

Priebe points out, with reference to The Man, Ayi Kwei Armah's unnamed protagonist in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, the essential qualities of liminal characters. The first attribute is that liminal characters are persons "between and betwixt" two realities (21). This manifests in Okri's characterisation which depicts the interconnectedness of the living and the dead, the natural and the spiritual worlds. Many of his characters demonstrate their liminal quality by bestriding both worlds. Azaro, the self-confessed abiku, is the most striking example of a liminal character.

John Hawley describes him as "a late-twentieth-century doorkeeper between two imagined worlds: that of the spirits and that of the mortal"(35). He oscillates between both realms, relating with men and spirits with unusual ease,

sometimes simultaneously. For example, he once converses with Ade's ghost and his father at the same time, to the confusion and consternation of his father (*The Famished Road* 261-3). He can trip in between the two worlds in the middle of a sentence. Azaro is, therefore, the quintessential liminal character.

However, he is not alone in this respect: Dad, Madame Koto, the Blind Old Man, Ade, the unnamed protagonist of "Worlds that Flourish", Arthur in "Stars of the New Curfew", the tapster in "What the Tapster Saw", Ede in "When the Lights Return", and Omovo in *The Landscapes Within* partake of the liminal condition too. Ade is Azaro's kindred spirit, another spirit-child who, unlike Azaro, has decided to honour his vow and return to his spirit-companions. At a point in the narratives, Ade flits back and forth from the present to the past and back again, recounting some of his various reincarnations in the last two thousand years, as a musician, a priest, a ruler and a warrior stoned to death in Egypt (*The Famished Road* 478). On his own part, the tapster fell down from a palm tree and found himself in another realm where all natural laws are turned inside out. Ede, a struggling musician hears a dead man talk and sees the face of his dead girlfriend, Maria, on the market men and women.

All of these characters operate within yet remain outside their immediate societies. They are normal physically, but move in and out of reality, and members of their societies perceive an "otherness" about them. More often than not, these liminal characters perceive sensation or see things which others cannot see, or perceive reality the way other members of the society prefer not to see them. Examples are an artist such as Omovo who lives more within himself than

within his society and intrepid Dad who is ready to fight men and spirits in his pursuit of truth and justice. In short, these characters are often iconoclasts, rebels by normal societal standards.

Another attribute of the liminal character is that "he experiences liminality not because he wants to, but because he must" (Priebe 25). This means that more often than not, the socio-economic conditions created by a self-serving leadership impose liminality on the citizenry. The liminality of Madame Koto is occasioned by her rituals and witchcraft. However, her quest to make it in a society that lionises the rich no matter the dubious origins of their wealth is the motive force behind her liminality.

Dad, too, is a liminal character. This is evident in his spiritual journeys to many strange lands in his punch-induced trances or dream-states. He travels to the land of the people in masks, the land of the fighting spirits and the Hangmen's continent. He wrestles with spirits such as the reincarnated ghost of Yellow Jaguar, the spirit with seven heads and the spirit in white suit. As the son of the priest of the Shrine of Roads (figurative of the Yoruba god, Ogun), it is implied that he must have inherited some spiritual powers from his father. This may account for his liminal quality, but the author demonstrates that he is forced to take up boxing primarily to augment his paltry earnings as a load carrier in the local market.

Omovo and some of the protagonists in Okri's short stories, though largely realistically drawn, nevertheless demonstrate some attributes of the liminal character. Omovo is trapped between the serenity of the landscapes within, his

idyll world of beauty and order, and the contradiction, violence, corruption and filth of the society in which he lives. The tension which the contradiction generates in him is vividly depicted in his confiscated painting entitled "Scumscape", a metaphor for the Nigerian state under a myopic military dictatorship

Some of the protagonists in *Stars of the New Curfew* are similarly trapped in the nightmarish world of the urban centres and the surreal world of the spirits or their fevered imaginations. Ede, central character in "When the Lights Return", is an unsuccessful musician who suffers hallucinatory attacks on his return journey from the sickbed of his dying girlfriend, Maria. He is killed by an irate mob of market women who mistakes him for a thief. He dies seeing the face of his now-dead girlfriend. Maria is cast in the mould of a witch who is able to possess other human beings or animals. As a witch, she is an authentically liminal character, operating within and outside the pale of normality. Fraser notes in his review of this story: "Symbolically, she kills him" (60).

The unnamed hero in "Worlds that Flourish" loses his job and his property to armed robbers. Unable to escape from the scene, the armed robbers implicate him as an accomplice and he is detained by the police for a while. After his release, secured through a bribe, his harrowing experience in the cell, coupled with the robbery and loss of his job makes him lose his sense of balance. He sleepwalks, sees signs (writing) on people's heads and hands. He tries to escape from the city but is involved in an accident. His spirit then goes on a journey into a phantasmagorical world of alien people with three legs, elongated necks, etc. In

this strange world, he meets his dead wife and as he is being pursed by ghosts, he regains consciousness.

In "Star of the New Curfew", the titular story, the hero, a fake medicine huckster, flees the city of Lagos to escape the nightmares induced by the tragic consequences of his Power Drug. A commercial bus driver has gone berserk after taking his supposed cure-all and plunges his vehicle into the lagoon, killing seven people. This incident coupled with the insalubrious effects of the medicine which the producer forces his salesmen to drink drives the huckster to the brink of madness, and makes his day an unrelieved nightmare. He flees to the city of W in the Delta to exorcise these attacks, but lands himself in worse troubles and humiliation. He is forced to return to Lagos and regains his sense of balance after he has saved enough money to start his own business. In short, Okri implies that his liminality is caused by the state of unemployment created by the mismanagement of the Nigerian nation by her post-independence leaders.

The Tapster in "What the Tapster Saw" falls down from a palm tree and his spirit enters another realm where animals like turtles with human faces and snakes oppress him, while invisible beings feed, punish or converse with him. He wakes up as he is about to be buried. All these characters, as well as the unnamed protagonist of *Astonishing the Gods*, are liminal.

Some are liminal by nature, for example, abiku such as Azaro and Ade. Others are liminal by choice and association, like Madame Koto and the sorcerer the Blind Old Man. However, many are liminal by circumstances; they are forced by suffering and oppression to exist on the margins of society and straddle the real

world and that of spirits. At a level of signification, therefore, liminality in Okri's prose fiction is a metaphor for the pervasiveness of suffering in society as a result of unfavourable government policies and the oppression of those in power.

In other words, these characters have become a "living dead" people in consequence of the poverty, neglect and hopelessness that ravage the socio-economic landscapes. According to Okri, suffering is an important theme, almost a personality in his works. He says:

> Suffering is one of the great characters of the book (*The Famished Road*), the different ways people suffer.... There are hundreds of variations, but there is just one god there, and that is suffering, pain.
>
> (Quoted in Wilkinson 85)

Hawley asserts that Okri's "choice of a liminal figure like the abiku to serve as his spokesman, straddling both worlds and drawing power from both, summarizes his determination to imagine something new" (36). No doubt, the liminal characters in Okri's prose fiction buttress his thematic preoccupations, especially the themes of violence and suffering. According to Akachi Ezeigbo:

> Okri creates a bizarre world of fantasy to embody his vision of a fragmented and violent society. His choice of symbols –chaos, nightmare, dream-state – is apt, for these are images that foreground the confusion, pain and suffering in people's souls, in their heart and eyes. (115)

Ezeigbo adds that Okri may have chosen a narrative method which combines realism with myth because:

> Dealing with a world that has gone berserk, where violence has become the language spoken by men, women and children, Okri searches for a suitable medium that can effectively and successfully recreate the harrowing situation. He believes that the realistic or naturalistic medium has completely become an inadequate vehicle to convey the chaos of contemporary scene. Therefore, he resorts to extra-realistic devices as fantasy, dream-state, hallucination and the trance as aesthetic tools to explore his vision of society. In this state, his characters shunt between the real world and the world of fantasy which Okri calls "the other world". (111)

Ezeigbo's stance is in consonance with that of Moh who had stated earlier that Okri uses fantasy, hallucination and the phantasmagorical in the real to "satirise urbanity and the political elite for being responsible for the sufferings of the poor," (150).

At a deeper level, Okri uses the liminality of some of his characters to depict his abiding optimism in a utopian human society. According to Priebe, liminal characters are:

> ... at the limen of what are essentially liminal societies. In other words, seen objectively in relation to the mundane world, they are anti-heroes, inversions of what we would expect in a hero. But if we look at them subjectively, and in relation to their fictional societies, they can be seen as having positive heroic virtues in the mythic sense of possessing or being possessed by regenerative powers for their society. (25)

Priebe adds that even though the liminal character is regarded by his society as a threat to the existing social order and a negation of its warped but dominant values, he remains a source of hope for the revival of his society. By

being "set apart from the moral and spiritual corruption, he becomes a potential regenerative force" (28). In the end, such liminal characters become a kind of scapegoat, a carrier or, in Soyinka's parlance, a challenger of the chthonic realm, the abyss, who effects the salvation of his society by being true to his humanistic ideals, no matter the opprobrium this stance elicits in the short run. Dad, Omovo and Azaro easily fit this mould.

In sum, it is the liminality of Dad which enables him to actualise the deliverance of his community from the grip of Madame Koto and the Blind Old Man, even though many people regard him as deranged. Azaro as the symbol of the nation also survives his many battles because of this same liminal factor. This shows that there is hope for Nigeria in spite of the numerous travails that have bedevilled her nationhood and being since the amalgamation of the Southern and Northern Protectorates by Lord Lugard in 1914. As for Omovo, he serves as the conscience of his nation, showing contemporary Nigerians a better alternative to the prevailing negative social system. His largely unsullied nature in the midst of so much corruption, poverty and moral morass is indicative of a future greatness for the Nigerian nation that will be populated mostly by Omovos. Such a society will be close to a Utopia.

3. 4 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is obvious that the interface of myth and realism in Okri's characterisation aptly demonstrates the catastrophe that often befalls a society in which greed, avarice, violence and corruption are enthroned. Such a society can

only stifle creativity in its artists, make monsters out of the ambitious, and throttle the humanity out of the common man until he becomes like the somnambulist living dead in Okri's works. In spite of these observations, however, it is pertinent to note that Okri's social vision through his employment of satiric characterisation and liminality remains optimistic of a future greatness for the nation, the African continent and the world at large. The next chapter examines how far the same conclusions can be drawn by an evaluation of the interface of myth and realism in Okri's setting.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE INTERFACE OF MYTH AND REALISM IN OKRI'S SETTING

4. 1 INTRODUCTION

A perusal of the previous chapter may have created the erroneous notion that the confluence of myth and realism inheres only in Okri's characterization. This chapter, therefore, serves as a correlative to this unintended disjunction by focusing on Okri's manipulation of his setting to accentuate his message through the agency of myth and realism.

4. 2 THE MYTH AND REALISM OF LOCALES

The notion of realistic setting in prose fiction evokes the general locale, sociological conditions and historical time evident in the work. Watt adds that realism compels the author to create works in which particular people are put in particular social circumstances. Consequently, setting is not just to create a credible socio-temporal context for the plot; it also adds depth and credibility to characters and their actions. Accordingly, realistic setting should not only be a backdrop to action, but should create atmosphere, accentuate characterisation, evoke omens and facilitate the themes in the work. All these elements confer on a work the specificity of realistic setting.

Many of Okri's works are set in the city of Lagos, Nigeria, with occasional forays into the Delta region. The Nigeria of Okri's works may be dated

as the post colonial nation, not in the sense of "postcolonial studies", but in the sense of a nation that has recovered from direct colonial experience and is passing through the inevitable neo-colonial phase of nationhood.

In most of these texts, the military are still in power. This is shown in incidents depicting military excesses. For instance, in *Flowers and Shadows*, some soldiers flog a civilian for riding a motorcycle without wearing a crash helmet. For this offence that is outside the jurisdiction of the military, the soldiers whip and batter a respectable man of forty (126). In *The Landscapes Within*, the authority figure who seizes Omovo's painting, "Scumscape", for depicting the dirty underbelly of the nation to foreigners is also a military person (48-50). Some of the short stories are based on the Nigerian civil war when the military were in power, for example, "In the Shadow of War" and "Stars of the New Curfew".

The Nigeria of *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment*, however, is not so easily defined. The story is set in a Nigerian society in transition, one that is emerging from the vice-like grip of colonial subjugation, but is yet to fully metamorphose into a democracy. Thus, rather than a peace-engendering democracy, it is a violence-prone polity that is in place in the Nigeria of these novels.

The Nigeria of these narratives is replete with political thugs, insincere politicians and their murderous political parties. By inverting the sequence of these narratives, that is, placing *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment* first, and the other works later, a chronological consideration of the social contexts of Okri's works yields a startling but logical revelation which accords

with historical facts. It is the violence-prone politicians with their penchant for rigging, treachery, debauchery and the evocation of dark powers who paved the way for the frequent military intrusions into the Nigerian democratic space Thus, the Nigerian society depicted in *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment* is emerging from colonial rule into a democracy that would not last long before the military strikes. In *Flowers and Shadows*, *The Landscapes Within* and the short stories, the military are fully in power.

It is obvious that Okri's setting problematises his message that an irresponsible leadership can only create a social context that will dehumanise its citizens. The self-serving politicians in *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment* created an atmosphere of fear, intimidation and violence that confirms the poor in their poverty and subservience, thereby emphasising the gap between the haves and the have-nots. And because the politicians created such a violent society, they unwittingly beckon to the merchants of violence, the military, who execute coups and counter-coups in a mad grab for power.

In such a society where leaders, civil or military, are locked in a death-struggle over the perquisites of office and the economic advantages of retaining power, violence, economic stagnation and injustice will be rife. In essence, the Nigerian society in Okri's works reeks with all of these negative features, and this is Okri's subtle criticism of the Nigerian leaders and the elites which give them intellectual support. Through his setting, he creates a social context in which right is wrong and wrong is right.

