

Leadership, Human Degradation and Social Change in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*.

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Abstract

There is the capacity for growth and development of African nations but due to the recurrence of negative historical experiences, they neither grow nor improve. Okri (1991) in *The Famished Road* deplores the ineptitude of predatory rulers who exploit the masses leaving them famished. He also frowns at the complacency of the citizens who refuse to react against the inhuman treatment and exploitation meted out to them. This paper therefore addresses the degradation of human life, the squalor in many African nations, the ruthless use of power, and how good leadership and positive social change can reposition African nations and better the lots of the poor masses.

KEY WORDS: Leadership, Existentialism, Social Change, **Abiku*, Allegory, Realism, Human Degradation.

* *Abiku*: In Yoruba mythology, a spirit-child.

INTRODUCTION

It is evident that literature mirrors society and can as well x-ray the problems inherent in the society with a view to offering solutions to these problems. Africa is however considered one of the richest continents in terms of her natural and human resources like oil, diamond, gold, salt, iron, cobalt, uranium, copper, bauxite, platinum, nickel, silver, petroleum, cocoa beans, woods, tropical fruits and so on. Africa is also blessed with abundant water resources that sustain aquatic and hydro energy resources. The continent is endowed with rich offshore and onshore mineral deposits with abundant flora and fauna. In spite of all the rich resources that Africa is blessed with, the continent is wallowing in poverty and extreme socio-economic and political deprivations. This deplorable state of African nations is attributable to colonialism, neo-colonialism and bad governance.

What is Leadership?

According to Chemers, leadership is described as “a process of social influence in which a person can enlist the aid and support of others in the accomplishment of a common task” Chemers (1). To Thomas Carlyle, leadership emerges when an entity as ‘leader’ continues to receive deference from other entities who become ‘followers’. The word leadership can also refer to:

- those entities that perform one or more acts of leading.
- ability to affect human behaviour so as to accomplish a mission.
- influencing a group of people to move towards its goal setting or goal achievement.

Leadership implies a relationship of power, the power to guide others. Leadership problem has been identified as one of the evils plaguing Africa in general and Nigeria in particular. It is very obvious that the destiny of every group, family, institution, organization, nation, and

even the whole world depends upon wise and effective leaders who have integrity. A good leader is an asset while a bad leader is a disaster.

However, many scholars have analyzed *The Famished Road* in divergent ways. Moh (2001) sees it as a ghost story of magic realism and a text that equally examines the relationship between a child and the parents. Mahmutovic (2010) analyses the text as one that explores a country's identity crises and existential angst. To some scholars it is a novel which deals with the problems of growing up and willingly accepting the burdens of an adult life. Obumselu (2011) positions the novel in the context of existential thought and postmodern fiction in which the extravagances of African folk art are adapted to contemporary myth of the culture hero. This paper analyses *The Famished Road* as a portrayal of a state of hopelessness and despair into which African nations have been lowered because of the ineptitude of the political class and also articulates how positive remedial actions and good political leadership can ameliorate the degrading human life and condition prevalent in the contemporary African society. In this respect, the novel assumes the dimensions of an allegory, for the story goes far beyond what it tells: it conveys a message much more important and much more general than the destiny of the city in which the events are situated. Okri in this novel, transcends the limits of writing an African fiction since *The Famished Road* is a novel whose message is universal. The city is satirized as a corrupting influence. Similarly, in his short story, "Stars of the New Curfew", Okri satirizes the duplicity of those in power. The power brokers in the story throw out currency notes on the famished poor who push and wound one another to get a few of the money. At the end, they discover that the currency notes are fake. This theme of hypocrisy of the political class is raised in *The Famished Road* as "the milk of bad politics" (Moh 74).

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The objective of this study is to build a more solid understanding of what effective leadership should entail as well as to promote the use of techniques involved in democratic and transformational political leadership which will go a long way in ameliorating the dehumanizing condition of the masses and promote lasting positive change and peace.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology used is textual analysis whereby the themes of the novel are examined and analyzed in order to x – ray our societal ills and vices with a view to offering practicable, and lasting solutions and most importantly, stamping those vices out.

