



## **MAGIC AS DISCOURSE STRATEGY IN BEN OKRI'S THE FAMISHED ROAD**

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### **Abstract:**

*After a careful examination of *The Famished Road* within the framework of Discourse Stylistics used to investigate how the resources of language that have been used to establish the themes of the supernatural and social power semantics, we have made the following observations. That in order to realise the extraordinary, the novel has stretched the existing concepts of literary coding of reality. This is reflected in the deviations of the contents as well as in the unique language that serves as a vital instrument of establishing magical universe of discourse. Thus, the elements of the supernatural are achieved by the skilful blend of Urhobo and Yoruba beliefs and oral forms as well as post-modernist literary style. It is found that this adaptation of language in TFR has brought about the theme of magic. For example, Dad declares that we have not started living yet.*

### **Magic as Discourse Strategy in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*:**

At the lexical level of analysis, it is discovered through random sampling of frequently instantiated co-meronyms of the lexical semantic field of the supernatural that the novel is situated in myth. And by such lexical frequency we have found that the theme and the main preoccupation of the novel are myth, magic and mystery, which together constitute the wider cultural context of the novel. This is exemplified in the explicit reference to Abiku and the aggregate supernatural meanings of over 3000 words.

It is discovered that graphetic devices have been used to construct various social meanings reflecting social power. It is observed that both capital and small letters are semantic constructs functioning as signifiers of social power differential. These graphetic features iconically signal social status as well as institutional subordination of the masses to the overwhelming political and social power of the politicians. We have found out, for instance, that the speech of the powerful is presented in capital letters while the less powerful speak in lower case.

It is noticed that the subordination of the people is further symbolically constructed through complex simultaneous choices of transitivity and graphetics. In this sense, the capitalised clause complex symbolically represents the inequality of power by making the masses speak in embedded clauses of the main clauses initiated by the politicians.

In the same breath, it is observed that in the interpersonal interaction between the politicians and the masses, there is no tacit conversational frame that grants the latter equal basis of turn taking. The masses therefore have to forcefully interrupt the moves by the politicians and this is graphically signalled in the interruptive ellipsis, which seems to semiotically code class struggle between the powerful and the powerless in the society.

By examining the lexical patterns, an objective method of arriving at the theme has been achieved. In literary practice, themes are intuitively determined through the subjective inferences of the reader. But we have found out lexical tokens that the author has used flora and fauna to develop the theme of the supernatural. Instances of these are shown in giving the qualities and attributes of humans to non-human entities and the inanimate.

In using the concordance to do the Type/Token of the instantiations of the tokens of 'Road' in the novel, it is discovered that ROAD is the central metaphor, which apart from inspiring the title of the novel has also affected the qualities and the state of being of the animate, human or inanimate participants. For example, some of the entities have the instability of forms and identities like the road itself that can change into many other entities: human, river and even a deity.

We have observed that one of the stylistic features of TFR is the use of spectra of colours and aural stimuli to simulate visual appeals that portray mysticism and symbolic social practice especially the scene in which the police officers are sharing money.

It is noted that Okri uses animal imagery and often achieves the unconventional through the dislocation of the normal collocation patterns. This can be seen in such expression as 'the river became a road'.

Similarly, he uses the stylistic devices of personification, pathetic fallacy, kinaesthesia, synaesthesia, paradox, and hyperbole to create mystery. The overall effect of these is that the style taxes the limits of language and alters the reader's concept of reality. For instance, there is intimate interaction between man and animals and even the forest.

The discourse patterns and processes therefore disturb cause-effect and consequently deconstruct the margins between spheres of existence. Thus, the transition in the consciousness of Azaro is constructed as an alternative reality for the reader in the cosmic sense of dream. Azaro, thus can shuttle between the world and the hereafter.

It is found that the novelist uses epithets and adverbial circumstances to judge, paint, evaluate and give surrealistic images to some participants, entities and events through descriptions. By specifying time, locations, situations, degrees, and intensifications, Okri has given extraordinary colours to entities in the novel, especially the chimera Azaro saw.

It is observed that there are recurring references to and alienation of body parts as a stylistic pattern in the novel. The body parts are constructed as if they are autonomous of the body itself and they seem to lie outside the body semantic primitive system. For example, there are more than 3000 references to human body parts in the novel.