At the realistic level, Okri creates credible social contexts that add depth to the characters in his works while accentuating his themes. *The Landscapes Within* (also *Dangerous Love*) is set in a Lagos ghetto situated near Alaba market. It is depicted as a densely-populated area, with each room packed to the brim with suffering humanity. For example, Omovo's father, his wife and three grown-up sons are crammed into a two-bedroom apartment with toilet and bathroom facilities shared with many other families in the compound. The whole compound reeks of filth. The bathroom is a good case in point:

> Slimy substances hung on the walls. The bathroom was a claustrophobic compartment. Some of the cracks, through which grey slots of light filtered into the darkness of the bathroom, widened daily and took on snaky aspects at night. The floor of the bathroom had a stagnant pool of soapy, slimy water. At night rats could be heard scurrying around and startled naked bathers. There were two large stones on which people could stand while having a wash.
>
> (*The Landscapes Within* 97)

The near-naturalistic description of the bathroom is an index of the poverty and low social status of the inhabitants of the compound, who are mostly petty traders, low-cadre civil servants, pensioners on meagre incomes, and other unemployed or underemployed people. This scene implicates the rich and the poor, the latter for their unsanitary environment, the former for creating such terrible human habitation in an oil-exporting country, one of the biggest in the world.

In contrast, the rich live in opulence, in well-apportioned mansions which, by Ajegunle standards, are extremely under-utilized. For example, Jonan Okwe's mansion in *Flowers and Shadows* has only three family members and a few

menials living in it. Jeffia has his own bedroom with an adjoining bathroom. Unlike the "common bath-place" described above, Jeffia's bathroom is glittering with marblework, has a "bath", a shower and the tap never runs dry (3-4). Needless to say, the Okwes live in Ikoyi while Omovo's family live among the wretched of the earth in Ajegunle.

The states of the streets in the two areas also evidence the chasm between the rich and the poor. The ghetto where Dad and his family live is as filthy and as congested as Omovo's in *The Landscapes Within*. In these ghettoes, refuse is dumped in the streets, carcasses of animals, sometimes human corpses are left lying around (*Worlds that Flourish* 163), constituting visual and olfactory assaults to passers-by. Okri's vivid description of a typical road in Ijora, another enclave of the poor, deserves quoting at some length:

> There was a terrible stench in the air. The roads were bad, filled with ugly potholes and dirty. People who looked sickly and limp milled past us and I couldn't help being revolted by some of the sights I saw. There was a man under the Ijora bridge who had no legs. He was sleeping beside the spot people habitually used as a urinal. There was a boy no more than fourteen lying on the side of the road with flies dancing all over his swollen body. He was dead. (*Flowers and Shadows* 243)

The roads in Ajegunle, Ijora and other ghettoes in *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment* are filled with potholes, but the roads in Ikoyi are tarred with asphalt and gleam in the sun. The streets where the Okwes live is "... lined with tall whistling pine trees and Indian almond trees .... The air was heavy and hot but sweet-smelling" (*Flowers Shadows* 6) While the ghettoes in Okri's narratives are a town planner's nightmare, Ikoyi is serene, and the "many ornamented and

expensive houses" had "large tennis courts, large swimming pools and well-kept gardens" (*Flowers and Shadows* 15). Okri emphasises the dichotomy between the rich and the poor when he makes Elizabeth Okwe to wonder "how leaders of the country could claim to be in touch with the people's spirit when they were so far removed from their guttered worlds" (15).

The rich and the poor buy and sell in Okri's works. However, while the poor go to the "marketplace", the rich go to "department stores" or shopping malls. Okri's vivid description of both locales further demonstrates this dichotomy between the haves and the have-nots in Nigeria. For instance, the marketplace in *The Famished Road* is a chaotic place, with crowds of traders displaying their wares on open stalls and shouting at the top of their voices to attract buyers. There is no visible sense of planning or organisation in the marketplace, as the seller of bean cakes sits next to the fruit seller who herself is by the dried fish seller (15). Apart from being depicted as chaotic visually and aurally, the smells emanating from the refuse in the middle of these marketplaces add a nauseous dimension to the atmosphere. In contrast, the department stores and shopping malls where the rich purchase their groceries and other necessities are sparkling clean, well-organized and generally devoid of the visual, aural and olfactory assaults associated with the "marketplaces" of the poor.

Even though the rich and the poor sometimes dine out, the poor in Okri's narratives go to "bukas" while the rich go to "restaurants". Okri's description of the physical locales of the two establishments continues his criticism of the gap which the rich maintain between them and the poor. He describes bukas as a shed

with wooden benches and tables, plastic serving plates and an abundance of flies that contest every morsel of food with the eaters. Sometimes, some of the patrons attempt to escape without paying for their meals, leading to a hot chase and violence (*The Famished Road* 146). But the restaurants of the rich are usually spick and span, serene, with exotic paintings hanging on the walls and soft music playing in the background to delight the diners (*Flowers and Shadows* 205).

Okri's depiction of the drinking places in his works likewise shows the poverty of the poor and the affluence of the rich. Initially, only the poor drink palm-wine in Madame Koto's rustic bar, but when it is transformed into a neat, beer-selling brothel, it becomes the exclusive preserve of the rich. In *Flowers and Shadows*, Jonan Okwe's family usually relaxes at the plush Ikoyi Hotel (176).

The rooms of many of the poor characters reflect the same inattention to sanitation as their compounds and streets. Okri's description of Omovo's sitting-room graphically depicts the crumbling financial situation of the family:

> The sitting-room was scantily furnished. There were four cushion chairs, their bodywork multi-coloured with age and use; some of them creaked like barely suppressed rebellious farts whenever anyone sat down. The coverings of the cushions were a faded red and were washed every fortnight by Blackie. Omovo could make out a couple of holes on one of the cushions. The holes were a dark green, revealing the colour of the original cloth beneath the faded covering .... The walls were originally a light marine blue. Now they had fingerprints and other smudges stamped within arms reach.... His eyes fell on the carpet that covered the floor in parts. It was perhaps the most obvious symbol of the state of the house. It was faded, peeling; and the red-painted floor peeped rudely at the ceiling through the shaggy holes. There was a musty, stale smell about the dining-room. He recognized it as the odour which

comes from a kitchen screaming out for proper cleaning. (*The Landscapes Within* 70, 71, 72)

Takpo and Ifeyinwa, unlike Omovo's family, share just a room, the contents of which reflect their precarious financial situation and the strained relationship which exists between husband and wife. According to the narrator, their property consists of three cushion-chairs, a centre table, a bed, "an ancient radiogram that looked as though it had not played a sound for many years" and a full-length mirror (*The Landscapes Within* 108). The walls in this sitting-room-cum-bedroom are "drab" and "infested" with "mildewed posters of white girls drinking Coca Cola" as well as "pictures of Mr. Takpo and Ifeyinwa." "[S]he was in a rather stiff pose and, was unsmiling" while her husband "looked dominant and proud," (108). The pathetic contents of Takpo's room, therefore, vivify his poverty as well as the stormy state of his marriage.

In *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment*, Okri employs the same technique of reflecting the social status of his characters through their physical setting. For example, Dad, Mum and Azaro are crammed into one room which serves as bedroom, sitting-room and pantry. The furniture consists of one bed, a chair, a table and a cupboard which contains the family's provisions. A string attached to the walls functions as the wardrobe. Azaro sleeps on a mat spread on the floor once the centre table is pushed aside. Needless to say, the family shares the single room with the ubiquitous rats.

Even though Mum tries to keep the room tidy, some structural deficiencies frustrate her efforts. The only window in the room is not netted, giving fleas,

mosquitoes and dust free access to the room once it is opened. The roof also leaks, making life a living hell for the family when it rains.

> One night as I slept the rain dripped on my head; it seemed the rain was corrosive and ate through new places in the zinc roof .... The rain swept down so badly that I could no longer sleep on the floor and had to share the single bed with my parents. When more holes opened above us we had to keep moving the bed round the room. It got so awful that we couldn't find a place that wasn't leaking. We ended up settling for having the water drip on our feet. Dad complained to the landlord, but he merely threatened to increase the rent further if he fixed the roof. We couldn't afford the rent as it stood so we had no choice but to settle for being soaked through at night.
>
> (*The Famished Road* 311)

According to the narrator, the whole ghetto is in the same dire straits: "Our street turned into one big stream. Water flooded into our rooms from the gutters" (312). And because the whole compound uses the pail latrine, the flood also carries some of their excreta to their rooms, making the whole environment stink and causing strange diseases. Undoubtedly, this setting reflects the extreme poverty of the ghetto dwellers and vividly portrays Okri's themes of the unnecessary suffering and oppression of the poor by the rich. This is obvious in the refusal of Dad's landlord to repair his leaky roof, while still collecting his rent. In reality, many Lagos landlords behave in the same manner. They do not repair their dilapidating establishments but continue to milk their tenants dry. At another level of interpretation, the dilapidated house with the leaky roof is a metaphor for the nation whose vital resources the rich exploit without making any attempt to put something back.

At the initial stage of her reign, Madame Koto's habitation is only slightly better than that of her poorer neighbours. Her bar consists of some crude benches and tables, her gourds of palm-wine and some plastic wares. Her single bedroom also has a big bed with a corner dedicated to her goddess. This setting reflects her nascent occult dimensions which come into full bloom as the narrative progresses in the novels. Later, her bar transforms into a brothel with proper chairs and tables, electricity and a gramophone. The new setting again reflects her change in status from the struggling palm-wine seller to a rising capitalist and power broker who deals in beer, assorted meats and prostitution. The atmosphere in her palm-wine bar is warm and humane, but her brothel is a force-field of harsh, callous and oppressive sensations. The author, therefore, uses the metamorphosis in the setting of Koto's bar and room to chronicle his message that ill-gotten wealth dehumanizes and causes a debasement of moral values.

Besides using his setting to depict the social context of action or to emphasise his themes, Okri often manipulates his setting to reflect the mood of his characters. For example, Omovo goes to bed feeling depressed by the loneliness, lack of love, poverty and general squalor in his environment. This feeling persists throughout the night until the following day when he goes for a rendezvous with Iffy, his lover. As soon as they hold hands, his mood immediately changes to an alternation of light, bubbling joy and dark forebodings of inevitable loss. Omovo's change of mood is never explicitly stated in the text; rather, it is reflected in the atmospheric condition, the author's description of the firmament over the lovers' heads:

> The sky was clear and clean; a spotless blue dome. The air was fickle. Now it was light-tipped and fresh. The next moment it would be disturbed and fumed. A few black birds swooped past low and twittery, and he felt their presence keenly. The next moment they were scattered black specks swallowed in the vanishing canvas of the sky. He was suddenly touched with a sense of things irrevocably lost, of places that cannot be reached. (*The Landscapes Within* 21)

The adjective "fickle" implies inconstancy. The adjectives "light-tipped" and "fresh" connote happiness while "disturbed" and "fumed" imply a mood swing in the opposite direction. Through this technique, Okri deftly captures the anxiety and precariousness plaguing illicit love affairs. The torridness of the whole business is further emphasised by the filthiness of the room where they attempt to consummate their love.

> The room was bare except for the large wooden bed upon which was some flimsy, threadworm bedding. The smell of cooking oil was pungent in the air. The room was dirty, unswept, musty, lit with a dull, steady burning oil lamp. The floor was uncarpeted, a grim grey. The walls had been painted either by an amateur or by a sorely disgruntled workman. The stained white ceiling had grim spirals of smoke from oil lamps. A dense gloom fell upon him as he entered the place. (*The Landscapes Within* 210-11)

The grimy setting objectifies Okri's condemnation of adultery as a filthy and unfulfilling social vice, and Omovo who is sensitive to the unclean environment experiences an initial libidinal failure even though his lover stands naked before him. The fact that some Nigerians live in such an environment is also an indictment of the country's leaders for failing to utilise the country's oil wealth to lift the living conditions of the average Nigerian.

No doubt, the physical setting in Okri's works is strewn with so much filth and disorder that a perspicacious reader perceives the setting as a metaphor for the undesirable state of the nation. However, Okri implies that even though the leaders create the situation through their avarice and myopia, the masses of the people also contribute to the appalling state of the nation by their inattention to simple sanitary schemes and general docility. They refuse to challenge the oppressive philosophy of the rich, choosing instead to maintain the *status quo*. All these notions and thematic concerns are inscribed in Okri's realistic setting.

However, the interweaving of realism and myth in Okri's setting implicates the thematisation of his social vision in ways that problematise the mundane/esoteric binarity in his works. Many critics have highlighted the interpenetration of the ordinary and the extra-ordinary in Okri's setting. For example, Ezeigbo says:

> Often, the scene of drama in the stories shifts to the mind of the characters and the external struggle transforms into a battle in the subconscious. (112)

Ede in "When the Lights Return" sees a corpse lying on a refuse heap. As he passes by, the corpse suddenly resurrects and complains:

> First they shat on us. Now we shit on ourselves.
> .....
> REVOLT! (*Stars of the New Curfew* 163)

Afterwards, the scene regains its normalcy as the corpse returns to its prostrate, lifeless state. As Ezeigbo has noted, the scene of action has in actuality shifted to the subconscious of the character as he walks. The rapid change between a natural street scene to an unnatural scene in which a corpse momentarily resurrects and

then dies is symptomatic of an abnormality which Ede's social circumstances imposes on his psyche. Ede, an unsuccessful musician, is reduced to a hallucinatory wreck by a combination of socio-economic forces that more or less wipes out his source of income. After all, it is only an economically viable people that can have the sort of surplus income which can be spent on a struggling musician like Ede. But in a society in which the economy is so poorly managed by the government that the average man has little or no income left for the pursuit of pleasure, artists such as Ede who insist on living by their talents alone may starve to death.

Okri also suggests that the chaotic environment in which the poor live may have something to do with their state of mental ill-health characterised by frequent slips from sanity to insanity. In *Songs of Enchantment*, an unusual hurricane whipped through the ghetto one night, leaving carnage in its wake. The author's description of the chaotic scene is almost naturalistic:

> Houses had crumbled altogether. Rooftops have been torn off and twisted under a pressure or a malign force. The broken-down political vehicle, which the inhabitants of the streets had destroyed in the early days, had been crushed and its parts scattered as if the wind had taken steel fists to it and flung its components all over the area. Some people woke up to find bits of the vehicle's door jutting through their windows. Tyres had been hurled into rooms. The vehicle's engine, broken into pieces was found in buckets, smashed against walls. (149)

This "realistic" scene soon takes on an unnatural hue as the author paints a scene of horror where "the innards of a dog" are stamped on Dad's door, the heads of black cats are found in living rooms, where the corpses of lizards,

mauled goats, dead frogs, rotting vegetables are all mixed up with broken furniture, clothes, shoes and mountains of rubbish (149-150).

