



## A Study on the Perspectives in *The Famished Road*

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### Abstract

Ben Okri is a famous Nigerian writer who plays an important role in African and world's literature. His masterpiece, *The Famished Road*, has won him lots of important awards. Since publication, it has been well received for its exquisite structure, unique narrative style, beautiful language and interesting plots. Up to now, more than a dozen of monographs and over a hundred papers about this novel or its author have been published.

On the basis of previous studies, with the analysis of the narrative perspectives, this paper intends to make an in-depth study on the Perspectives in *The Famished Road* and dig deeper into Ben Okri's writing intentions, language use and writing techniques, so as to know better about this book, as well as deepen the understanding of the novel among researchers and readers.

**Key words:** *The Famished Road*; Ben Okri; Narrative Perspective; Narratology

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### INTRODUCTION

#### A Brief Introduction to *The Famished Road* and Its Author Ben Okri

Having entered into the 20th century, English and American Literature have won themselves a position and reputation across the world for their pioneering explorations and experiments. Tons of systematic and professional researches in them have enriched the treasure house of literature, inspired literary creation and criticism, while in the meantime deepened readers' understanding on writers and their works. As time goes on, scholars' attention has extended the geographic borders of English writings beyond the UK and the USA. In this situation, Ben Okri, a Nigerian writer who writes in English, begins to gain his reputation steadily.

Born in Nigeria in 1959, Ben Okri was taken to London by his parents when he was still a baby, and brought back to Nigeria when he was 9. Okri has loved literature since he was a child. He started writing when he was only 17. At the age of 19, he went to England again to study in a university, from which he dropped off later due to short of money. When he was 21, he published his first English novel *Flowers and Shadows*. Later, he wrote many other novels, such as *The Famished Road* (1991), *Songs of Enchantment* (1993), *Astonishing the Gods* (1995), *Dangerous Love* (1996), *Infinite Riches* (1999), *In Arcadia* (2002), *Starbook* (2007), *Tales of Freedom* (2009), etc.... Besides, he has written many short stories, essays, poems and literary criticism. His masterpiece *The Famished Road* won him the Man Booker Prize in 1991, which made him the youngest winner by then. Later he has won many other awards. His outstanding literary contribution has not only made him an iconic figure of Nigerian literature, but also one of the most important African English writers.

Written with the technique of Magic Realism, *The Famished Road* is Okri's most famous book, which tells a story about a fictional impoverished African country. By revealing all kinds of difficulties and conflicts Africa has encountered with in its post-colonial era, this novel shows Okri's deep concern on Africa and the fate of its people.

This novel starts with the introduction of the existence of a group of abiku, spirit children, who lived so happily in the spirit world that they were unwilling to be born into the Living World. Ironically, the happier they were, the closer they were to be born. Being able to will their own death, abiku made pacts to return to the spirit world at their first opportunity. Anyone who broke this pact would be assailed by hallucinations, haunted by their companions, and found no consolation until they return to the world of the Unborn. Their reluctance to stay sped up their death in the Living World, which brought much pain to their mothers. The protagonist of this novel, Azaro, was such an abiku.

Having come and gone so many times between the Living and the Unborn, Azaro finally chose to stay in the Living World. It might have been that he got tired, or that he wanted to know more about the world and do something for it, or that he didn't want to break his mother's heart.

Okri creates this novel with an extraordinary imagination and conception. He has observed carefully and written exquisitely in poetic language. The novel is narrated through the perspectives of Azaro (a combination of an innocent, ordinary child and a sophisticated, indifferent abiku), who has the ability to see things that normal people cannot even perceive. It takes Azaro's growth as the storyline and gradually radiates its delineation to the lives of African people and the political destiny of Africa in the post-colonial era, which presents a rich picture of Africa for readers. Meanwhile, through multiple allegories, it tries to reveal the causes of the political dilemma in Africa in the post-colonial era.