It is therefore discovered that by metonymic transfer, the body is used as the metaphorical construction of social power in terms of anarchy in the society, which emanates from power struggle. Therefore, the society is framed as an organic essence like the human body. Fragmenting the body through power struggle, therefore, iconically reproduces chaos in the society. It is found that the dismemberment of the body thus mediates the symbolic fragmentation of the society itself through violence and disorder. The mode of representation of this process is motivated by Yoruba Ogun cultural and ideological myth. This extra-linguistic interpretation is central to the construction and realisation of the theme of social power in the novel.

After a careful analysis of the novel, it is discovered that there are strong extra-textual influences as the underlying metaphors that inform the anatomical violations as well as the realm of impossibility which collectively make up the theme of the supernatural in TFR. For example, the mismatch of human body parts.

It is observed that TFR is embedded in Yoruba legend and mythology, which are used to criticise the society through the dynamics of language that construct the peculiar body configurations of the participants. The myth is based on two Yoruba gods,

Ogun and Obatala. Obatala, according to Soyinka (1976: 15 ff), is a 'saint', 'god of purity', who moulded the human form into which Olodumare, the supreme deity 'breathed' life. However, one day, Obatala got drunk on palm wine, 'His craftsman's finger slipped badly and he moulded cripples, albinos, and the blind' (p.15) as a result of which Obatala was imprisoned as a punishment. The anatomical violation in form of alienation of body parts and bad configuration of the body schemata therefore are cultural signifiers rooted in this myth, which has been used as symbolic betrayal and power corruption.

It is also observed through extra textual context of the novel that Ogun, as the pivotal image of terror, violence and social disorder is coded in the discourse of disorder in the novel.

The instability of being and form change from one state to another in the novel is therefore a linguistic reproduction of the qualities of Ogun whose symbol is a snake with its tail in its mouth signifying repetitions of things- signifying cycle of violence.

It observed that both Ogun and Abiku share this cyclical nature, which Okri has used to make social and political comment on Nigeria where history repeats itself without the nation learning her lesson. Further, this ideology of Yoruba belief system has structured the world of the novel and has greatly influenced the way language is used to construct realities. The concept of Abiku incarnate, which Azaro the protagonist represents, is an extended metaphor and the underlying ideology used to make social comment on political power particularly about Nigeria, which Okri openly refers to as an Abiku country, that is not ready to be and is equally unwilling to die.

In examining the system of Transitivity in the novel, we find that such construction as ergative and passive processes, encode elements of aesthetics as well as magic. They construct syntactic organisations that confer on some inanimate entities quality of volition of action as if they have a will of their own. The strategy for achieving a situation where no one takes the responsibility for action is adopted to protect the animator (the writer/speaker).

The system of Transitivity has also been used to decode the ideology underlying violent acts of the human participants especially the riots and the acts of violence unleashed by the thugs on the masses in the night. Identities of both the victims and the victors are concealed through the lexico-syntactic strategy of passive and ergative construction, which elides the agents and masks the affected human goals. The anonymity of the victims (goal) is also achieved by referring to them in generic terms, *woman, man, people* etc. And this alienates the sympathy of the reader.

The structural elements are constructed through the system of Transitivity to frame the ideology of concealment. Agents are elided with no one in particular taking the responsibility for the act of violence in the novel or claiming the knowledge of it. In terms of social power, the knowledge of the violent action is constructed as generalised suggesting an atmosphere of fear.

Therefore, to portray the horrific effects of the violence on the streets, the author has through structural strategy highlighted and specified the instruments used in committing the violence. The instruments are framed as if they act on their own, thus eliding the agents. The circumstance, night, does not only provide a cover for the marauders but it is also an ideological cover for the novelist to criticise the government since both the victims and the thugs are unknown and since there is no visible authority in sight to enforce law and order, it seems the violence has the tacit support of the government.

Our main objective is to establish and affirm the themes of the supernatural and social power hierarchy in TFR through the ideological coding of language. We have made some findings, which have profound philosophical implications. This is especially found in how the cultural setting of the novel has conditioned the linguistic features. TFR has posed a challenge to the accepted literary norms. In determining the influence of the underlying ideologies on the linguistic construction of the themes within the framework of Discourse Stylistics, we have unmasked the hidden contextual meanings that are not ordinarily manifest in the literal reading of TFR. There are observations and evaluations of the linguistic processes in TFR that need further philosophical discussion, which are beyond the scope of the findings.