The juxtaposition of realistic and the unnatural settings has a volatile effect on the reader. Okri implies that the havoc is caused by the "political magicians" in order to maintain their stranglehold on the captive community. The resultant effect on the ghetto dwellers is akin to the affliction of Ede in "When the Lights Return". According to Azaro, "The chaos made us hallucinate .... It became hard to tell if the world was real or if we had collectively invented it" (151-152).

Ogunsanwo opines that *The Famished Road* is distinguished by

> ...an astonishingly swift shift from the conventional verisimilar description of the world of discrete things in the Western manner of narration to the mythopoeic description of the "other reality" whose neglect he noted in his radio statement. This shift occurs all the more strikingly within a single paragraph or within a single sentence, and is as seamless as one finds in, say, Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* or Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgiveness.* (43)

Brenda Cooper (1992), Hawley (1995), Ogunsanwo (1995), Quayson (1997), Ezeigbo (2003) and Fraser (2003) have all pointed out that Okri's narratives, besides shuttling between the real and the other-worldly, also shift rapidly from urban to rural settings. Okri's fiction unquestionably problematises the dichotomy between the cityscape and the forest zone, implying that the former has a haunting and hallucinatory effect on city dwellers. Ato Quayson, for instance, observes that many of Okri's short stories are set in the city, eleven out

of fourteen, in fact, noting the infusion of the forest with esoteric essences. He says:

> ...there is a dual movement between the city and the forest or village and the trajectory of the characters' movement traces an increasing entry into the world of the esoteric whose strongest expression seems to be outside the city. This trajectory is not to suggest a simple dichotomy between city and forest and real and esoteric, a dichotomy which was dominant in Tutuola's mode of story telling. Instead, there is always the sense that the reality of the city itself is interwoven with esoteric significance so that the dichotomizing gesture is increasingly problematised. (103)

In "What the Tapster Saw", "Worlds that Flourish", *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment*, the setting changes rapidly from the normal "verisimilar" realist scenes to weird, fantastic and phantasmagorical ones in which abnormality becomes the norm.

The market scene in *The Famished Road* depicts one of the best examples of the interface of myth and realism in Okri's setting. First, Okri paints the picture of a typical "market day" in a Nigerian marketplace with its teeming crowds of buyers and sellers, its boisterous mercantile activities and general disorderliness. But right in the middle of this realistically rendered scene, in the middle of a paragraph, the scene changes to the surreal world of myths in which spirits with borrowed human parts mingle with market men and women.

Okri here plays on a popular Yoruba myth which says that the living, the dead and the unborn throng the marketplaces of the world. There have been stories of chance encounters with dead relations by the living in distant

marketplaces. The Yoruba also have the myth of "Akudaya", people who allegedly die at one location only to resurface at another where they continue to live and marry and bear children until they are discovered by someone from their "original home." Then they would disappear, never to be seen again.

The interface of myth and realism in the market scene buttresses Okri's theme that success in the world results from an alliance of the living and the dead, the conscious integration of the past into the present to forge a glorious future. A general saying in Nigeria, especially amongst the Yoruba, is that the world is a "marketplace" while heaven is home. The marketplace is a confluence of natural and supernatural forces, both of which the traditional African regards as imperative for a successful mercantile venture. Hence, success for the oppressed, Okri suggests, is a collaborative venture between the living and the dead, the natural and the supernatural forces, the past and the present. This message is graphically depicted in the riot scene when the dead rise up to fight on the side of the poor against the thugs of the Party of the Rich, (*The Famished Road* 180). Generally, the interface of myth and realism in Okri's setting manifests in scenes involving his liminal characters, most especially Azaro, Dad, Koto and the Blind Old Man, Ede and the unnamed protagonists of many of his short stories.

Cooper observes that Okri's narration in *The Famished Road* shifts rapidly between three sites which manifest the infusion of unreality in reality.

> There is the wild forest, the uncleared bush in which spirits, witches, monsters and ghosts find dark and dense safe-cover. Then there is the road, which encroaches on the bush. On the borders between them 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. (224)

Cooper expatiates further that the road in *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment* is both a physical encroachment on the bush as well as the metaphysical dwelling place of the king of the road and other spirits who dwell in its belly. She interprets the road as a multidimensional image signifying the pre-colonial past, the cruelty of Western technology and life itself, with its challenges and threats (Cooper 224). The bar, too, is another site radiating plurisignification and it keeps shifting its location. Sometimes it is at the edge of the bush, at other times it is deep in the forest. Again it is the border between the road and the bush, "a gateway to the spirits, who enter the bush, or a haven to the new politicians, who enter from the road. This is the zone of the mutant and the hybrid, women-birds and bird-fish, creatures, half-human and part animal" (Cooper 226).

4. 3 THE MYTH AND REALISM OF TIME

Locale apart, Okri's treatment of the temporal dimension in his works evinces both fidelity to and violation of the realist canon. In other words, time in Okri's prose fiction sometimes projects the linearity of "historical time", and at other times it manifests the circularity of "mythic time" (Okpewho 5-23). Nevertheless, both historical time and mythic time are vital tools used by Okri to convey his message to the reader. Historically, *Flowers and Shadows*, *The Landscapes Within* and *Dangerous Love* are set in post-independence Nigeria and

manifest the linearity of historical time. In these narratives, day and night are linear in progression and the sequence of actions emphasises this.

For instance, the action in *Flowers and Shadows* starts in the afternoon when Jeffia, the boy-hero, comes back from a friend's house. It is a sweltering day, so he climbs straight into the bath. A flashback follows which shows that he had been playing tennis with his friend earlier in the morning and later rescues a puppy on his way back home. At the end of the flashback, the narrator returns to Jeffia's bathroom. He spends the rest of the evening reading Achebe's *Arrow of God*, and falls asleep on a cushion to wake up the following day (3-11).

The temporal element in the above scene follows a logical sequence, a linear progression from early morning to afternoon, through the evening and the night to the following morning. The rest of the book follows this pattern which can be easily mapped. Even when there are flashbacks, the linearity of the action and time-scheme is not disturbed as such. The author's adoption of historical time in this book facilitates the reader's easy comprehension of his plot and creates a kind of hook.

Even though the temporal element in *The Landscapes Within* and *Dangerous Love* is not as straight-forward as that in *Flowers and Shadows*, it still partakes of the linearity of historical time rather than the circularity of mythic time. This linearity, with its logical sequence of events, dominates the temporal elements in these novels and is not violated by the many flashbacks and introspection which the hero engages in. Always, both flashback and introspection return to a logical temporal point which does not leave the reader in any

confusion. In other words, even though Omovo lives more within himself than within his society, the sequence of actions and temporal markers, morning, day, night, etc, follows the logic of historical time.

However, the same claim cannot be made of the short stories in *Stars of the New Curfew, The Famished Road, Songs of Enchantment and Astonishing the Gods*. Even though the short stories are set in post-independence, contemporary Nigeria, time assumes the circularity of mythic time because the liminal characters slip in and out of reality so quickly that the reader becomes dizzy in the effort to maintain a grip on the slippery time element. Quayson says the author problematised time in "What the Tapster Saw":

> ...by making indeterminate the specific moment of the crossing of the liminal boundary into the realm of the esoteric. The narrative introduces several liminal boundaries, making it difficult for us to locate the precise point of entry into the esoteric realm. (116)

Moreover, the liminal characters seem to take such a long time in the other realm when measured from the perspective of normal historical time. Yet, the same liminal characters emerge into historical time sometimes in the twinkling of an eye, or just a few days after their entry into the esoteric realm. For instance, the unnamed hero of "Worlds that Flourished" has so many time-wasting encounters in the other world, yet wakes up and finds that he has been unconscious only for a short while in historical time. The same thing happens to the tapster in "What the Tapster Saw" whose activities in the spirit realm seem to stretch on and on. They defy easy temporal classification because they merge into one another seamlessly

in the womb of time as if they occur in a "timeless" zone. Yet, the tapster woke up seven days later in historical time.

The same observation is relevant to the time factor in *Astonishing the Gods*. In the first instance, there is no indication in the story of when the unnamed hero starts his journey. The only temporal marker is the statement that he travelled for "seven years and … arrived at a strange port" (5) in his quest for visibility. Whether it is morning, afternoon or evening is not clearly stated. As he wanders through the strange city with invisible inhabitants whom he only glimpses in the mirrors along with a unicorn and angels, he feels himself dissolve.

Suddenly, the author introduces moonlight without any indication as to the period of transition between day and night. Later, the author says the hero's mind plunges into "total darkness" which does not really indicate if the darkness is first physical before it is metaphysical. Much later, there is another reference to darkness when the hero has to cross an ethereal bridge into the city of the Invisibles. Here, "Time howls around him" (19), but he passes the test and arrives in the city which is enveloped in darkness and he and his invisible guide "went into the city at the most mysterious time of night" (35).

In essence, time in *Astonishing the Gods* takes the form of a riddle. It violates the expectation of historical time and goes round and round, and is slippery and difficult to pin down to definite temporal units. This is a reflection of the theme of the book that life is a paradox, and an endless quest for self-actualization. Paradoxically, the condition a man tries to escape from may actually be the very condition to which he ought to aspire.

In *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment*, time becomes even more confusing. Historically, the novels are set in Nigeria prior to 1960. Yet, there are references to coups and the execution of coup-plotters which historically took place after Independence in 1960. In fact, the first coup took place in Nigeria in January of 1966. Okri, however, signals the pre-eminence of "mythic time" over "historical time' with the folkloric opening statement in *The Famished Road*: "In the beginning there was a river" (3). As Ogunsanwo points out, this statement prepares the reader's mind for a narrative which bestrides both historical and mythic dimensions. The massive intrusions of the mythic in the real warp historical time, and are often occasioned by Azaro's many trips to the other realm occurring, as pointed out earlier, sometimes in the middle of a sentence without any visible signposts. For example, Azaro says:

> One moment I was in the room and the next moment I found myself wandering the night roads. I had no idea how I had gotten outside. I walked on the dissolving streets and among the terrestrial bushes. The air was full of riddles .... I was following a beautiful woman with a blue head. She moved in cadenzas of golden light .... She drew my spirit on to fountains of light and lilac music and abiku variations.
> (*The Famished Road* 307)

Such sudden shifts of setting from the world of men to the world of spirits are typical of *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment* generally and only serve to dismantle historical time in the mind of the reader. Quayson observes:

> Throughout all these myriad of events, no specific time indices are given. All the time indices are vague references to "that night", "the next morning", "during the time" and so on. Subsequently, the narrative makes concessions to temporality by referring to a sequence

> of days such as "Saturday" and "Sunday" as a frame for the occurrence of certain events. It is clear that the narrative imposes a framework of temporality on the narrated events rather reluctantly, for, as it progresses temporal indices become less and less prominent. (128)

The author's infusion of the mythic in the real in the temporal dimension in his works is indicative of the deliberate confusion created by the rich to put the poor at a perpetual disadvantage. The conflation of mythic time with historical time in these works is a deliberate aesthetic choice to mimic the manipulation of the common man by African leaders with such hallucinatory concepts as tribe, language, religious and political differences. As Eruvbetine points out, these concepts are used by abiku politicians and their kindred abiku academics to keep the citizens in a state of unrelieved bemusement while the greedy rulers, the King of the road and his priests, fill their pockets with what is supposed to be the common wealth (29-35).

The overall effect of the interface of myth and realism in Okri's setting is its emphasis of his theme that the urban space dehumanizes city dwellers. Quayson says that at one level, the irrationality of the urban space reflects the mismanagement of the city by the planners of the city. At another level, it also suggests that the squalor and dispossession in the city make it difficult for the characters to achieve grandeur or heroic stature in the scheme of things (13). Moh adds that "What Okri holds up to ridicule is the dehumanizing influence of the city which turns the inhabitants into denizens" (136), adding:

> In Okri's world, nightmares have become the only reality. Suffering and privation plod to a state of

> sleepwalking and hallucinations. The wicked landlords, the corrupt police, the tribalistic boss and the armed robbers appear in the dreams and fantasies as man-eating ogres, as ghosts and as ferocious animals who intimidate and beat up the poor. (138)

4. 4 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the interface of myth and realism in Okri's setting is an authentic vehicle for his thematic preoccupations. Through the interface of myth and realism in his setting, comprising the physical locale and the temporal dimensions, Okri condemns the neglect and oppression of the common man by post-independence African leaders. As this chapter has shown, Okri's main argument seems to be that the kind of physically debilitating and spiritually nauseating socio-economic environment deliberately created by self-serving Nigerian leaders can only foster the birth of many abiku. Only the rich benefit when the poor continually give birth to abiku children because the phenomenon extinguishes any kind of competition that the children of the poor might give to the children of the rich.

In other words, if the children of average Nigerians die young through the creation of an unfavourable socio-economic environment, then the rich can easily perpetuate themselves in power and hand over the control of the nation, economically and politically, to their offspring after their exit from political office. This is already happening at the economic and political fronts in Nigeria. For example, Muktar, the son of the former head of state, Shehu Shagari is a minister in the Obasanjo regime. Femi Fani-Kayode, another minister in the same

government is the son of the late politician Fani Kayode, popularly known as "Fani Power" in the Western regional politics of the First Republic in Nigeria. The daughter of Obasanjo himself, Iyabo, is a commissioner in Governor Gbenga Daniel's administration in Obasanjo's native Ogun State and is presently aiming for the Senate in the next political dispensation. Bukola Saraki, the current governor of Kwara State is the son of Senator Olusola Saraki, who also has an offspring in the national assembly. Adeniyi Adebayo, the former Ekiti State governor is the son of General Adebayo, former military governor of old Western State. The situation is not peculiar to Nigeria, but is replicated all over the world. The most popular international example is President George Bush of America whose father was a former president in the same country.

It is this kind of situation that Okri satirises through the use of myth and realism in his prose fiction generally. His aesthetic choice is, therefore, a clarion call to the common man, most especially, average Nigerians to challenge government policies that create environments which keep them and their children in a state of perpetual abiku-hood.

CHAPTER FIVE

OKRI'S LINGUISTIC AESTHETICS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

So far has been analysed in this thesis the intermingling of myth and realism in Okri's prose fiction as it manifests in his themes, characterisation and setting. However, the analysis is incomplete without a concomitant exploration and analysis of the interface of myth and realism in his language and the resultant effect on his message and aesthetic vision in general. This chapter, therefore, examines the implications of Okri's marriage of myth and realism on his linguistic aesthetics on one hand, and his social/aesthetic vision on the other.