### Studies on This Novel

Researchers have started their studies on this book since its publication and made lots of achievements: more than a dozen of monographs and over a hundred papers about this novel or Okri have been published. These studies have mainly focused on Ben Okri's adaptation of surrealism, magical realism and post-modernism, his use of narrative and the post-colonial elements, as well as the ethnic culture and African aesthetics he depicts. For instance: Olatubosun Ogunsanwo (1995) has analyzed Africa and the living conditions its people are facing in the post-colonial era from intertextuality and post-colonialism theories, which reflected the author and the researcher's deep concern for the fate of mankind. Edna Aizenberg (1999) has focused on the joys and pains in Africa brought by the post-colonial hybridity. Adeline Masquelier (2002) has discussed the mythical interpretation in this novel based on her research in African myth. Wole Ogundele

(2002) has studied the mythical and historical imagination through post-colonial theory. David CL Lim (2005) has studied the desire for home country expressed in the series of works by Ben Okri and another writer. Douglas McCabe (2005) has said that Okri highlighted the characteristics of African culture through his surrealist techniques of expression. Richard K Priebe (2005) has studied mainly on Okri's delineation of community and violence writing. Maurice O'Conner (2008) has explored Okri's regional literary writing and how it transcends regional boundaries to refer to the whole world. Christopher Warnes (2009) has analyzed the magic realism technique and post-colonial perspective together with his research in and understanding of African culture. Ben Obumelu (2011) has interpreted and re-evaluated the Yoruba myth in the novel. V Guigner (2012, 2014) has analyzed the characterization and theme of it. To name just a few.

Overall, current researches in Okri and *The Famished Road* mainly focus on its creative intentions and themes, while those on his language and narrative strategies are relatively few. Thus neglect occurs when Okri's complex and ingenious writing forms and superb writing skills are overlooked.

On the basis of previous studies, this paper intends to make an in-depth study on the perspectives in *The Famished Road*, dig deeper into Okri's writing intentions, language use and writing skills, so as to know better about the themes of this book and deepen the understanding among researchers and readers.

### Theoretical Framework

In her book *Narratology and Stylistics of Novels*, Professor Shen Dan (2001, pp. 187-250) has summarized the concepts, the advantages and disadvantages of various narrative perspectives. She says that during the first person's retrospective narration (be the narrator a protagonist or not), there will always be two effective kinds of perspectives: one is the self-narrative perspective, from which "I" recall the past (hereafter referred to as SNP); the other is the self-experienced perspective, from which the "recalled I" experienced the past (hereafter referred to as SEP). These two kinds of perspectives can show "my" different perceptions of and opinions on events. Shen Dan believes that when the narrator takes the self-narrative perspective, he actually has a limited omniscient perspective on things in the past; and when he takes the self-experienced perspective, he can have the readers go through things with him, leave them some kind of suspense as well as get themselves involved.

In *The Famished Road*, three kinds of perspectives are adapted. Most of the time, Okri uses the past tense to tell the story from the perspective of the protagonist Azaro (the combination of an innocent, ordinary child and a sophisticated and indifferent abiku). While being an ordinary child, Azaro tells the story when he

experiences it. Thus we can categorize the perspective in such situation into the SEP. However, while being an abiku, the spirit child, Azaro tells the story from the SNP, which sometimes has the effects like the limited omniscient perspective, from which some selected but not yet interpreted information are given to the readers (Shen, 2001, pp.203-222 & 246-247). But, before has Azaro become the narrator, we notice that the author has adapted first-person collective narrative perspective of a group of abiku (who kept an indifferent distance from the Living World) to tell the story, which can be categorized as the limited first-person omniscient perspective.

The following chapters will try to use narrative theory to analyse the perspectives in *The Famished Road* to see how they can help in characterizing roles, promoting plots, deepening themes and clarifying the author's creative intentions.