AFRICAN NATIONS AS ABIKU

Ade, one of Azaro's spirit-child companions observes that:

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

One of the major organizing symbols in *The Famished Road* is the symbol of African nations, particularly Nigeria as an abiku nation. The novel is the story of Azaro, who is at the same time man and spirit who decides to remain in his fifth visitation to the earth. Azaro's story combines two strains. The first strain takes up Azaro's story of his experiences while here on earth. The second strain shows Azaro's experiences as a symbolic representation of the nation's historical experiences.

It is obvious that the celebrations that heralded democratic change in the 1990's in Africa have gradually faded into muffled cries of anger and attendant violence of despair. Almost everywhere on the continent, the so-called democratic leaders are openly subverting the people's will and disregarding national constitution. From Nigeria to Zimbabwe, Kenya

to the Ivory Coast and Uganda to Cameroun, the writing is on the wall. According to Rousseau, the object of political association is the preservation and prosperity of its members. The more the distance between the people and the government increases, the more burdensome the changes become; therefore, in a democracy, the people are least encumbered. And instead of a good leader to govern his subjects in order to make them happy, “despotism renders them miserable in order to govern them” (Rousseau 80). Many African despots govern with violence and without regard for justice and the rule of law; they arrogate to themselves the royal authority without having a right to it. For instance, in *The Famished Road*, the representation of the violent history of Nigeria brings about what Mahmutovic (1) calls “identity crises and existential angst”. Overwhelming conflicts and changes within history rupture the characters’ lives and lead to an anguished concern with existence and a desire for articulation of singular freedom. These characters feel thrown or fallen into an inhospitable world in whose making they have not participated, and which for the most part controls their development. Their social spheres are even more shaped by authoritative and diffuse powers, which produce and maintain both physical and existential hunger. The roads that are always hungry are inadvertently created by our leaders who have lost the true blueprint for a nationalist government and who have also taken a draught of forgetfulness. They lack the willpower for a positive democratic change. And for the fact that the appalling condition of the poor masses is of no interest to them, they do little or nothing to ameliorate that condition. Hence, the road that seems to end nowhere leads to existential hunger, dehumanizing psyche, misery and death.

The setting of the story is in a mythical time. The novel opens thus:

In the beginning there was a river. The river became a road and the road branched out to the whole world. And because the road was once a river it was always hungry (3).

Possible interpretations of why the road remains famished can be suggested. First, the stomach of the king of the Roads was washed off by the rains into the road. This king stands for the archetypal predator that has such an insatiable appetite that he preys on everything and everyone for self-preservation. Because the rulers are oppressors, the road is always hungry and it becomes the symbol of many African nations with unjust predatory rulers.

Secondly, the road is also famished because according to Dad, “we have no desire to change things” (451). The Nigerian nation for example is in a state of stagnation because the ruled have no desire to change things. Colonization has left the citizens with a slave mentality which shuns positive remedial action. There is insecurity or what Mahmutovic calls “existential angst” and this signals to the characters that something is not quite right with their social system, and that it may deprive them of freedom. Angst is indeed negative, yet it also implies an opening to doubt, the kind of positive uncertainty that undermines oppressive social structures. Angst here entails very much of Sartre’s *nausea*. Okri evokes Sartre when Azaro is “filling with unease and anxiety ... nausea and bile rising in my throat” (456). As in Sartre’s discourse, anxiety is also connected to the dizzying experience of freedom and responsibility, which both fascinates and repels the characters. Sartre’s famous example is of an individual standing on a cliff that not only dreads falling off it but also anguishes about the possibility of hurling himself off. The factuality of freedom becomes obvious in that the individual sees a possibility that everything that is supposed to hold him back is not absolute and that in the last instance the choice is singular. There is a similar image in *The Famished Road*, when Azaro stands on the edge of a threatening forest pit dug open by industrial machinery. He does not simply fear falling, but the fact that he may decide the next moment to jump. Azaro discovers in anguish that he is free to honour his resolve to stay human or die in the pit with other ghosts and creatures. While everything pushes Azaro

to take a fatal leap, the vertigo of freedom is experienced in the choice to hold back, to opt for life.

Mahmutovic observes that:

Okri puts a particular postcolonial spin on [this] recognizable motif, suggesting that the history of colonialism and the postcolonial traumas actually drive individuals and communities to find peace and relief from suffering in the leap of certain death (2).