In consonance with our theoretical framework, Wheelwright's semantic approach to myth serves as our guide in the exploration of the language of myth depicted in Okri's prose fiction and their semantic implications. Likewise, Watt's theory of realism facilitates the analysis of realistic language in Okri's works. It must be stated from the outset, however, that in the two major areas of focus in this chapter, mythic language and realistic language, the scope is limited to the three aspects of language: choice of words, typical sentences and how language is used to reflect character and thematic inclinations in Okri's prose fiction. The third part of the chapter assesses the semantic effect of Okri's interweaving of mythic and realistic language in his works.

5. 2 MYTHIC LANGUAGE IN OKRI'S PROSE FICTION

According to Wheelwright, myth, especially in its manifestation as primary myth, is analogous to expressive language because it does not ordinarily show clear-cut distinction between term and proposition (158). That is to say, both the non-assertible elements (terms) and the assertible element (proposition) seem to merge in one fluid utterance. For instance, "turtle" is a non-assertible term because it basically refers to an animal. However, the sentence, "The turtle with tabasco's face had on a pair of horn-rimmed glasses and a sthethoscope round his neck" ("What the Tapster Saw" 192) is an asertible proposition. It can be denied or affirmed that turtles have human faces, wear glasses and conduct themselves like medical doctors. Wheelwright posits further that in spite of its fluid nature, expressive language can be examined in relation to two key elements which it possesses. These are "diaphor" and "sentence".

"Diaphor" is closest in meaning to the term "metaphor" in contemporary criticism in the sense that both semantically imply a semantic motion (*phora*) from one thing to another. The difference lies in the number of things involved. Metaphor implies the transference (*epi-phora*) of the name associated with one thing which is well known in the language to some other thing (Wheelwright 158). In essence, only two things are involved in metaphor, but this is not the case with "diaphor", which also implies a kind of semantic motion (*phora*) "through (*dia*) a number of experiential elements,

related in the first instance, no doubt, by a sort of vague but highly charged and tribally infectious emotive congruity, and then formalized into a tribal tradition" (Wheelwright 159).

While metaphor implies one meaning, diaphor implies a cluster of associative meanings which are only vaguely related. That is why Wheelwright says that diaphoric language which is a feature of expressive language and, by inference, mythic language, is archetypal in character because at least two of the diaphorically related elements reflect deep human interests or are related to man (159). Simply put, certain words found in myth radiate a plurality of signification in the context of the culture that produced the myth and these meanings, which could be diverse in nature, refer to all men universally. A scrutiny of Okri's prose fiction reveals the existence of such words.

The word "abiku", which is the most important word in the myth of abiku, ordinarily means "children-born-to-die-young" in the Yoruba language. Thus, to call someone an "abiku", for instance, Azaro and Ade in Okri's *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment*, is to transfer the uncanny ability to die young and be born again to that person. Within the Yoruba culture, this word has a negative connotation as the person so named is perceived as a bringer of sorrow and death to the homestead. The same word also connotes a transcendental presence in that it implies somebody who is capable of existing in the physical and the spiritual realms simultaneously. This quality makes the "abiku" an interesting even if not a desirable character within the culture. Okri

exploits this quasi-positive aspect of the word "abiku" by translating it as "spirit-children", and creating an enchanting world for the abiku in his prose fiction. In one breath, therefore, the word "abiku" connotes two apparently contradictory meanings: mortality (the inevitable end of all men) and immortality (the characteristic of spirits or spirit-beings). These two phenomena, life and death, are the perennial concerns of all human beings irrespective of race and religion. Therefore, to call someone an "abiku" is to confer on the individual both mortality and immortality.

At an aesthetic level, the word also connotes spiritual renewal or regeneration and inconstancy. This is the semantic implication of Nigeria being called an "abiku nation". The term implies that Nigeria has the potential for regeneration and growth even as it is plagued with political instability. Okri later extends the diaphoric reference to ideas and institutions that partake of the "abiku condition". The composite meanings associated with the word "abiku" ultimtely confer an archetypal character on it, thereby highlighting its feature as an instance of mythic language.

The word "road" is another diaphoric term used in Okri's works. Like "abiku", "road" is the most important word in the myth of the road. Okri signals the diaphoric nature of the word by conflating it with "river" at the beginning of *The Famished Road.* Fluidity or motion is similar to both concepts, but while river connotes plenitude, fertility and life, "road" implies aridity and death. The connotation of "road" as death is generally associated with the accidents that claim lives on the road. It is only in this sense that one

can understand Madame Koto's prayer after the resurrection of Azaro: "The road will never swallow you" (46).

Paradoxically, "road' also signifies life in the narrative. For instance, Azaro says that the road is the "soul" of the people in masks (330). "Road" also signifies movement, whether historical or ambulatory. It is in this sense that Okri uses the road as a metaphor for African and Nigerian history, while using it as a metaphor for the journey of life at the personal level. Other significations of the road include its symbolism as the Nigerian nation and its symbolism of the African Utopia. All of these meanings give "road" an archetypal quality.

Another diaphoric word in Okri's narrative is "witch" which is associated with the myth of human mediums. In many cultures across the world, "witch" connotes a negative quality, the ability to kill, suck human blood, deform men physically and spiritually, etc. However, the same word has an implied or in-built positive connotation because in several cultures, witches are often sub-divided into two groups: white witches and black witches. The former are generally perceived as using their spiritual powers to a somewhat positive end, while the latter are perceived as being implacably evil. In the Yoruba oral tradition, it is alleged that the two groups sometimes disagree over a victim. While the black witches call for the punishment or death of a person, the white witches may take the side of the victim.

Madame Koto in *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment* and Maria in "When the Lights Return" are depicted as witches. Yet, both exhibit

the positive and negative connotations of the word. Madame Koto's negative propensity is displayed in the way she oppresses the poor, especially Dad and Azaro, in the narratives. Yet, she shows concern and love for her neighbours, most especially Azaro's family whom she often helps financially. On one notable occasion, when Dad's spirit is trapped in the land of the fighting ghosts, Koto participated fully in the spiritual rescue operation. In fact, the leader of the rescue operation is a former witch who has confessed and repented and has sworn to compensate the society by doing only good for the remainder of her life. Maria, too, displays this diaphoric quality of witches by being alternatingly affectionate and cruel towards her lover, Ede. At the end of the story, she impliedly killed him for not being sensitive enough to her peculiar needs. From another perspective, however, it could be inferred that Maria, who first dies, loved Ede so jealously that she decides to take him along with her to the spirit-world where they can continue their love affair in uninterruptible bliss.

The word "bird" in Okri's myth of the invention of death has the same diaphoric character as the words analysed above. Ordinarily, "bird" ("eiye"in Yoruba) is the name of a feathered, flying animal. Consequently, the word means "motion" or "mobility". But when the Yoruba call someone a bird, it has several negative connotations. First, it connotes an unstable, unreliable person. Second, it connotes someone who cannot be trusted. This is reflected in the Yoruba proverb, "Igi da eiye fo" (The branch breaks and the bird flies away). In other words, the person referred to as a bird in the above proverb

cannot be trusted to stand by one in times of trouble, but immediately seeks a more comfortable environment as soon as conditions become adverse. Third, it connotes someone who is associated with witchcraft or sorcery. Hence such a person is called "eleiye" (possessor of bird-like qualities) in Yoruba because witches are believed to fly like birds to attend their nocturnal meetings in the spirit realm.

All these meanings and more are implied in the word "bird" as used in Okri's myth of the invention of death. To reiterate, the myth of the invention of death explains how death became man's burden, and how God sent a little "bird" to kill death, which it did through love. In Okri's myth, therefore, "bird" subsumes all of the connotations above as well as life (motion) and spiritual regeneration or life in the after life. The last connotation is particularly interesting as it reflects a universal Christian symbol, the Holy Spirit by whose power Christ was raised up from the dead. In essence, "bird" in Okri's myth connotes diverse meanings such as instability, lack of trust, witchcraft, life, spiritual regeneration and salvation.

Still on the diaphoric nature of Okri's language, it is discovered that he deliberately gives some of his characters names that seem to defer specificity of individuality indefinitely. In other words, the personal names of these characters are rather general in nature, meaning that they are vague and applicable to all men irrespective of culture, tribe and race. A scrutiny of some of these names is pertinent here.

"Dad" is a general name with several resonances, most of them positive, in many cultures. It normally means a male, who is a "father" or the father to a child. It also implies a greater level of intimacy than "father". To a child, therefore, the word subsumes "father", "protector", "guide" and "provider". In the Nigerian Pentecostal circles, "dad" or "daddy in heaven" also refers to God. "Dad", therefore, implies a giver of life, having provided the fertilising sperm that sparked the child's birth, and God, the stature that a father has in the eyes of his little child.

"Mum" is another peculiar name used by Okri in his works. It is another general term which normally refers to a female who has given birth to a child. Like "dad", it is a term of intimacy, most especially when compared with "mother", which sounds a little distant in tone. The word "mum" also has several positive connotations in several cultures of the world, including: "tender care", "instinctive love", "provider", "gentleness", etc.

Both words are common nouns and are not the specific names that people normally bear. Yet in Okri's *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment*, they function as proper nouns, the personal names of some major characters in the novels. To emphasise their change of grammatical and semantic status, the author writes both words with their first letters in capitals, notably in the first novel. The diaphoric nature of these words is reflected at two levels of ambiguity.

First, common nouns are hereby employed by Okri to play a role normally reserved in English grammar for proper nouns. Secondly, even though these

words have several positive connotations, an atmosophere of aggression is introduced by the semantic implication of "protector" of their child or children. In performing their parental duties, many mums and dads could do virtually anything to protect their offspring. A good example would be the aggressiveness displayed by the mother hen in her bid to protect her brood. She could do all sorts of violence to anyone that threatens the security of her chicks. This quality is also displayed by mum when she goes to the policeman's house of ghosts to rescue her son Azaro. In essence, these names confer an archetypal or universal aura on the bearers, as if the author is inviting the reader to put him/herself in the character's space within the narratives.

Even more archetypal than the general names used by Okri are those characters that he leaves nameless. As mentioned in earlier chapters, the protagonists of "Worlds that Flourish", "What the Tapster Saw" and "Astonishing the Gods" are nameless characters. Semantically, therefore, they possess indeterminate signification, which is a feature of diaphoric terms. They also indirectly invite the reader to slot his name in their places in the narratives.

So far in this chapter, the diaphoric character of the key words in the typical mythic language has been analysed. The tentative conclusion is that mythical language goes beyond metaphor to embrace what Wheelwright calls diaphor. Diaphor is what confers universal or archetypal character on mythical language as it extends the normal connotation of metaphor to a variety of

man-related experiential elements. At this juncture, it is pertinent to examine the typical sentences found in expressive language and their semantic implications.

According to Wheelwright, "sentence" in the context of expressive language "is to be taken functionally rather than grammatically". It is interesting, however, that the functions identified by Wheelwright continue the ambivalence of diaphoric language. The first function is that an expressive sentence is simultaneously affirmative and interrogatory. The second function is that of demand and acceptance, while the third is commitment and stylisation (163). A logical summation of the typical mythical sentence that emerges from Wheelwright's analysis of expressive language is that its ambivalent nature makes it resistant to the kind of logical analysis that steno-language allows. This "illogicality" manifests in various ways.

First, it manifests in the violation of historical time by the mythical sentence. According to Wheelwright, myths have a conventional or formulaic opening which obviously dismantles the normal concept of time. Okpewho clarifies this notion with regards to the myths in the African oral tradition:

> ...perhaps the vast majority of tales, especially in Africa, do not make any pretence to specific time-schemes. They are set in the most undetermined periods, and are often introduced by phrases like 'Once upon a time' or 'In the olden days'. Such a time-scheme we may call 'mythic time', in the sense that the creative imagination of the narrator does not have any constraints or obligations whatever to a time-bound image. (14)

In other words, the typical mythical sentence cannot be analysed or understood from the perspective of normal historical time. Rather, the mythical sentence invites the reader to put his normal sense of discrete temporality in abeyance and subscribe, albeit temporarily, to the indeterminacy of mythic time. There are so many examples of such sentences in Okri's myths, but a few examples will suffice here.

The Famished Road opens with the statement: "In the beginning, there was a river" (1). "In the beginning" is an adverbial phrase of time which is curious in the sense that the time-scheme it signifies is indeterminate and there is no other lexical item in that sentence to suggest a specific date or time of day. The third sentence on the same page demonstrates the same feature of temporal indeterminacy in its opening statement, "In the land of beginnings..." Similar sentences are scattered all over Okri's works whenever he narrates a myth or refers to a mythic reality. For instance, the myth of the stomach starts with the popular mythic opening: "Once upon a time...there was a man without a stomach" (*The Famished Road* 80). The myth of the king of the road begins with: "Once upon a time...there was a giant whom they called the King of the Road" (*The Famished Road* 258). In the same vein, the myth of the invention of death opens with the sentence: "Once upon a time...human beings were happy and they lived for ever" (*Songs of Enchantment* 74) and "What the Tapster Saw" likewise begins with, "There was once an excellent Tapster..." (183). The deliberate disconnection of historical time and consequent enforcement of mythic time is a common denominator in the above sentences. This factor is a feature of

expressive language which renders the mythical sentence somehow illogical because time seems to be suspended indefinitely in mythic language.

Besides time, the mythical sentence appears illogical because its transcendental reference often conflicts with the normal logic of every day reality. For instance, this sentence occurs in "Worlds that Flourished": "At the entrance there were two palm trees growing upside down" (25). Structurally, this sentence is perfect, but is semantically illogical. This illogicality resides in the closing adverbial "upside down" which conflicts with the way "palm trees" normally "grow" in reality. In other words, the verb "grow" normally subsumes an upward direction and so would naturally collocate with an adverb/adverbial phrase indicating an upward movement. But the sentence above jars the reader's sensibilities because the phrase that collocates with "grow" violates the norm.