For instance, using the resources of the Discourse Stylistics of Graphetics, it has been possible to simultaneously construct the themes of social power and magic. As a post-modernist novel, the manipulation of language is important in the subtle realisation of the cultural settings of the novel as well as the creation of possible simulation of the realities and the illusions of both spiritual and the mundane worlds. The intellectual import of the findings questions the critical classification of TFR as a fiction. As an African literary narrative, it can be philosophically stated that such categorisation is sometimes misleading and has therefore influenced the discourse stylistic analysis of the African novel or fiction. This can be traced to the cultural worldviews of the Africans, which are the underlying factors responsible for the different interpretations of the African literature. Okri has modified the Western critical canons in reproducing the African culture in the eclectic narrative style he has adopted in TFR as post-colonial literature.

The realms of impossibility and deautomatisation of the readers represent the increasing tendency of African post modernist writers to systematically transfer the African oral aesthetics into the narrative genre. There is, therefore, the need to adjust the current critical values in order to accurately describe the realities in some African literature via African orature. In the case of TFR, it is an interpenetration of African folklore, orality as well as the postmodernist European narrative, which gives it the distinctive language.

The result is that TFR is variously classified as 'fantasy', 'magical realism', 'romance', 'allegory' and 'fiction', terms, which seem to situate the novel as far removed from the reality. However, TFR as an African novel obviously depicts the African condition and realities that are often 'stranger than fiction'. Africa is viewed here, as a relative cultural space since the concept of African culture is heterogeneous.

It is necessary to observe that the dynamic interaction of language and culture has been used to interpret the ideology at the centre of the novel in implementing the set goals. The graphetic and the lexical elements are the mediatory stylistic expressive means in the discourse interpretation of the novel. Having therefore analysed the text at the discourse stylistic level, we have observed that TFR is embedded in African culture and world-view, which have lent credence to the aleatory processes such as the instability of entities and the realms of impossibility in the novel. Viewed within the context of African cosmogony, the processes, participants and phenomenon in the novel are credible and possible and this has greatly challenged some literary worldview in the sense that the processes and the events in TFR constitute general cultural realities.

The participants and the processes left at the magical level. It is necessary to rationalise them with evidence from African traditional religion. The African cultural realities have impacted on the stylistic execution of TFR. Rather than being fantasy and fairytale; the cultural processes in the novel are real. Mbiti (1969: 15 ff) has elaborated

on African philosophy and religions and has pointed out that in Africa an individual is immersed in religion from birth to death (15).

Mbiti (1969) has also noted that in African cultural view there are no fixed times, spaces and specific symbolic objects that are designated for worship. He states that in Africa, any object could be marked for worship at any time and place. Thus, rocks, streams, the sky, lakes, trees, caves, boulders, forests, earth, rivers, mountains, hills and animals as God's creatures are His manifestation and are therefore sacred. They are not worshiped but they constitute the media of approaches to the Supreme God.

In this sense, the African is in complete harmony with the totality of his environment. He could therefore communicate, commune with and by mimetic magic transform himself into the fauna or flora. Thus the interaction and dialogues between Dad, Azaro, Koto and trees, brooms and lizards and the fact that Azaro understands the language of rats are relative possibilities in Africa, where it is possible for people to turn into animals. There is, therefore, a high level of liminality making credible the sudden transformation of participants, the 'apotheosis' of objects, the overwhelming presence of spirits, and the unusual intimacy and conversation between man, and 'things' in the novel.

The above conclusion is supported elsewhere, in his other novel, *Songs of Enchantment*, where Okri rhetorically defines this unique African 'Way'.

The undiscovered secrets and mysteries of The African Way- The Way of compassion and fire and serenity; The Way of freedom and power and imaginative life; The Way that keeps the mind open to the existences beyond our earthly sphere, that keeps the spirit pure and primed to all the rich possibilities of living, that makes of their minds gateways through which all the thought-forms of primal creation can wander and take root and flower.... The Way that makes it possible for them to understand the language of angels and gods, birds and trees, animals and spirits; The Way that makes them greet phenomenon forever as a brother and sister in mysterious reality; The Way that develops and keeps its secrets of transformations--- hate into love, beast into man, man into illustrious ancestor, ancestor into god (159-60) (underlined by the researcher).