Azaro's mother, for instance, twice attempts suicide. Their freedom, as is clear from Dad's continuous boxing fights, and Azaro's ordeals are articulated in their opting for life (even in suffering), and in standing against the impossible forces that seek to make each person submissive, obedient, exploitable, disposable, and finally, in fact dead.

In the novel, Okri's protagonist, the abiku spirit Azaro is born at one of the most precarious and chaotic times in the history of the African territory on the verge of becoming the modern, decolonized nation-state of Nigeria. "Our road was changing. Nothing was what it seemed any more" (428). Azaro further asserts, "I knew we were in the divide between past and future. A new cycle had begun, an old one was being brought to a pitch" (220). This pitch is the highest point of material and spiritual famine of the colonized people. Azaro, whose own transformation from spirit to human is partly an allegory of this historical transformation, suffers "anxiety and nausea" (456).

Azaro being a spirit child, 'abiku', keeps coming and going, unwilling to come to terms with life. Abiku children are symbolic of many countries in Africa. They keep the recyclic nature of being born and dying. These abiku children do not look forward to being born but if any decides to stay, he is fated with tragic living. The contrast between the world of the unborn and the world of the living is too sharp for them to adjust. They do not like the unfulfilled longings and dreams. Azaro admits that:

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

Azaro's experiences serve as symbolic representations of the nation's historical experiences. Everything about the nation has gone haywire. It is dysfunctional in its educational, economic, political and security systems. The poor masses' existence is at such heartrending.

We notice that there is freedom, justice, affluence, feasting and playing in the eternal world of origins, whereas in the world of living, there is despair, disorder, misery and death. Azaro himself says that, "Being born was a shock from which I never recovered"(7). But having been born, he fights with death. As a corollary, the Nigerian nation never chose to be a nation. The status of nationhood was somewhat imposed on the divergent tribes. But having become a nation, it has resisted any attempt at secession. Undoubtedly, for this country (Nigeria) to remain and become strong, an expensive sacrifice must be made rather than taking interim measures which never lasts.

As Dad discovered:

The child of our will (the nation) refuses to stay till we have made propitious sacrifice and displayed our serious intent to bear the weight of a unique destiny (494).

In Azaro's case, his parents would willingly have made whatever sacrifices required of them, but they are poor and cannot afford the sacrificial items. Panic measures are taken whenever he falls ill which do not satisfactorily solve his problems. But in the case of Nigeria, the people have not "displayed a serious intent to bear the weight of a unique destiny" by

addressing once and for all the problems besetting it as a nation. Rather than tackle the major problems which threaten the peaceful existence of the nation, the leaders adopt interim solutions. And so, the nation continues its rhythmic existence of birth (hope), betrayal and death (bloodshed).

Brendan Cooper characterizes Nigeria as “the bizarre product of both new and old tradition and burgeoning change”, the latter being effectuated by “Western money technology and education haphazardly and unevenly” (67). Okri dramatizes not only the conflicts between pre-modern and modern understandings of existence, but rather the ways in which these conflicts “create the aporetic hybridity of them” (Mahmutovic 3), and how the politicization of ghost, gods and myths produces even more terrifying oppressors of “the wretched of the earth” (Infinite Riches, 161).

Azaro’s predicament is indeed graver than that of ordinary humans and his very ontology is equally in question:

I ran through the yellow forests, through deluded generations, through time. I witnessed the destruction of great shrines, the death of mighty trees that housed centuries of insurgent as well as soothing memories, sacred text, alchemical secrets of wizards, and potent herbs. I saw the forests die. I saw the people grow smaller in being. I saw the death of their many roads and ways and philosophies. ... I heard the great spirits of the land and forests talking of a temporary exile. ... I saw the rising of new houses. I saw new bridges span the air. The old bridges invisible, travelled on by humans and spirits alike, remained intact and less frequented. As the freedom of space and friendship with the pied king fisher and other birds became more limited with the new age, something died in me. I fled deep into the salt caves of rock lands. Hunters with new instruments of death followed (457).

Azaro experiences changes that entail the death of older ways of being and understanding the world, and the rise of something new. Although he is speaking about transformations and escapes into exile, rather than abrupt shift, the emphasis on dying serves to highlight the severity of the changes. Political shifts serve to increase rather than ameliorate or root out oppression and exploitation. In a sense, this transformation from the old to the new is also cyclical: ideologies change but the suffering recurs and even increases.