## 1. INTRODUCING THE WORLD FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF A GROUP OF ABIKU

The author starts his narration of this story from the perspective of a group of Abiku (the limited first-person omniscient perspective), spirit children who lingered in the interspace between the spirit world and the Living World. Abiku were sophisticated and indifferent. They regarded the spirit world as a heaven and disliked the Living World. In this situation, the author's choice of a group of abiku as his narrators has kept the narrators distant from the Living World, the world he intends to focus on in the latter part of the novel. Meanwhile, his choice of a group of abiku instead of a single one has presented readers a relatively objective view on the Living World from the Collective Narrative Voice "We". Let's see how "We" saw the Living World:

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, all of whom are born blind, few of whom ever learn to see. (Okri, 2009, p.3)

Obviously, in the eyes of abiku who were unrelated to it, the Living World was a dreadful place filled with cruelty, injustice, ignorance, indifference, heartlessness and blindness. Almost no good word was in their description of it. Therefore, abiku children chose to leave it at the first opportunity they could get. As we readers may have known from all kinds of information that the Living World resembles the real Africa a lot, we are likely to wonder what a place it could be even though we may not live there.

By choosing an objective and distant perspective in the introduction to the abiku children (of whom one would be the protagonist of the story) and the Living World (the background of the story), the author has laid a magical realism foundation for the story and created a convenient

narrator, an abiku child who can see things that normal people cannot even perceive, to tell the rest of the story. He has made readers prepared for a story that appears to be surreal but is metaphorically real with nearly all the allegories resemble the real Africa. In that way, he has built a kind of trust with the readers, which make them take the novel as a fiction that reflects on the real world rather than a mythical one.

## 2. PERCEIVING THE WORLD FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF A SON

When the protagonist, Azaro, was again born into the Living World, he finally chose to stay. Okri chooses Azaro's SEP to tell the story in this situation, from which we can see that at the beginning, Azaro did not fit quite into his family. Like most of the spirit children, he felt like a stranger in the Living World. It took him some time to build intimacy with his parents, during which he had been through a lot: got to know the destitute situation of his family; met and observed for the first time how the policemen took bribe from the rich and helped them oppress the poor by all means; and known the ROAD (the most frequently mentioned allegorical image in the story). Following Azaro's SEP, readers get an initial impression of the political environment of Africa and people who live there.

When growing up, Azaro gradually got more intimate with his family, especially his mother. Okri has depicted a very touching moment when Azaro started to change his emotion for his mother. It happened when Azaro was found by his mother after being allured by his spirit companions and losing his way:

There was a woman standing in the doorway, her hair bedraggled and wet, her eyes distracted, her neck strung, her feet bare.... For a moment I thought I had known her in another life or in the world of spirits... Then, with light in my head, and hunger in my voice, I cried: 'Mother!' (Okri, 2009, pp.32-33)

In this scene, Okri obviously knows who the woman is, but, instead of telling us directly, he keeps a narrative distance by calling her "a woman", which makes the readers experience the same with Azaro through the SEP. It seems that we are to see a stranger. Instead, as more and more details were revealed about the woman, we readers, as surprised as Azaro, found out it was his mother who had weathered off all the difficulties for her son. So, our empathy was with Azaro to feel so touched by his loving mother. Then, from the underlined sentences, we know that Azaro has finally approved his identity as a son of a family in the Living World. Hence by using the SEP, the author has got his readers curious and involved.

Having made up his mind to be a child in the Living World, Azaro started to perceive and feel things as most ordinary children did:

Our surroundings were poor... I was happy because I could smell the warm presences and the tender energies of my parents everywhere. (Okri, 2009, p.40)

Here, from the SEP, together with Azaro, we can see that he and his family was just a microcosm of most African children and their families living in slums. As we know more about the bad conditions of the slums, we might think, maybe the warmth and tenderness from family are the strength that has supported countless African children or even adults to endure their hard life and to hope for a better future.