Similar sentences from the same story include: "Some of the people of the village had their feet facing backwards" and "Some people came out of Tree-trunks" ("Worlds that Flourish" 28). In the first sentence, "backwards" cannot collocate with "feet facing" because the logic of reality demands that feet should be facing "forwards". In the second sentence, the illogicality inheres in "tree-trunks". Normal logic expects people to come out of a "house" or some other sensible places, not a tree-trunk. Only animals like squirrels, owls or bats are expected to reside in tree-trunks and so can come out of them. The same illogicality is obvious in the following sentence: "The turtles broke a kola nut, divided it amongst themselves, and discussed gravely like scholars without a text" ("What the Tapster Saw" 192). Turtles are animals but the actions ascribed to

them in the above sentence are contrary to their nature. Only human beings are logically capable of "breaking kola nut" or "discussing gravely". Ascribing such normally human actions to these animals is evidently illogical.

Aside from violating historical time and employing "illogical" sentences, mythic language is also imagery-laden. That is to say, it is the kind of language in which figures of speech and other tropes that enhance "maximum fullness" in expression abound (Wheelwright 157). Generally, mythic language is allusive. As mentioned earlier, the myth of the invention of death is a retelling of another Yoruba myth narrated in Tutuola's *Palm Wine Drinkerd.* At another level of interpretation, the myth of the invention of death alludes to the Christian salvation story in which death is incarnated because of man's sin (murder as a result of greed), necessitating the birth and sacrifice of a saviour symbolised by the little blue bird who killed death with love. The myth of the King of the Road is an allusion to Ogun, the Yoruba god of iron and war. The title of Okri's major work, *The Famished Road*, is an allusion and a parody of Soyinka's poem,"Death in the Dawn" and his play, "*The Road*".

Apart from allusion, mythic language is replete with symbolism and metaphors. Earlier in this study, we have mentioned the symbolism of Madame Koto as the whore of the apocalypse, the symbolism of the Masquerade as the Beast of the book of Revelation and the Blind Old Man as symbolic of the False Prophet, also in Revelation. We have also analysed the metaphoric significance of abiku with regards to the Nigerian nation, Azaro as

a metaphor for Nigeria and the malevolent spirits - spirit-with-three-heads, spirit-with-seven-heads, spirit in white suit, the King of the Road, Yellow Jaguar and other miscellaneous spirits - as metaphors for the heartless, greedy and cruel leaders of the nation. The symbolism of Dad as a combination of Christ-like essence and the uncontrollable raw energy of Ogun has also been commented upon in the chapter on characterisation.

A logical corollary of the exuberance of figurative expressions in mythic language is that it is more poetic than realistic language. Even though Okri's works are written in prose, many passages dealing with mythic interventions often read like a poem. An example is the following excerpt describing the flawless beauty of the square in the city of the Invisibles:

> Lost in wonder, he stared at the white harmonic buildings round the square. He noticed their pure angles, their angelic buttresses, and their columns of gleaming marble. He inhaled the fragrance of childhood, of sweet yellow melodies, and of ripening mangoes. (*Astonishing the Gods* 7)

The above extract has a poetic rhythm made possible by parallelism. It has a number of phrases that have similar structures: "the white buildings…their pure angles…their angelic buttresses…their columns of gleaming marble". Each is a noun phrase. With the exception of the last phrase, each is made up of three words comprising two modifiers and the head noun. The last phrase has five words and a modifier-noun-qualifier structure. Nevertheless, it "rhymes" with the other structures in a number of ways. The voiced dental fricative is repeated in "the" and "their" in all the phrases and the same

centering diphthong is repeated in "their", which is found in all the phrases except the first. Poetic rhythm in the second sentence is also enforced by the same device. There is parallelism in the structure of the following phrases: "...of childhood...of sweet yellow melodies...of ripening mangoes." The repetition of "of" at the beginning of each phrase enforces a "rhyme" pattern on the sentence. Besides rhythm and repetition of the same vowel sounds, the adjectives used to describe the nouns appeal to no less than three out of the reader's sensory faculties. The colour adjectives, "white", "gleaming", "yellow" - appeal to the reader's visual faculty. The adjective "harmonic" appeals to the reader's hearing faculty. Finally, "sweet" and "ripening" appeal to the reader's sense of taste. To crown it all, the adjectival "angelic" is also a metaphor, indirectly comparing the shape of the buttresses to the perfection of angels.

In sum, mythic language is poetic, ambivalent and manifests an irrational logic in its sentence patterns. This is the most appropriate language for myth which by its nature is poetic, irrational by normal standard and indirectly related to reality through metaphorical reference.

5.3 REALISTIC LANGUAGE IN OKRI'S PROSE FICTION

According to Watt, the language of art forms predating the novel followed the rule of Decorum, which meant that language in such art forms "was not primarily concerned with the correspondence of words to things, but rather with the extrinsic beauties which could be bestowed upon description and action by the use

of rhetoric" (30). In other words, the language of the romance, the epic, drama and poetry did not primarily set out to describe reality as it is but simply to beautify or decorate the art form. In contrast, the primary function of language in the novel is largely referential, which means that "the writer's exclusive aim is to make the words bring his object home to us in all its concrete particularity" (Watt 32).

The practical working out of the referentiality in the language of realistic fiction is that the narrative is composed in prose which does not go beyond descriptive and denotative use of language (Watt 31). Three areas stand out in the bid to assess Okri's realistic language. First, the prose must satisfy the criterion of descriptive and denotative use of language. Second, there must be the provision of exhaustive details of the objects, places and events being described in such a way that they are particularised in the mind of the reader without any attempt at beautification or adornment. The third area of assessment is the naturalness of the language of the narrator, most especially when the author hides behind the persona of a character in the story. These three areas constitute the yardstick against which Okri's use of realistic language will be measured.

A perusal of Okri's novels shows that his prose is largely denotative, most especially, in *Flowers and Shadows*, *The Landscapes Within*, *Dangerous Love*, and "In the City of Red Dust". In line with the canons of realism, the language in these works mostly describe without straining at beautification and ornamentation. The following extract from"In the City of Red Dust" demonstrates this assertion:

> Emokhai left the pools office and went to their favourite bar two streets away. When he pushed aside the red yellow strips of curtain the noise in the bar assaulted him. The place was crowded. All the benches were occupied, there was practically no space to stand, and the air was full of flies. The clamour of voices rose to him. At the bar the manager was having a furious argument with three prostitutes and a truck pusher. Hi-life music blared from the loudspeakers. Everywhere the clientele were arguing about the governor's real age, about if he had been a good leader, or whether he was merely another thief in office who had not yet been exposed. (39-40)

Undoubtedly, the prose in the above extract is largely denotatative. Its primary purpose is to convey to the reader a conventional bar scene at peak period with all the hustle and bustle that such a scene normally entails. No attempt is made by the author to decorate his prose by using any figure of speech, neither is any object or person painted with a flourish. In essence, the language in the extract can be referred to as "transparent" in the sense that it does not call any attention to itself.but allows the reader to, as it were, "see the bar scene through it". Thus, it has satisfied the demand of "referentiality" in realistic language. Many passages in Okri's works follow this pattern. Even in the most "mythical" of his works, *The Famished Road* series, contain many passages of denotative prose.

The second criterion of referentiality in realistic language is that the author is under obligation to provide exhaustive description, still using denotative language, of the people, places, events and objects that he describes. To a large extent, Okri's language subscribes to this canon of realism as the above extract shows. However, when Okri's works are compared to that of the early realists,

Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe,* for example, it would be obvious that he does not always satisfy this criterion fully in his prose fiction. If Defoe were to render the bar scene above, he would have been much more exhaustive in his description, providing minute details about the benches, the serving glassware, the dressing, speech pattern and voice quality of the clientele, etc. That bar scene alone would have run into pages in the hand of the master realist, Defoe. Nonetheless, Okri's description in his works is adequate enough to particularise his objects, places, characters and events in the reader's mind.

The last consideration of referentiality has to do with the narrative voice and the apropriateness of the dialogue ascribed to characters. Generally, in his earlier works and the short stories, Okri adopted the omniscient point of view. The narrative language can, therefore, be assumed to be his and falls within the range of his age and exposure to the English language prior to and at the time of writing. Okri was no more than twenty-two at the time of writing *Flowers and Shadows* and *The Landscapes Within*. His vocabulary and sentence structure though advanced for his age and educational attainment at the time cannot be compared to the exuberance and complexity of his vocabulary and syntax in some of the short stories, in *Dangerous Love* and *Astonishing the Gods* which he wrote when he was much older and had lived in England for many years.

In *The Famished Road, Songs of Enchantment* and some of the short stories, Okri hides behind some characters to narrate his stories. This is an area of interest in terms of language use. The question that comes to mind is: how realistic is the language assigned to these character-narrators by the author? The

most problematic in this respect is Azaro, the boy-narrator of the two novels above. Azaro is age-wise just a boy, not up to thirteen in both novels. The poverty of his parents, the social cataclysms in his society and the incessant spiritual interruptions of his spirit-companions in the course of his life ensure that he does not acquire a sound formal education. Yet the author assigns to this half-educated boy a vocabulary and syntactic competence that far exceed that of an English graduate of several decades. How did a boy of Azaro's limited educational attainment acquire a vocabulary that includes such rare words as: "affinity", "aquamarine", "fauns", "sibyls", "benign sprites", "mythology", "hallucinations" (*The Famished Road* 4)? In short, how realistic is the language assigned to Azaro by Okri given his age and exposure to formal education?

The stance of this study is that Azaro's language is very realistic, but only in the context of his mythic characterisation. As a spirit-child, he has access to unlimited knowledge which he can tap into at will. The unstated psychological assumption, therefore, is that Azaro as narrator taps from the store of endless linguistic competence available to all spirit-children in the spirit realm in narrating the novels. Secondly, having been in the world four times before his current incarnation and possessing clear memory of his former lives, it stands to reason that whatever formal education he may have had in his former lives is always available to him in his current incarnation.

It could be argued, in contrast, that if he had been to Dad and Mum five times and they had always been poor, then he couldn't have garnered much formal education in all his incarnations. This argument is not all that tenable

because the evidence Azaro gives us is that he has been born five times to Mum, but implies that he may have been born to other mothers many more times before afflicting Mum with his presence (*The Famished Road* 5). The bottomline is that the language that Okri ascribes to Azaro is realistic in the light of his spirit-child propensity.

The last criterion for measuring realistic language in Okri's prose fiction is the dialogue assigned to each character. Going through his works, one discovers that he often uses the language spoken by his characters to indicate their social status, level of education, etc. As mentioned earlier when analysing Okri's realistic characterisation, the coarse language of the prostitutes in *The Famished Road* reflects their ignoble profession and social status. There is a preponderance of four-letter words such as "cunt", "fuck", "anus" and "shit" in their dialogue (294). In *Flowers and Shadows* drivers, guards, policemen and rank and file soldiers speak in pidgin. For instance, the "watchday" tells Jeffia: "Welcome, O Oga. Today be like fire" (3). Jeffia responds in Standard English, which reflects his educated status and social standing. In short, Okri often uses varieties of language to distinguish his characters and thereby makes his works realistic.

5.4 THE INTERMINGLING OF MYTHIC AND REALISTIC LANGUAGE

The analysis above may have created the impression that Okri uses realistic language in some of his works and mythic language in others. Such a conclusion is not entirely right. Generally, Okri uses realistic language in the first

two novels and some of his short stories. However, in *The Famished Road, Songs of Enchantment, Astonishing the Gods*, "Worlds that Flourish", "Stars of the New Curfew", "When the Lights Return" and "What the Tapster Saw" Okri deliberately mingles mythic language with realistic language. Sometimes, these two "languages" flow frictionlessly into each other within the same paragraph as in the extract below:

> All the lights in the houses along our street were off but I knew that no one was asleep. I knew it because there were no dreams floating about in that moon-dominated air. Usually dreams floated from their dreamers and entered the minds of other sleeping forms. Sometimes dreams were transferred from one person to another. I remember once entering the dream of the carpenter's wife, who was encoiled round the solid post of her husband, and who was dreaming the dreams of the tailor across the road who found himself in a land of birds and who had been asked to sew the cloth of leaves into one vast garment that could make the earth more beautiful.
>
> (*Songs of Enchantment* 255)

In the extract above, Okri starts from realistic language, but switches rapidly in the second sentence to mythic language. Such intermingling of mythic and realistic language is characteristic of Okri's latter works.

5. 5 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the intermingling of mythic and realistic language in Okri's works is an apt linguistic representation of Okri's aesthetic vision that life is not always logical and the best way to represent this ambivalence that is life is by deliberately interweaving the realistic and the mythic in his prose fiction. His

linguistic experiments, therefore, buttress his aestheitic vision that myth and realism need not be mutually exclusive but can cooperate in the creation of great works of art.

CHAPTER SIX

OKRI AND EARLIER WRITERS: CONVERGENCES AND DIVERGENCES

6. 1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on the inter-textual links between Okri's works and those of other writers with the ultimate aim of analysing the recurrent themes or motifs in these works and assessing how they contribute to Okri's aesthetic vision. Specifically, this chapter examines how certain myths that are found in other texts and the African oral tradition have been used by Okri to project his own vision of life to the reader. No doubt, there are points of agreement and disagreement between Okri's use of these elements, their use in the oral tradition, and in texts by other writers, but of more importance to this study is the analysis of how they have been made to bear the weight of Okri's unique message to modern man, especially the oppressed. Two myths stand out in this respect: the abiku myth and the myth of the road. Both myths form the kernel of the exegetical preoccupation of this chapter.

6. 2 THE ABIKU MYTH

The traditional origin of the abiku myth has been explained in chapter three of this study. Many critics including Fraser, Ogunsanwo and Quayson, have highlighted the use of the abiku myth by Okri in his prose fiction. Some of them have also pointed out the differences between Okri's deployment of the myth and

the traditional perception and depiction of the spirit-child in the Yoruba/African oral tradition and in other texts by earlier writers.

The phenomenon of intractable beings that operate outside the pale of societal laws and mores is not unique to Nigerian literature or cultures. In fact, every society in the world has its stock of ghost stories and myths relating the activities of the supernatural or the quasi-supernatural. In Nigerian literature, the concept of the spirit-child is quite prevalent. They are popularly called abiku (born-to-die children), but the spirit-child concept is also associated with children whose predilection for un-childlike antics and disruptive behaviour is quite obvious.

These part-human, part-spirit beings are often depicted as harbingers of societal doom or filial disruption in their immediate families. However, Okri's depiction of the spirit-child is a paradigm shift in Nigerian literature as it represents a metamorphosis of spirit-children from their usual perception and depiction as agents of societal cacophony and sorrow to their acquisition of a stature approaching the messianic.