While Azaro has a nostalgic yearning for some kind of pre-ideological mode of being when “human beings and animals understood one another, we were all free” (457), the very myth of the beginnings and the hungry road suggest that there never was such a general state of being.

Furthermore, Azaro offers his agonizing vision of the future independence, which is celebrated by the rich who can dance “with political erections” (455), benefiting from the changes, while the poor stomp in chains. He says:

I saw a duiker gazing at me intently, drugged on its captivity, gazing at me as if my freedom lay in freeing it from imminent death, from being sacrificed for the opening of the road of Madame Koto’s destiny (458).

The symbolic duiker is about to be slaughtered by Koto for the sake of the Party of the Rich, the heirs of the colonial authority. Azaro traces his own existential death in the sacrifice of the animal.

POSITIVE SOCIAL AND BEHAVIOURAL CHANGES AS KEY DETERMINANT FACTORS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

Brett (18) describes development as “a change process characterized by increased productivity, equalization in the distribution of the social products, and the emergence of indigenous institutions whose relations with the outside world are characterized by equality rather than by dependence or subordination.” Fadahunsi (6) also defines development “as the mobilization, adaptation and use of human and natural resources within a state to meet the needs, and possibly, the wants of the citizens of such states.”

Today, development in most African nations is characterized by rapid depletion of natural resources, degradation of human life and cultural institutions of the people as well as mass, often misappropriated, external borrowing. Whereas in the technologically advanced nations of Europe and America, damage to the physical environment is often a product of the pattern of economic growth, in Africa, mass poverty, hunger, deprivation and the struggle for subsistence is at the root of the imprudent use of both cultural and natural resources of the continent. Besides political conflicts and large scale wars across the African continent, the greatest obstacle to her development is the unprecedented official corruption and its attendant poverty among the masses. As Brett (3) rightly pointed out, many “developers” in Africa actually “do little more than develop their family fortunes.”

Understandably, Okri uses the ‘road’ motif to suggest historical time. He transforms the recognizable form of “In the beginning, there was” (3), which he combines with the local myth of the volatile river that becomes a hungry road of history. The local myth is blown up into the master myth of the abiku trilogy. While the modernization of the country is supposed to bring about progress, Okri insists on the endless repetition of historical injustice: “I recognized the new incarnations of their recurrent clashes, the recurrence of ancient antagonisms, secret histories, and festering dreams” (194).

Therefore, a night of a riot can be “a night without memory” which keeps “replaying its corrosive recurrence on the road of our lives, on the road which was hungry for great transformations” (180). Like the primordial river, everything shape-shifts, yet nothing changes. This is why the famished road of history consists of cyclical transformations, which resemble “the condition of the spirit child” (478). Azaro’s friend Ade prophesizes that:

There will be changes. Coups. Soldiers everywhere. Ugliness. Blindness. And then when people least expect it a great transformation is going to take place in the world ... A wonderful change is coming from far away and people will realize the great meaning of struggle and hope. There will be peace. Then people will forget. Then it will start again, getting worse, getting better (478).

Most scholars and analysts agree that modernization trends in most African nations completely negate the basic principles of sustainable development whether ecological, economic or cultural. According to Okpoko and Ezeadichie, “Sustainable development in Africa should be concerned with the establishment of a system of economic growth and advancement that puts into proper consideration both the socio-cultural background of the people and the physical environmental adaptability of technology” (5).

Given the colonial background of African nations, sustainable development must be conceived in the direction of rural reorientation and mass participation in development. In addition, simultaneous progress along the major aspects of rural life is the basic requirement for a sustained reversal of the vicious cycle of poverty, environmental degradation and rapid population growth which currently beset the rural society in Africa. This is because

“sustainable development is a holistic concept whose practical dimensions cut across all the facets of rural life including economic, human, technological, institutional and environmental” (11).

There is also a new security consciousness around the world that considers peaceful atmosphere a necessary precondition for the pursuit of development in its broadest conception. More than any other part of the globe, Africa has become associated with conflict, insecurity and human rights atrocities. “... insecurity in Africa has made it impossible to realise the economic development potentials of the continent” Adetula (384). In addition to insecurity, conflicts have the capacity to severely constrain development endeavours by destroying infrastructure, interrupting the production process and diverting resources away from productive uses.