This Way is grammatically and graphically rendered as one, which is signalled by capitalisation. The Way as an ideological African worldview rhetorically situates man and constructs him as intimately part and the same thing as his physical and spiritual environment. This has led to intimacy of beings at different stages and forms of existence and it is the primary motivation for the deviations of participant as well as the linguistic defamiliarisation at the centre of the novel.

Therefore, the unique discourse achieved in the novel is the result of the complex harmony and intimate interaction between man, spirit, fauna and flora and the symbolic undercurrent of the image of Ogun that, in line with Yoruba cosmogony, has become associated with the road. The road has therefore acquired cultural polysemy of being a shrine, way of life and god who controls the destiny of man by being the supreme deity of the road on which man travels to fulfil his goals in life.

Consonant with this African worldview, every space, time and object is the creation of and manifestation of God. Madame Koto sacrifices to the crossroads; and the forest, the road, the way, the market and the path are the media of Azaro's transition and shuttling between life and death. Accordingly, Hemminger (2001: 67) concludes that 'the novels (TFR and *Songs of Enchantment*) (have) redefined the world human beings inhabit', and has argued for 'increased interplay between the physical and the spiritual in a modern technologized world' (67). The harmony between these levels of



existence is coded in the linguistic elements of the novel. The deviation of both participants and the linguistic processes are the manifestation of this cosmic reconciliation. It is therefore a reality that the forest and man quarrel. Man also talks and interacts with the animals on equal basis, which is Dad's manifesto in garnering support for his bid to become the president.

In addition to the instability of being, we can further elaborate that in Africa there are eternal occlusion between the unborn, the living and the dead and the abode of each of these stages of existence is contiguous. In Africa, these are not separate, sequential and compartmentalised stages of life, where death is the finality, non-being and the phase of forgetfulness, which can only symbolically be retrieved via icons like pictures.

This is how Dad fought a dead wrestler, Yellow Tiger. Thus, all forms of deviations of the participants, realms of impossibilities and anatomical violations in the novel can indeed be rationalised as normal realistic events and processes within African cultural context. The deviations observed in TFR challenge the conventional literary worldviews in many ways. Thus, the Africanisation of the narrative process in TFR emanates from incorporating elements of African traditional folklore narrative, which are not considered fictitious but are seen as the representation of the eternal truth, the mediation of the African belief system and verbal moral illustrations.

The treatment of spirits needs further clarification. The conception of participants with flesh and blood as characters in literary works in the tradition of realism has been challenged by populating TFR with beings (spirits) that exist at the margins of realities who, the critic, Czair-Thomson, 1989, 1996, has pointed out, are not characters at all. They are actualised and manifested in auditory terms, as disembodied voices. It is also a philosophical statement that the modern world has a lot to benefit from the moral balance between absolute materialism and extreme spiritualism.

According to Mbiti (1969: 1), 'Africans are notoriously religious... (and) Religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it'. The novel therefore seems to address these imbalances across the ideological divides implying that the most desired world is the one that can strike a balance between these extremes.

This literary ideology in which the margins of different and seemingly contradictory realities are blurred and in which spirits interact actively with humans is often termed 'romantic', 'magical' or mythological. This implies that the novel is far-removed from the realities. In Africa, however, the interaction between human and the spirits and of humans occasionally taking glimpses of the spirit world is possible giving rise to such concept of a child as the reincarnation of the parents and ancestors as well as divination. Thus, the Yoruba name 'Babatunde' given to a child means 'father has come back', (the father has reincarnated in the child). This way we have implemented the major focus of this study which is basically undertaken in order to find out the stylistic variants and their effects and how these could be used to interpret the underlying ideologies, participants, events and processes in the novel'. Cause-effects in the context of the novel are relative.

The central issue and the thematic preoccupation of the novel is the construction of the supernatural, and this has been proved through the isotopic analysis of the novel, which reveals how the supernatural are projected through meronyms and the comeronyms across the text. The idea of Abiku, which is the controlling cultural semantics in TFR's discourse, can be rationalised as a reality in the African context.