Before delving into the task at hand, however, a re-definition of some of the terms employed in this chapter is mandatory. In literary circles, the word "spirit-child" is usually associated with the abiku phenomenon. This is the sense in which a writer such as Okri uses it in *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment.* Azaro, the protagonist-narrator, for instance, asserts that: "We made vows in fields of intense flowers and the sweet-tasting moonlight of the

world. Those of us who made such vows were known among the Living as *abiku,* spirit-children" (*The Famished Road* 4).

The translation of "abiku" as "spirit-children" has over the years crept into critical parlance and has apparently achieved a measure of acceptance. Critics such as Garuba (1993), Otu (1993) Moh (2001), Griffiths (2000) and Fraser (2003) have endorsed the translation and interpretation of "abiku" as "spirit-child". This is evident in the preponderance of the word in their critical appraisal of Okri's works and those of other writers who have utilized the abiku motif as the central organizing principle in their works.

In this study, however, the term "spirit-children" is being used to cover other "unusual" children besides the "abiku," which in Yoruba means "children born to die again and again". The Yoruba, for instance, call some children "Mo gbonju ba" or "Child-Wiser-Than-His-Father" (Moore 180). Fagunwa's "Ajantala", Tutuola's "Zurrjir" and Soyinka's "Half-child" fit neatly into this category of spirit-children. Even though it can be argued that all these "strange" children are clones of the abiku, it is vital to highlight the semantic differences right from the onset. In the context of this study, therefore, the word "spirit-children" refers to all these "unusual" children as well as the common term, abiku.

Ajantala, Fagunwa's creation in *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmole* is the first spirit-child under consideration in this study. The novel, written in Yoruba, describes the journey of some brave hunters on a mission to Langbodo on behalf

of their town. The Ajantala story is embedded in the main story, and it relates the story of an unusual child who starts to speak the very moment he is born:

> Ah! So this is how the world is! Why did I come? I didn't know this was how bad the world is! I thought it would be glittering like heaven. Ah! Look at gullies, see those hills, look at animal droppings all over the town! See dirt in homes. I'm done for. I will soon go back. (*Ogboju Ode* 76, my translation)

After this speech, the strange child takes a bath, eats a meal meant for three normal adults, and comes out crying of acute hunger. From that day, he becomes a burden to his parents, eating them out of house and home, beating up whoever opposes him in any form, including a supposedly powerful diviner, a *babalawo* who had earlier boasted all over the town that he would deal with Ajantala. The diviner it is who first identifies Ajantala as "ayorunbo", another Yoruba name for abiku, meaning "He-who-goes-to-Heaven-and-back" or "He-who-frequents-heaven-and-earth."

Eventually, Ajantala's mother abandons him in a forest, where he joins the society of some animals: the elephant, the lion, the hyena, the tiger and the goat. These animals have been living communally and peacefully until Ajantala joins them and shatters their peace and harmony. In the end, he cannot fit into any earthly community, human or animal. So God has no other choice but to recall him to heaven.

Ajantala is no doubt a spirit-child judging by his "un-childlike" behaviour, his unusual feats of strength, his unfettered cruelty and cunning. He is depicted in the novel as an agent of disruption, a force of cacophony in an otherwise peaceful

community. Fagunwa creates the picture of a human society which has evolved a stable and harmonious system of social relations which the intractable Ajantala disrupts because he cannot fit into it. At one level of signification, it could be averred that Ajantala's atavistic proclivities are manifestations of his disappointment at the filthy and disorganized state of the world in comparison to the paradise from which he came. Interestingly, this is the same type of social environment which engenders abiku in Okri's prose fiction and in Nigeria. But instead of using his unusual knowledge and strength to change the society for the better, Ajantala decides from the point of birth to go back as soon as possible. His depiction, therefore, is the stereotype of a spirit-child who only brings sorrow and discord to the community, even though the seeds of joy and societal advancement are in him/her. In the context of the story, the boon which the hunters win at the end of their dangerous sojourn is the knowledge that love is the only panacea for the healing and growth of their town. It is this love that Ajantala lacks; hence, his anti-social behaviour.

Tutuola's Zurrjir, "a son who would change himself into another thing very soon" (*The Palm-Wine Drinkard* 32) is Ajantala's soul mate. In Tutuola's narrative, the protagonist embarks on a journey to Deads town to bring back his deceased tapster. He has many adventures on the way, including his rescue of a lady from the hole of the demonic skull who masquerades as a beautiful man (23-30). He marries the lady and after three years, his wife gives birth to a spirit-child in an unusual way.

> When I completed three and a half years in that town, I noticed that the left hand thumb of my wife was

> swelling out as if it was a buoy, but it did not pain her. One day, she followed me to the farm in which I was tapping the palm-wine, and to my surprise when the thumb that swelled out touched a palm-tree thorn, the thumb bust out suddenly and there we saw a male child came out of it and at the same time that the child came out from the thumb, he began to talk to us as if he was ten years of age. (31)

An obvious affinity between Ajantala and this spirit-child is that both start to speak immediately they are born. Both also display an insatiable appetite for food and evil. Like Ajantala, Zurrjir eats also his parents out of house, and fights everyone in the town. Even when he is reduced by fire to a half-child, he continues to oppress his parents until they are delivered through the *deux ex machina* of the allegorical Drum, Song and Dance (40). The Half-Child enters the town of the three entertainers and is never seen again.

Undoubtedly, Zurrjir is a clone of Ajantala and, like him, is depicted as an agent of societal disruption. His demonic inclinations are borne out of an emotional deficiency; he finds it impossible to love his fellow men, not even his parents. Consequently, he cannot relate harmoniously to them. Even though this moral is never explicitly stated in the story, Tutuola cleverly leaves it to the reader to arrive at it. The author's intention notwithstanding, his depiction of this character is apparently that of a rebel without a cause, a being who takes a masochistic joy in inflicting pain on others and disrupting societal serenity and orderliness. The next time we meet Zurrjir in Nigerian literature is in the garb of the Half-child in Soyinka's Independence play, *A Dance of the Forest*, in which

he represents a future constantly plagued with danger from conflicting interest groups or tribes (Jones 69-70).

Having explored the depiction and transmutation of the not-so-popular spirit-children in Nigerian literature, this study now beams its investigative searchlight on the notorious abiku. As explained earlier in this study, the abiku myth is a Yoruba origin myth narrating and explaining the unusual phenomenon of children born to die again and again to the same mother. A version of the myth exists amongst the Ijaws, and the Igbo refer to the abiku as ogbanje.

The Igbo treat the ogbanje the same way the Yoruba treat the abiku. When a family notices that a woman is afflicted by the ogbanje (abiku) spirit, they immediately consult the dibia or diviner for a solution to the problem. In *Things Fall Apart*, Ekwefi gives birth to ten children, nine of whom die before the age of three. So:

> After the death of Ekweffi's second child, Okonkwo had gone to a medicine man, who was also a diviner of the Afa Oracle, to inquire what was amiss. This man told him that the child was an *ogbanje*, one of those wicked children who, when they died, entered their mother's wombs to be born again.
> (*Things Fall Apart* 74)

As Daramola and Jeje state, however, very few traditional doctors can prevent the spirit-child from dying. They can only succeed if they persuade or coerce the spirit-child to reveal where he/she has hidden his/her secret power objects, the "special tokens" whose recovery will automatically sever the link between the spirit-child and his/her spirit-companions. In Achebe's classic, the first set of diviners who attempts to stop the ogbanje from haunting Ekwefi fails,

but Okagbue manages to coax the information out of her. The narrator says Ekwefi and the community believe that Ezinma, Ekwefi's tenth child, will live because "a year ago or so a medicine man had dug up Ezinma's *iyi-uwa"* (*Things Fall Apart* 76-77). Her *iyi-uwa* turns out to be a smooth pebble wrapped in a dirty rag that had been buried near an orange tree.

In *The Famished Road*, Dad and Mum are told by a herbalist to perform a special ceremony to recover Azaro's special tokens, thereby "earthing" his limbs. Unfortunately, they are too poor to afford the sacrificial elements demanded, and the spirit-child proves too crafty for the diviner. Azaro declares after his first brush with death:

> I learnt that I exhausted the energy and finances of my parents. I also learnt that a herbalist had been summoned. He confessed to not being able to do anything about my condition..... He added that, if I recovered, my parents should immediately perform a ceremony that would sever my connections with the spirit world.... When I recovered, however, my parents had already spent too much money on me. They were in debt.... And so time passed and the ceremony was never performed. (8-9)

As earlier stated in chapter two, the second option open to the parents of an abiku is to "woo" the child to stay by giving him/her endearing names to indicate their special love for him and the hope that he/she will live out his current incarnation. "Azaro" is a sweet name. Similarly, Ekweffi's second child is named Onwumbiko – "Death, I implore you" (*Things Fall Apart* 74).

Repeated visits of an abiku child to the same parents eventually attract mutilation of the corpse even amongst the Igbo of South East Nigeria. In *Things Fall Apart*, Onwubiko's corpse is subjected to such treatment.

> The medicine man then ordered that there should be no mourning for the dead child. He brought out a sharp razor from the goatskin bag slung from his left shoulder and began to mutilate the child. Then he took it away to bury in the Evil Forest, holding it by the ankle and dragging it on the ground behind him. (*Things Fall Apart* 75)

Clark-Bekederemo's abiku is also known by such marks. The poet declares:

> We know the knife scars
> Serrating down your back and front
> Like beak of the sword-fish,
> And both your ears, notched
> As a bondsman to this house
> Are all relics of your first comings.
> (Clark-Bekederemo 61)

On his part, Soyinka's unrepentant abiku taunts his parents with these marks, saying:

> So when the snail is burnt in his shell
> Whet the heated fragment, brand me
> Deeply on the breast. You must know him
> When Abiku calls again. (Soyinka 62)

The lives of all the abiku under analysis also fit the traditional perception of the spirit-child as a liminal figure, a boundary personality that is forever commuting between this world and that of the spirits. For instance, Azaro's life and self-declarations fit the picture of an abiku painted in the Yoruba myth. The boy-hero/narrator confesses to several births and deaths:

> How many times had I come and gone through the dreaded gate? How many times had I been born and

> died young? And how often to the same parents? I had no idea. So much of the dust of the living was in me. (*The Famished Road* 5)

Clark-Bekederemo makes virtually the same claim in his abiku when the poet persona, a concerned relation, most likely, accuses the spirit-child of "Coming and going these several seasons" (Clark-Bekederemo 61). Soyinka's rather boastful abiku also speaks in the same vein: "I am Abiku, calling for the first/And the repeated time" (Soyinka 62). In *Things Fall Apart*, Ezinma, Okonkwo's daughter is declared an ogbanje who has frequented Ekwefi's womb nine times before she is stopped by Okagbue the diviner through the discovery and recovery of her *iyi-uwa*.

The Yoruba myth goes ahead to depict abiku as heartless children who delight, perhaps revel, in bringing sorrow and ruin into a home. This is the way Achebe depicts Ezinma in *Things Fall Apart*. Ade, another abiku in Okri's *The Famished Road*, is also depicted this way. His father has searched for him all night long before finally tracking him down to Azaro's parents' home at dawn. Instead of showing remorse for giving his father unnecessary heartache all through the night, Ade is pitiless:

> Ade, standing at the window, seemed radiant with the glow of his father's temper. He did not appear repentant or even rebellious .... There was something cruel about my friend's spirit and I understood why spirit-children are so feared .... Ade did not want to stay any more, he did not like the weight of the world, the terror of the earth's time.
> (*The Famished Road* 485-6)

Clark-Bekederemo also depicts his abiku as a heartless being who has no pity for his/her mother's tired body, "her milk going sour" and the fact that his/her to-ing and fro-ing prevent "normal" children from coming to "gladden the heart" of the mother (61). Soyinka's abiku betrays his/her heartlessness when s/he mocks the parents' efforts to chain him/her to *terra firma* through sacrifices: "In vain your bangles cast/Charmed circles at my feet/….Must I weep for goats and cowries/For palm oil and the sprinkled ash?" (62) He later declares: "Mothers! I'll be the/ Suppliant snake coiled on the doorstep/Yours the killing cry" (63).

In consonance with the traditional myth, all the abiku under consideration confirm that a pact exists between them and their spirit-companions. In Clark-Bekederemo's poem, this pact is implied in the poet's plea that the abiku should "Follow where you please your kindred spirit/If indoors is not enough for you." Soyinka's abiku says the same thing in figurative, almost incantatory, language when he boasts that so long as yams do not sprout in amulets, his limbs cannot be chained to the earth. He even advises his parents to "dig me deeper still into/The god's swollen foot" the next time he dies.

Okri's Azaro also confirms that they had to make "pacts that we would return to the spirit world at the first opportunity" (*The Famished Road* 4). The pacts are binding, and violators are haunted by their spirit-companions until they return to the spirit world. The life of Azaro reflects the hazards that beset spirit-children who break their pacts (*The Famished Road* 8).

Socially, the abiku myth is used by different authors to address the ills in contemporary society. At the political front, the "abiku politicians" do not fashion

or implement policies that will improve the lot of the average Nigerians but concentrate on issues that keep the people divided (Eruvbetine 27). Their goal is that of the erstwhile colonial masters: divide and rule. They divert people's attention from their debilitating penury by springing the bogey of ethnic dominance, and fanning the embers of disunity. They instigated the Nigerian civil war and are the sole beneficiaries. They also created the current ethnic militias which are a constant threat to the stability of the polity. In this respect, Oodua Peoples' Congress (OPC), Egbesu Boys, Bakassi Boys, Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF) and Dokubo Asari's riverine militia are all tools in the hands of the political abiku.

On the economic front, the abiku looters "put in their coffers wealth meant for the economic development of the nation and its peoples." (Eruvbetine 29). Agricultural and mineral resources are misappropriated; even the on-going privatisation of public enterprises favours only those abiku-looters and their "kindred spirits" in all ethic groups and abroad. Eruvbetine adds:

> … the looters access and take over the Nigerian economic web (the world of the living), either as native or foreign Abikus. They rob the masses (many fingers) of their resources and cart them away to the Western world (abode of spirits), destabilizing the national economy.… The looters and their all-too-willing economic theorists have perfected economic schemes for manipulating the economic indicators to advance their self-seeking design without the people being in a position to call them to order. They present Abiku budgets made by Abiku economists, containing the same platitudes, policies, projects and assertions about a future prosperity, giving hope to all in a supposed new beginning. (33)

The activities of these Abiku politicians are no less destructive on the religious plane as they are in the political, economic and social realms. Ideally, religion should foster harmonious relationships and love amongst people of diverse ethnic groups. But the contrary is the norm in Nigeria as Abiku politicians encourage religious bigotry whenever their political fiefdoms are threatened (Eruvbetine 35).