When he grew older, Azaro started to know more. He saw how his parents (representatives of the poor) were not able to get rid of their destitute life after having tried their best; how their petty and greedy neighbors fought against the rich at one moment but changed their sides at the next; how the struggles and conflicts between political parties got more and more fierce and filthy. Through those, he realized the hopelessness and weakness of some poor people, the perseverance of some other poor people represented by his parents, the hypocrisy of politicians, and the exploitation and oppression that the rich had imposed on the poor ....All in all, following Azaro's perspectives, we had witnessed a lot:

We had witnessed how a photographer, the first hero who tried to speak for the poor with his photos and writings, got expelled and chased by the rich. But most ironic of all, he was finally abandoned by the poor whom he had devoted so much for. The photographer, who spoke the loudest at first, became silent under all kinds of pressure in the end. In the scene when the photographer was admired as a superhero by the poor at a party, Ben Okri depicts him from Azaro's SEP as below:

One moment he was talking and the next moment I didn't hear him anymore. His mouth moved, but his words were silent. The candle flicked on the table. (Okri, 2009, p.186)

When nearly everyone got so fascinated and bewildered by the photographer, Azaro, a child who was so curious about the photographer, noticed something abnormal. It is a very interesting scene in which Ben Okri foretells the fate of the photographer through Azaro's narration. We can see from the rest of the book and know that basically from this moment, the photographer's fate started to change. The moving mouth and silent voice foretold how his future voice was smothered, and the flicking candle symbolized his uncertain, dim future. However, seeing that from his SEP, Azaro had no idea what would happen to the photographer by then, nor did the readers. Still, we can sense something ominous. It is such kind of sense that keeps us following Azaro's narration to finish reading this novel.

We also had witnessed Azaro's father's change. At the beginning of the novel, he had no name, did a humble job and resorted to violence to vent his discontent, judging from which the readers may think of him as a coward who would resign himself to all kinds of adversities and keep silent always. By then, he was just among those ordinary poor people who struggled for a living and fought against

the rich when they were oppressed too hard. But as time went by, he gradually became the one who insisted on his faith and even wanted to be a leader of the poor to strive a better future for them while most of the poor were either tempted or scared by the rich, or simply got tired of the endless political struggles. Through boxing, Azaro's father had gained his reputation and people's respect, and his name, Black Tyger, was known to all. In that process, he had tried his best to beat his rival Green Leopard (a man sponsored by and spoke for the rich), and almost got himself killed. His bitter struggle, in a sense, stood for the poor people's fight against the rich, which was filled with bitterness and sadness. His victory, in another sense, stood for the author's ideal that the poor can win their rights. Unfortunately, most of the poor did not have willpower that Black Tyger had, they either got tired of the endless conflicts or caved by the threat from the rich. Worst of all, some of them were even unaware of the value of freedom and independence.

Black Tyger's image kept changing in accordance to the circumstances around him. In his ups and downs, his wife and Azaro were always around. Their constant support had given him strength to go on. Azaro knew how much pain his father had been through, understood how he got stronger by enduring all kinds of humiliations and bitterness. He was happy when his father got power, sad when his father's dreams were ridiculed, and supportive as always when his father was abandoned by others. Let's see one of the scenes when his father's political dream was mentioned:

"My father wants to talk politics with you."

"Who?"

"You."

Madame Koto reached for a stick and began to hit me. I didn't move. She stopped.

"You and your father are mad." (Okri, 2009, p.498)

Seeing things from Azaro's SEP, we can feel the same as that Azaro had been through and know what kind of painful and embarrassing situation his family was in. Thus we get more and more sympathetic and empathetic with people who had a similar fate in Africa.