First, according to MacCabe (2002: 45), 'The corpus of written Nigerian literature contains at least thirty works in which Abiku or Ogbanje play some sort of pivotal role (45), which testifies to Abiku as the cultural mediation of the realities in TFR. In the cultural context of the Yoruba world, Abiku is a reality to Soyinka. He states that 'You have to understand that I grew up with abiku [...] Abiku was real, not just figment of literary analysis...' (Wilkinson 107-08) and indeed, as a young boy, one of Soyinka's playmates was an abiku as he relates in his autobiography, *Ake: The Years of Childhood*:

(Mrs. B's) only daughter, Bukola, was not of our world. [...] Amulets, bangles, tiny rattles, and dark copper-twist rings earthed her through ankles, fingers and waist... (16). It made me uneasy. Mrs. B. was too kind a woman to be plagued with such an awkward child [a child who threatened to die if she was not given anything she wanted...(18).

It can be seen from Soyinka's view that abiku is a reality and this reality together with the myth of Ogun, accounts for the instability of identities, transformation of entities and flagrant deviation of the linguistic elements in the novel.

Yet, the overall philosophical principle is woven around the personality of Abiku, who in Yoruba worldview is a symbol of rebellion and assertion of individualism. Abiku is a semiotic icon of individualism and rebellion. The dominant 'I' point of view Abiku uses in the narration is the discursive representation of the 'me' culture. The 'I' narrative point of view verbally and semiotically frame Abiku as a metonym of a detached individual and a defiant, egocentric self-willed rebel.

Nobody speaks for Abiku in his boastful ranting in Soyinka's poem 'Abiku' or as he is implored to pity the mother in the tone of J.P. Clark's Abiku poem. Finally, Okri's reference to Nigeria as an Abiku country thus symbolically transfers the contradictory qualities of Abiku. The novel is thus an extended metaphor for Nigerian social and political problems and as a failed state. So, all the instances of the civil war, coups, religious and communal riots are seen semiotically as little deaths of Nigeria like the way Abiku shuttles between life and death

However, such realities are not likely to be critically accepted by some Discourse Stylistic analysts, who would regard TFR as a chronicle of myth. For example, Abrams (1999) in his *Glossary of Literary Terms*, seventh edition, defines myth as ...a system of hereditary stories of ancient origin which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain (in terms of the intentions and actions of deities and other supernatural beings) why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observances and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives. Most myth are related to social rituals—set forms and procedures in sacred ceremonies... If the protagonist is a human being rather than a supernatural being, the traditional story is usually called **legend**. If the hereditary story concerns supernatural beings who are not gods, and the story is not part of a systematic mythology, it is usually classified as a *folktale*.... to treat myths within each culture as signifying systems whose true meanings are unknown to their proponents (170).

From this point of view, myth is a discourse format that does not match the reality and this means that some events in TFR do not fit into this classification from the authoritative evidence adduced from Soyinka's experience. To Soyinka, Ogun is so real and inspiring in his process of literary production that he had to acknowledge the deity in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech.

As a literature of commitment, it is found that at the graphetic level, social symbolic meanings and criticisms are veiled, sneaky and subtly attached to the graphic features of the text of novel. In this case, it takes a very inquisitive mind to discern the social comments. This means of social criticism provides a cover for the author. Other aspects of the findings that merit comment is the examination of some of the structural patterns in TFR. We have observed some ideological motivations for the authorial resort to some specific linguistic strategies. It seems the political realities of the military rule and the anarchy caused by political thugs under the civilian government, which is equally intolerant of opposition has dictated the resort to passive transformation to elide agency. In this case nobody takes the responsibility for the event being reported and such linguistic strategy makes for the survival of the discourse animator (the author).

By the same transitivity, the gossiping of the women is constructed iconically in the repetition of verbal process, 'said'. The result and the stylistic effect is that the spiritual enigma of Madame Koto has become a speculation among women as reproduced in vague attribution of facts, 'they said', where 'they' has no antecedent. Okri has, through the system of transitivity and semantic prosodies, constructed the women as truly Nigerian carrying out their traditional chores and are greatly subjected to the control of men.