The portrait of the spirit-child that emerges so far in the course of this analysis is dark and evil. Whether as Ajantala, Zurrjir, Half-Child, Ezinma, Ade or plain abiku, the depiction of the spirit-child in these texts reflects their traditional perception as agents of societal disruption, filial disappointment and sorrow. In other words, in spite of the placatory, cynical, angry or boastful tone adopted by earlier writers, their portrayal of the spirit-child in their works follows the prescriptions of the traditional myth of the abiku. At least one of them, Achebe, also validates the traditional power structure by making a diviner extract Ezinma's *iyi-uwa* from the place she had hidden it, thus chaining her to the earth in her tenth incarnation.

However, Okri re-works this same myth to create a positive image for the spirit-child. His Azaro is depicted as an abiku with a human heart. He denies the charge of atavistic devilry and proclivity for breaking hearts often levelled against all abiku. According to him, none of the abiku "looked forward to being born" and, "Each new birth was agony for us too, each shock of the raw world" (*The Famished Road* 6).

More harrowing to the spirit-children, says Azaro, is the hatred they incur in the world of men and in the spirit world because of their inconstant nature:

> Our cyclical rebellion made us resented by other spirits and ancestors. Disliked in the spirit world and branded amongst the Living, our unwillingness to stay affected all kinds of balances. (*The Famished Road* 5)

The abiku world described by Azaro in *The Famished Road* is an enchanting one. It is a world in which suffering is unknown and stress is foreign. It is a world in which "there was much feasting" (3), where spirit-children play with "fauns", "fairies", "tender sibyls" and "benign sprites". It is a world bathed by the radiance of "diverse rainbows," a world of grasslands and magic caves where spirit-children "meditate on sunlight and precious stones" and are "joyful in the eternal dew of the spirit" (5). It is also a world with fields of intense flowers and "sweet-tasting moonlight" (4). As pointed out in chapters two and three, this abiku world represents a sought-after paradise, a veritable Garden of Eden in the beauty of its unalloyed perfection.

In contrast to the orderliness and love in the abiku spirit world, human society in *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment* is replete with oppression, poverty, squalor and hopelessness. To reiterate, this is the state of the world which offends Ajantala at birth, making him to decide not to stay long in the world.

It is instructive that in spite of the beauty, orderliness and joy in the spirit world, Azaro decides to stay in this incarnation and risk the wrath of his spirit-companions. He says his decision

> … wasn't because of the sacrifices, the burnt offerings of oils and yams and palm-nuts, or the blandishments, the short-lived promises of special treatment, or even because of the grief I had caused. It wasn't because of my horror of recognition either.… It may simply have been that I had grown tired of coming and going. It is terrible to forever remain in-between. But I sometimes think it was a face that made me want to stay. I wanted to make happy the bruised face of the woman who would become my mother. (*The Famished Road* 5)

Love, then, is what eventually motivates Okri's abiku to live out his current incarnation in violation of his pact with his spirit-companions. As the symbolic level, Azaro is a type of the nation, Nigeria, which he describes as an abiku nation.

> …. ours too was an abiku nation, a spirit-child nation, one that keeps being reborn and after each birth come blood and betrayals, and the child of our will refuses to stay till we have made propitious sacrifice and displayed our serious intent to bear the weight of a unique destiny. (494)

Okri's message is clear: if love is the only thing that can make an abiku child stay, love among the different tribes making up the country is all that is needed to make Nigeria great. That is the only panacea to all our teeming problems of nationhood and being. At the symbolic level, therefore, Azaro, Okri's abiku protagonist-narrator in *The Famished Road*, is a source of hope for national cohesion, integration and greatness through inter-personal love.

In sum, this analysis shows that, while Okri's use of the abiku motif conforms in several parts with the usual depiction of the abiku in other works of literature, his abiku represents a gradual shift from the traditional perception of

the spirit-child as harbingers of disruption and sorrow to icons of potential cohesion and national healing. Ogunsanwo also observes that Okri's use of the abiku motif is different from the way other writers have used the same literary element in terms of setting and aesthetic project. According to him:

> In the hands of Fagunwa and Tutuola, the folktale events take place in the traditional setting of abiku narratives, in 'terra incognita': the evil forest, the bad bush. Here was the home of chaos, where random spirits without name or history of bizarre forms and malignant intent were to be found.... However, spirits and demons are believed to inhabit our terrestrial realm and to interact with us in our mundane existence, though they are visible only to people who have extraordinary consciousness or the sixth sense. In *The Famished Road* [*Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches*], there is no separation. In fact, the worlds are inextricably interwoven.... (46)

Ogunsanwo admits the differences in the tones of Soyinka's abiku, which is cynical and recalcitrant, and that of Clark-Bekederemo's abiku whose tone is supplicating and placatory. Nonetheless, he regards both poems as being reflective of the traditional perception of the devilish nature of the abiku. He says:

> However deconstructive Soyinka's stance may be in general towards African myths, the poem does not attempt to show any contradictory elements in the abiku myth in a way that will make any incompatible meaning become indubitably irreconcilable, as it is rather mocking than analytical. In this particular case, there is really no irrationality, since the Yoruba people believe in the efficacy of rituals to re-order strange and unpleasant happenings in human life. It is part of their attempt to control chaos and disorder in the universe, and through experience they have cause to cherish this belief. Thus, J.P. Clark's 'abiku' has an appropriate incantatory tone that captures the essence of such propitiatory rituals. (Ogunsanwo 47)

In short, neither Soyinka's abiku nor Clark-Bekederemo's departs from the general negative perception of the abiku. Ogunsanwo concludes that Okri's abiku is a marked difference from Soyinka's or Clark-Bekederemo's abiku in the aesthetic project they have been made to serve:

> In both Soyinka's and Clark's poems, the abiku is sadistic. But Okri's abiku chooses to remain with his parents because of his compassion for his mother, in particular, despite tremendous pressure from his kindred spirits. (47)

In other words, Okri's abiku is a pointer to an optimistic future because of his compassion and decision to stay with his parents. This decision is symbolic of Okri's social vision that Nigeria will one day overcome its crises of existence and achieve greatness in the comity of nations.

6. 3 THE MYTH OF THE ROAD

In many cultures, the road acquires a mythical signification which ascribes to it the parallel of life itself. In chapter two, the analysis of the myth of the road as symbolic of the Nigerian nation or Nigerian/African history buttresses the perception of the road as a symbol of the journey of life. Earlier writers have used the road motif in their works, but this study concentrates on Soyinka's use of the road in his works, especially his poem, "Death in the Dawn", because the title of Okri's award-winning novel, *The Famished Road*, is generally believed to have been taken from it. The analysis becomes more interesting when Soyinka's road is contrasted with Okri's road.

Soyinka's poem is an artistic re-creation of an accident he witnessed one morning. In it an unnamed traveller is advised to set out at dawn and "wipe your feet upon/The dog-nose wetness of the earth" (2-3). The poem includes a translation of a Yoruba prayer usually offered when a loved one is going on a journey: "O ni rin l'ojo ebi npa ona" (May you never travel on the day the road is hungry, presumably for human sacrifice). Soyinka renders this prayer poetically:

> And the mother prayed, Child
> May you never walk
> When the road waits, famished. (22-24)

Earlier in the poem, a sacrifice is made, presumably to Ogun, the Yoruba god of all who ply the road, in the form of a cock's death. The killing of the cock by a car is traditionally regarded as a symbolic substitution for the death of any man travelling on the road that day. It is an assurance that the sojourner would not be involved in any accident and so the above prayer would be effective in warding off the evil plans which Ogun the god of the roads may have for that day. However, the cock's sacrifice "proved/ A futile rite" as the traveller still had a fatal accident and loses his life in consequence:

> But such another wraith! Brother,
> Silenced in the startled hug of
> Your invention – is this mocked grimace
> This closed contortion – I? (31-34)

The fact that Okri's road is a parody of Soyinka's is easily discernible. The title of his book is obviously taken from this poem. In *The Famished Road*, Madame Koto makes this clear in her prayer for Azaro at a party held by his parents to celebrate his resurrection from death: "The road will never swallow

you. The river of your destiny will always overcome evil" (46). The two key symbols in Koto's prayer, river and road, are embedded in the title of Okri's book. Both can also be found in Soyinka's play, *The Road* (1965), where Professor remarks after seeing a traffic accident: "When the road is dry it runs into the river. But the river? When the river is parched what choice but this?" Samson, another character in the play, later offers the same prayer: "May we never walk when the road waits, famished." These references show that Okri's road echoes Soyinka's concept of the road.

However, the differences between the two types of roads are also obvious. To Ogunsanwo:

> While Soyinka's poem concentrates on a car journey between two places so as to explode the myth underlying rituals meant to prevent road accidents, the novel presents the road motif in the form of a perilous journey of life in all its moral, psychological, and social ramifications.... Most importantly, while the road kills the dawn traveler in Soyinka's poem, Azaro survives out of an unflagging determination arising from his deep affection for his parents, though his journey of life is ontologically fraught with grave dangers and uncertainties. It is a triumph of will power, and in ironic contrast to the way Soyinka's *abiku* demonstrates his will power against his/her parents. (Ogunsanwo 49)

A summary of Ogunsanwo's position, which this study agrees with, is that Okri's road is a more positive phenomenon than Soyinka's. Okri lends credence to the interpretation of his road as being antithetical to the cynical rendering of the myth in Soyinka's poem when he asserts that his road is different from the Nobel laureate's because it is "a way. It's a road that is meant to take you from one place

to another, on a journey, towards a destination" (Wilkinson 83). Okri's road, therefore, is a purposeful journey towards an optimistic future, while Soyinka's is an all-devouring, pessimistic phenomenon, as insatiable as it is numinous. Even though Okri's road also manifests the ambiguity of a riddle – it is sometimes definite, sometimes indefinite; sometimes positive, sometimes negative; sometimes a road, sometimes a river; a journey towards a destination or the "road of our refusal to be" (*The Famished Road* 487) – it is still a symbol of future positive change because it is an open-ended road. Dad says: "A road that is open is never hungry" (497). In other words, the subjugated continents of the world must be open to all positive influences, no matter the source, as this is the only way they can grow. Okri's road is, therefore, eclectic; a cross-cultural amalgam of Africa's mythic past, the colonial intrusion into the African space and the present postcolonial travails. According to Cooper:

> This is the fundamental difference between Soyinka's, Achebe's and all the vast majority of African writers' critiques of the corruption of their societies. Okri is here, albeit somewhat contradictorily and ambiguously, asserting the possibility of change, the condition of which is not solely or even primarily, the mythical past. (228)

In sum, Okri's road is an icon of Okri's verbal message, "Take what is good from our way and adapt it to the new times!" (*Songs of Enchantment* 172). Africans need to take what is good from their mythic past and merge it with what is positive in the present postcolonial era to establish a great future for themselves.

6. 4 OTHER AREAS OF DIVERGENCES AND CONVERGENCES

There are other areas of inter-discursivity between Okri's works and other writers besides the abiku myth and the myth of the road. For instance, the opening statement in *The Famished Road*, "In the beginning there was a river…", is an obvious re-working of St. John's opening statement in the Bible: "In the beginning was the word…." Love is central to both the Bible and Okri's prose fiction as the only panacea to man's multifarious inter-personal and socio-political problems. But while the Scriptures concentrate this love in the person of Jesus Christ, Okri revolves it around man and man alone. This shift makes it the responsibility of man to initiate remedial action to correct the ills in the society, whereas the Bible insists that the first step towards man's redemption from his fallen state was taken by God who sent His only begotten Son to die for man.

This shift also betrays Okri's cynical attitude to the way people use religion as an excuse not to take the initiative in matters that affect their lives. In essence, Okri warns his contemporaries to be wary of the Abiku politicians and their kindred spirits who use religion to preach contentment to the poor, thereby confining them to their poverty-stricken situation, while the wicked rich soar on the ballast of ill-gotten wealth.

Tutuola's folktale of the lady who follows the beautiful man who in reality is a skull with borrowed human parts is also parodied in *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment*. This occurs when Azaro follows a beautiful lady with a blue head and had to be rescued by his mother (307-8). In Tutuola's work, the moral of the story is to caution young marriageable ladies against being overly

choosy and basing their choice on physical attraction without obeying traditional procedures of investigating the pedigree of all suitors, irrespective of their personal beauty. Okri's parody of the folktale, however, introduces twists which forcibly adjust the Tutuolan folktale to suit his personal vision.

While the hero of the Tutuolan tale is a man, Okri's rescuing saint is a woman, Azaro's mother. Again, while the beautiful creature takes the form of a man in the Tutuolan tale, a woman is the focus in the Okri version. Lastly, while the recalcitrant being is a woman in the Tutuolan tale, he is male, Azaro, in Okri's re-working of the tale. Okri's inversion carries an obvious message: making a mistake is not the province of any sex in the same way that heroism and redemptive qualities are not the prerogative of men alone. This small tale no doubt contributes to Okri's general build-up of Mum as iconic of the modern woman who joins her male counterpart in the redemption of her society from the grip of all forms of oppression.

The notion of the artist is another example of inter-discursivity in the novel. Critics such as Hawley and Ogunsanwo have indicated the similarity between Okri's Omovo and James Joyce's Stephen in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Both are young men blessed (or cursed?) with the gift of creativity. Both experience poverty through the decline in the income of their fathers. Both have to abandon school for a while. Both are sensitive to their environment, and are perpetually engrossed in thought, living more within themselves than within their societies. Both experience temporary moral turpitude, Stephen with

prostitutes and Omovo with his neighbour's wife. Both eventually experience epiphanies which influence their final decision to be "life-artists".

However, while Joyce's artist sees emigration as the surest avenue for the blossoming of his creativity and emigrates out of Ireland, Okri's artist spurns emigration and integrates himself into his society. Okri's message is quite clear: even the artist in his iconoclastic predilection has much to contribute to his society, not by a mental or physical flight from his responsibility but by being different, being himself in a world that is otherwise lopsided and twisted in its values. Of the two types of artists in the two books, Okri's Omovo will contribute more to his society because he sees himself as an integral part of his society's problems and its possible redemption.