According to a World Bank report, resources diverted by conflict away from developmental use are estimated at \$1 billion a year in Central Africa and more than \$800 million in West Africa. Donors and development agencies have argued that development assistance projects have suffered in many African countries due to incessant conflicts. Usually, the concern is that resources that are originally planned for the funding of development projects are increasingly diverted to conflict management and peace-keeping activities.

THE IMPERATIVENESS OF SELFLESS LEADERSHIP

Since Africa began to emerge from foreign rule, from colonial rule in the 1950s, it is an experience which inspired high hopes and promised liberating freedoms, but these were dashed because as the ‘nationals’ assumed office and took over power, they turned out to be dictators. Harsh governments and dictators rule over their people who distrust them to the point of hatred; and all too often, one dismal tyranny gives way to a worse one. These leaders spawn up plagues of poverty on a scale never known in earlier times. Despair rots civil society, the state becomes an enemy and bandits flourish.

In *The Famished Road*, Okri portrays the corrupting influence of wealth and power by describing the advancement of Madam Koto. Although she advances in wealth, riches and influence, these are followed by an inner spiritual decay and moral decadence. As her means improves financially and politically, she becomes meaner. Okri uses this character, Madam Koto, to depict the lives of those in corridors of power who amass excessive wealth at the expense of the starving majority. Madam Koto gets so fat that her back door has to be expanded to accommodate her excessive weight. She changes from her modest pattern of dressing to an extravagant mode. “She wore clothes that made the beggars ill” (495).

It is obvious that a society without talented and committed leaders will always regress or at best remain stagnant. That has been the problem of many African nations, particularly Nigeria. There is purely a state of anarchy where human blunders and corruption took the frontiers of power and development. Instead of the peoples’ true liberation and independence, the supposed liberation leads to alienation. Undoubtedly, African nations need leaders who can subordinate narrow private goals for broader community objectives. For such a leader, power and influence are important only if they can be used to solve human problems.

We always admire stabilized economies and developed countries like England, USA, Japan, Australia and others but the truth of the matter is that their land, climate, water, etc, are not better than Africans’ but the fact remains that our leaders are predatory and instrumental; what David Apter called “consummatory” leaders (Apter 1960). They do not have the interest of the governed at heart rather they are mired in the pursuit of selfish personal goals at the expense of broader national interests and needs. Chinua Achebe in his little but powerful and widely cited book *The Trouble with Nigeria* corroborated this by stating categorically that:

The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or water or air or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership (1).

The lack of selfless, non-corrupt and committed leaders has contributed immensely to the socio-political and economic predicaments facing Nigeria and other African nations today. And our social problems (poverty, diseases, illiteracy, prostitution, crime, etc), are in one way or another related to the sour state of the economic condition which was brought about by bad political leadership.

CONCLUSION

The novel as a vehicle for experience provides an other-worldly sensibilities which feel and describe African conditions with horrific and grim possibilities. *The Famished Road* both in its mythical and modern form keeps the sense of the exploitation of African soil. The theme is essentially that of a famished land in need of nourishment. Okri (1991) tries to fuse Azaro's experiences of spiritual anguish and disgust with a criticism of political and economic conditions. Azaro complains "that there was no escape from the hard things of this world. Everywhere there was the crudity of wounds ..." (161). These wounds as the afflictions of poverty and bad governance are capable of remedy. But Obumsele observes that "as the essential grossness and contingency of the created world, the wounds are beyond remedy" (28). They are only beyond remedy if the citizens remain docile and complacent in the face of maladministration, injustice and corruption. Evil can only thrive and remain unabated if the rulers and the ruled have no desire to change things. With firm resolution and remedial actions, Africa can break the cyclic pattern of irresponsible and unproductive governance. By having Azaro abandon the abiku cycle, Okri suggestively opposes repetition of what Quayson calls "the cyclicity of political irresponsibility," in which the country about to be born "has not done enough to transcend the trauma of unbending underdevelopment or the nausea of confusion in its unfocused attempts to escape it" (Quayson 132).

The idea of cyclical transformation is a critique of the inability of African people, particularly Nigerians to carry through an authentic revolution, and unfetter themselves from the burden of both pre-colonial and colonial past. But with exemplary and selfless leaders, who can uphold the rule of law and eschew corruption, the possibility of a revolutionary success and redemption is not far-fetched.

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