TFR has been highly influenced by the narrative ideology of folktales. This is evident in the anonymity of most of the characters that are simply identified typically by generic references, physical handicaps like, 'the blind old man', 'the man with eight fingers' and yet, they are constructed as common ground of knowledge with the reader using the definite determiner 'the' as if the reader shares the knowledge of these marginal characters with the author.

Another example of traditional mode of narrative is the sub-discourse like the story within a story. They are usually folktales incorporated into the modern narrative to situate the novel in an African setting. An example is the story within a story of how the stomach came about and the king of the road in TFR. They are aetiological tales, which give the reason why and how some things come into being.

Whereas our findings treat some participants as presented, there is the need to critically examine them. In as much as some entities, events, processes and phenomena, which have affected the stylistic interpretations of the novel seem out of the ordinary, a deep cultural reading of the text can as well rationalise these deviations, contradictions and apparent realms of impossibility and anatomic violations. This is not to say that all the stylistic values in the novel can only be read metaphorically.

We have demonstrated that the ideology, which underlies a narrative text, can be predicated on its linguistic structure. Discourse stylistics therefore can be an alternate tool in explicating and interpreting literary works since it uses the underlying cultural context as the moorings of interpretation. TFR as a literary work is capable of being interpreted at both the surface and the deep levels.

One can therefore conclude that apart from the normal literary practice, another way of establishing the dominant themes of the magical and social power hierarchy in TFR is through the medium of language. To construct the theme of magic, the author has situated the novel in a cultural setting that has conditioned the linguistic elements of the text. Okri has therefore accommodated within the conventional narrative genre the reproduction of the worldviews of his people and those of the Yorubas, which are manifested in the linguistic elements used in establishing the themes. The two themes are the main focus of the novel. However, the more dominant theme is that of the



supernatural. This is evident in the immense centrality of myth in TFR. His Abiku metaphor is clearly relevant to Nigeria of today.

It can be argued, therefore, that Okri has used various linguistic strategies to achieve literary communication in the novel especially in the construction of the themes of social power semantics and the supernatural. The themes are achieved through the choice of words, and by pivoting the semiotics of social power hierarchy on the graphetic elements of the novel, which constitute a subtle social criticism. The defamiliarisation in the novel mainly comes from the influence of orality. There is the interpenetration of Nigerian ethnic folklore style with the modernist mode of narrative, which forms strong literary and magical stylistic values in the novel. Therefore, central to the construction of the major themes of TFR is the transfer of Nigerian oral literary aesthetics to the modern narrative. This eclectic combination is striking and constitutes the stylistic strength of the novel.

TFR is embedded in African culture and world-view, especially the Abiku concept. The theme of the supernatural is realised through aleatory processes, which are reproduced in African oral stylistic values.

Therefore, the unique discourse achieved in the novel is the result of the complex harmony and intimate interaction between man, spirit, fauna and flora and the symbolic undercurrent of the image of Ogun in Yoruba cosmogony. The road has, therefore, acquired cultural polysemy. The deviation of the linguistic processes is the manifestation of the reproduction of the cosmic. The central issue and the thematic preoccupation of the novel is the construction of the supernatural, and this has been proved through the isotopic analysis of the novel, which reveals how the supernatural are projected through meronyms and the co-meronyms across the text.

The analysis has also shown that the ideology, in a narrative text can be predicated on the linguistic structure. Discourse stylistics therefore can be a tool in explicating and interpreting literary works since it uses the underlying cultural context as the bases of interpretation. Ben Okri has used multiple linguistic strategies to construct myth, magic, illusion and power through linguistic stylistic devices. At the various levels of stylistic investigations we have found that there are simulations of realities mediated through surrealistic presentation of participants, processes, events, entities and phenomena that are used to construct magic.

TFR as a literary work does not consist of just strings of structure and chains of words but structures and words that are cultural as well as ideological signifiers of power and myth. Linguistic stylistic analysis is thus an objective tool and schemata through which literature can be dispassionately interpreted and understood. Understanding literature through the linguistic medium therefore requires the ancillaries of wider and immediate contexts that delimit meaning. And that has helped us in analysing and explicating the major themes of the novel.

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