Jeremiah the photographer is a transmutation of Omovo into the kind of artist who functions as the conscience of the nation by recording and being involved in social upheaval, especially the people's fight against all forms of oppression and ignorance. Moh observes that,

> like Omovo whose paintings show the drift of the nation, the photographer records the evil aspects of the society.... His camera offers him the privilege of capturing different scenes of social life. And for this, he is haunted by the power caucus, harassed by party thugs and is finally evicted by his landlord, who does not want to be implicated. (94)

Cooper also asserts: "The photographer becomes a new messianic myth, sent to save the ordinary folk, who are too stricken by poverty and passivity to redeem themselves" (230).

6. 5 CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined Okri's works in the light of elements shared with other writers. The conclusion is that he has reworked many of the traditional myths and folktales found in earlier literary works and the oral tradition to make trenchant statements which bear his socio-aesthetic vision of man's life and living.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

7. 1 INTRODUCTION

This concluding chapter assesses the objectives stated in the introduction viz a viz their realisation in the thesis. It also summarises the research findings, and explicates their implications for further research. Furthermore, it responds to some of the issues raised by critics of Okri's prose fiction and proffers a more informed judgment based on the research findings. Some of the strictures on Okri's works have been upheld while others have been dismissed by the weight of objective analytical evidence provided by the study.

7. 2 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The five-fold objectives of this study are: to assess the contribution of myth and realism to Okri's thematic preoccupations; to explore and explicate the interface of myth and realism in Okri's novels as it impacts on his aesthetic vision; to evaluate the socio-political import of Okri's re-working of popular myths and other elements from the oral tradition; to elucidate the impact of the coalescence of myth and realism on Okri's characterisation and setting; and to explore the convergences and divergences between Okri and other African writers who have used the same cultural artefacts.

Using Wheelwright's semantic theory of myth and Watt's particularity theory, this study has shown that Okri's adoption of myth and realism in his

works is not accidental but a deliberate aesthetic technique to facilitate the realisation of his thematic preoccupations. This assertion is buttressed by the research findings which are enumerated below.

(1) Okri employs myth as a satirical tool to mock the society and proffer solutions to identified social problems. This is obvious in his use of the abiku myth, the myth of the road and the myth of the stomach.

(a) At the consummatory level, Okri uses the abiku myth to criticise the political and economic instability that has plagued the Nigerian nation since inception. Like the abiku, the nation experiences ups and downs on the political front. According to Okri, this cycle of impoverishing inconstancy will remain unbroken until "we .... displayed our serious intent to bear the weight of a unique destiny" (*The Famished Road* 478).

(b) Okri also uses the abiku myth to satirise the disorderliness and needless suffering in the Nigerian social system. As a primary myth, Okri uses the abiku condition to buttress his message that the poverty and deprivation in the Nigerian nation can be transformed into plenitude for all if both the rulers and the ruled live up to their social responsibilities. The abiku world narrated by Azaro is a world of beauty, order and all-round satisfaction. In contrast, the world depicted by Okri in his novels is one of squalor and mind-bending poverty.

(c) Through the agency of the myth of the King of the road, Okri condemns Nigerian political leaders, civil or military, as monsters whose

greed ensures that most Nigerians live below the poverty line. As Moh observes, the King of the Road "stands for the archetypal predator who has such an insatiable appetite that he preys on everything and everyone for self-preservation" (77). In other words, Nigerian rulers till date only see political office as an avenue to amass great personal wealth to the detriment of the masses of the people that they are supposed to serve.

(d) Okri uses the myth of the stomach to condemn the insatiable greed of the rich and their oppressive proclivities. Thematically, this myth emphasises the political oppression and deprivation which the rich inflict on the poor for daring to oppose their political choices.

(2) Okri exploits the pedagogic quality in myth to advance his own vision of human life and destiny, which he regards as a process of unlearning some of the received notions of the past and a deliberate fusion of the gains of the past and the present. His myth of destiny, myth of transformation, myth of higher beings and celestial gods, and myth of the invention of death manifest different aspects of this vision.

(a) Okri uses the myth as a subtle criticism of the complacency and docility of the Nigerian people in the face of the blatant corruption and oppression of their leaders. The author's perception of the myth, however, runs parallel to the general (mis)conception that "destiny cannot be changed". According to the author, a man's destiny is ultimately in his

hands. Therefore, it is the responsibility of every man to redream his world and create a better world for himself. Okri says, "We can redream this world and make the dream real" (*The Famished Road* 498).

(b) The myth of transformation bears Okri's message that Africans must reconcile their past with their present if they hope for a glorious future.

(c) Okri utilizes the myth of higher beings and celestial gods to convey his main message that the success of modern Africans depends on the alliance of positive spiritual forces and scientific knowledge. The author categorically states this in *Songs of Enchantment* when he declares: "Return to the old ways .... Return to the ways of our ancestors! Take what is good from our way and adapt it to the new time!" (*Songs of Enchantment* 172).

(d) The myth of the invention of death is employed by Okri to convey his cardinal message that love is the panacea to many of our national problems.

(3) Okri explores the narrative and propaganda value in myth to re-work some of the myths and elements taken from the oral tradition to achieve his artistic goals. Okri's myth of the invention of death is a clear departure from the Yoruba traditional myth which he obviously parodies. While the traditional myth celebrates man's capability to tame the supernatural, Okri's version of the myth preaches salvation through love.

(4) Okri's use of realism in characterisation invests them with thematic essence. Madame Koto, the Blind Old Man, the landlord and other members of the Party of the Rich represent the uncaring rulers of the country who will stop at nothing to retain their wealth, privilege and power. Dad, Mum, Takpo, Omovo's dad and other ghetto dwellers in Okri's novels represent the downtrodden people of the nation. Azaro the spirit-child represents the nation whose constant change of leadership and policies confirms the poor in their poverty and stultifies economic and social growth. Omovo, Okocha and Jeremiah the photographer represent the ideal artist and his primary role as the conscience of the nation. They remain true to their calling in spite of being persecuted by the powers that be and misunderstood by the very people they try to defend.

Another finding is that although Okri's characterisation and setting subscribe to the canons of realism, the interface of myth and realism in his works makes many of his characters liminal. This results from the hardship suffered by the people which forces them to take desperate measures to survive. Unfortunately, some of these measures push those involved to the brink of insanity such that they exist between the world of the living and the dead. Koto is a good example of a woman forced by the desire to get rich at all cost to become a witch. Dad also takes to boxing in a desperate bid to augment his family income but the profession brings him into close encounters with spirit beings. Azaro is

forced by the disorder, poverty and lack of love in the world to oscillate between the natural and the supernatural realms. Ede in "When the Lights Return", "Arthur" in "Stars of the New Curfew", the unnamed protagonists of "Worlds that Flourish", and "What the Tapster Saw" are also forced by dire economic circumstances to engage in activities which bring them to the brink of insanity. All these characters are liminal and they are made so by the economic circumstances in which they find themselves. Their liminality is, therefore, a subtle criticism of the political system which renders otherwise ordinary citizens liminal due to the lack of vision and care by the political leaders.

Okri also uses the interface of myth and realism in his setting to buttress his message that the harsh economic circumstances put in place by an uncaring leadership mentally destabilise the average man. At the realistic level, Okri's setting in his works supplies adequate description of the physical locale of action. However, there is the constant switch from the physical locale to the mental scene, from natural description to the surreal world of dreams and hallucinations. This constant switch gives the narration a haunting quality which is reflected in the "abnormal" behavioural pattern of Okri's liminal characters. The tentative conclusion is that such an environment which is abnormal in itself can only produce men and women who are in some way abnormal.

In the short stories and latter novels, Okri also replaces the normal linear time scheme with the cyclical and warped mythic time. This adds to the

evocative quality of his works and accentuates his message that an unfavourable socio-economic environment engenders psychologically unbalanced citizens. The interface of myth and realism in Okri's setting is, therefore, another criticism of the heartless leaders of the nation from pre-Independence till date.

(5) Okri's use of popular myths runs counter to the norm because in their traditional garb, these cultural artefacts would not support his socio-political themes. For example, the abiku in Soyinka's and J. P. Clark-Bekederemo's poems of that title is very wicked and unrepentant. He is determined to forever commute between the world of man and the spirit realm. In contrast, Azaro, the spirit-child in Okri's works, has a human face and decides to stay because of the love showered on him by his poor parents. Okri's use of the myth of the road is also different from the traditional myth, especially, Soyinka's use of the myth in his poem "Death in the Dawn". Okri's road is undoubtedly more positive than Soyinka's or the traditional myth of the road. Okri's depiction of the artist also runs counter to the norm because they do not choose to emigrate as artists in other novels do, in spite of their non-conformism and otherness in relation to the rest of the society. In a sense, it can be asserted that Okri's artists, Omovo, Okocha and Jeremiah, are more patriotic than Stephen in Joyce's *Portrait*.

These findings repudiate some of the earlier objections to Okri's prose fiction by some critics. For instance, Cook's allegation that Okri is merely exploiting the international readers' hankering for something exotic and new is shown to be false because Okri's use of the strange, his deliberate fusion of myth and realism in his works is to enhance his thematic preoccupations as the findings have illustrated. Hattersley's and Maja-Pearce's charge that Okri indulges in mysticism for its own sake is likewise dismissed by this study's analysis of the socio-political import of Okri's use of myth and realism in his prose fiction.

Liman's charge that Okri does not use art to proffer solutions to Africa's multi-faceted problems is perhaps the most damaging of the negative critiques of Okri's works. In chapter four of this study, Okri's partial response to this charge is alluded to when he says the ideal artist is supposed to be a filter, a prism, as opposed to the artists with ideas who "distort the world in terms of their ideas, and then reflect an idea-distorted universe" (Wilkinson 81). In *A Way of Being Free*, Okri rails at those who insist on certainties, that is, using the arts to make political statements:

> Certainty has always been the enemy of art and creativity; more than that it has been the enemy of humanity. In the name of certainties, under the illusory god, people have had an almost medieval belief in the rightness of the violence they have wreaked on others, in the destruction of other people's ways and lives. …This certainty, whether its name be religion, imperialism, ideology, class, caste, race, or sex, has been the great undoing of our measureless heritage, and has narrowed the vastness of human possibility and marvellous variety. (30)

While Okri's defence may be sound on the surface, he has not really addressed the question. The research findings provide a better response to Abubakar's charge by showing the relevance of Okri's themes and methods to his social vision. A perusal of the myths in his works as well as the interface of myth and realism in his characterisation and setting shows his concern for the oppressed all over the world, most especially Nigerians. Abubakar's confusion might have arisen from his expectation that Okri would verbalise his ideas, his social vision and message. Okri does that in some instances, notably where he admonishes Nigerians, the oppressed, to combine the best elements in their mythic past with the best elements in their colonial and postcolonial experience.

However, like a true artist, Okri makes more trenchant statements through his myths, characterisation and setting without having to overtly articulate them. For example, the resolution of his major works is an affirmation of the victory of good over evil. This is a better technique than "preaching" at the reader, as some authors often do in their works. Undoubtedly, Abubakar must have based his criticism on *The Famished Road* alone. Had he included *Songs of Enchantment* and the short stories, he would have arrived at a more objective conclusion. The most significant finding that this study comes up with is that Okri's quest for a Nigerian, African or world-wide Utopia based on the fusion of man's mental/spiritual endowments and his physical resources informs his interweaving of myth and realism in his works. By the time the study analysed the different myths in his works and the coalescence of myth and realism in his

characterisation and setting, it is evident that his works are relevant to the Nigerian reality and address the condition of man in modern society.

However, these observations are not meant to give the impression that Okri's prose fiction is impeccable. As Garuba, Otu and a few other critics have noted, there is measure of overdose in the interruptions of the supernatural in the natural in some of Okri's works. Also, the plot of *The Famished Road* is rather rambunctious, and may lead to the confusion of untrained or impatient readers. In fact, *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment* read more like a concatenation of disjointed stories, with the presence of Azaro as the only unifying factor holding the loose threads together. *Astonishing the Gods* is far more mythical than real, and an unsophisticated reader will certainly find the plot difficult to follow or comprehend. In spite of these shortcomings, Okri's prose fiction makes for interesting reading and yields a rich harvest when subjected to the kind of open-minded critical appraisal done in this study.

From the foregoing analysis, the research implications are quite clear. African literature in non-African languages would benefit more from a conscious use and reworking of elements from the African oral tradition. Contemporary African writers should take a cue from Okri's experimentation and marry the rich culture of orality in Africa with the received literary tradition from Europe to create works which will interpret modern postcolonial experience in new ways that make life worth the living. This is one way of making this kind of literature relevant to Africans at home or in the Diaspora.

7. 3 CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

This research has contributed to knowledge in a number of ways. First, it has shown that the relationship between myth and realism is not that of mutual exclusivity, but that both can be wonderful aesthetic tools, even when their manifestation in literary works depict unusual interfaces, unethical interventions of the supernatural in the real and vice versa. Second, the study has demonstrated that a more conscious use and reinterpretation of elements from the African oral tradition by modern African writers increases the relevance and acceptability of literary creations among contemporary Africans in spite of the adoption of the languages of the erstwhile colonisers as a medium of communicating the literary experience. Third, this study has also shown that a writer's aesthetic choices are often informed by his social vision and the strength of the relationship between him and his culture. Finally, this study confirms the age-old notion that a symbiotic relationship exists between a work of art and the society that produces it, even when the aesthetic product is satiric or critical in tone.

7. 4 AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study has yielded a lot of literary fruit. By looking at Okri's prose fiction from the perspective of the interface of myth and realism, the earlier misapprehension and misinterpretation of Okri's aesthetic vision have been obviated. Nevertheless, further research is necessary in the area of language choice and social relevance to the masses of African people who are still largely literate only in their mother-tongues. In other words, what advantage accrues from

translating Okri's works into Nigerian indigenous languages? This is a line of thought that is worth pursuing independently. Also, it will be interesting to examine Okri's works from the feminist perspective to assess his position on the gender issue. As Ezeigbo observes, many of his female characters do not play leading roles. Even though Madame Koto is an exception, the role ascribed to her, that of a witch, manifests the usual stigmatisation of successful women by a male-dominated society. These ideas were only broached in this study because they do not constitute the main thrust of the work. They will definitely be relevant supplements to this study.

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