Meanwhile, we had witnessed how Azaro's mother, an always submissive and silent woman who had no name from the beginning to the end of the novel, fought back against family violence and social injustice. But, if we think Azaro's mother was an exception, we are wrong. Let's see the scene when Azaro wandered on the street where he met many female vendors:

The women wore faded wrappers and dirty blouses....I went about the market confused by many voices that could have been Mum's, many faces that could have been hers, and I saw that her tiredness and sacrifice were not hers alone but were suffered by all women, all women of the marketplace. (Okri, 2009, p.190)

Here, from Azaro's SEP, we know that his mother was among those African women who suffered a lot and barely got any chance to speak for themselves, and we can conclude what kind of harsh life some African women were living.

Thereupon, following Azaro's SEP, we readers had witnessed everything as he had, and we can feel like we have grown up together with him. Step by step, we got more and more involved and wanted to know more about African people's fate in the novel.

### 3. FORCE-FIELD THE PERSPECTIVE OF A SON AND AN ABIKU COMBINED

As mentioned above, Okri has given a special identity, the spirit child who can see things that normal people cannot even perceive, to the protagonist Azaro. Readers will soon realize how clever the writer is since he makes it easy for his protagonist to transform his perspective between the SEP (Azaro's self-narrative perspective as a son) and the SNP (Azaro's self-experienced perspective as a spirit child). This setting provides him convenience to depict all kinds of people and things from Azaro's perspective, such as the text below:

The roads seemed to me then to have a cruel and infinite imagination. All the roads multiplied, reproducing themselves, subdividing themselves, turning in on themselves.... leading towards home and then away from it, without end, with too many signs, and no directions.... (Okri, 2009, pp.134-135)

This is one scene when Azaro wandered around as a spirit child and started to grasp some truth of the "road". As it being in title of this book, the "road" has run through the whole book and become the most complicated image in it. After reading through the whole novel, readers will find that Okri has used so many allegories to give multiple symbolic meanings to the "road": sometimes it symbolized the always starving stomachs of the poor; sometimes it symbolized the miserable sufferings of the poor; sometimes it symbolized the forever unfulfilled desires of the rich; sometimes it symbolized the various dreams people had; sometimes it symbolized the intricate difficulties that African people have encountered with; sometimes it symbolized the endless cycle of life.... But most of all, it symbolized the intricate political conditions in Africa which were always filled with struggles and conflicts. As things changed, the meaning of the road changed consequently. That is when we find that if the author sticks to the SEP, we won't be able to know so many, even if we piece together what the protagonist had seen and heard. But through the SNP, we can easily comprehend multiple meanings of the "road" from the text.

Besides, Azaro had witnessed how Madame Koto, the most interesting and intricate character in the novel (who might be a witch judging from her mysterious abilities), gradually changed from a covert supporter of the Party of the Rich into an open supporter and spokesperson of it.

When Madame Koto first appeared in the story, she showed no other mysterious power but only an unbelievable strength which make people take her as a

legend. But when readers were busy knowing what kind of legend she was from the SEP, the author transformed the perspective into the SNP all in a sudden:

Her legend, which would sprout a thousand hallucinations.... would become some of the most extravagant realities of our lives. (Okri, 2009, p.45)

No one knew which Party she supported or what actual identity she had when Madame Koto first appeared in the novel. In the above text, with the sudden perspective transformation, out of expectation, readers get to know that she would not keep what she was as in the beginning, which makes us wonder what kind of change she would go through. Thus, the suspense is set to attract readers to go on reading.

As time went by, political struggles between the Party of the Rich and the Party of the Poor get more and more fierce, Madame Koto became an open supporter and spokesperson of the Party of the Rich, she herself became richer, but she was not happy. In a scene she secretly gave money to Azaro, the narrator described her from both the SEP and the SNP:

...she had changed. She was now wholly enveloped in an invisible aura of power, a force-field of dread. Her stomach was really big and she seemed very wide.... Even her shadow weighed me down. Her eyes were distant. They couldn't come near human beings any more.... (Okri, 2009, p.424)

If Azaro were only a normal child, he would not be able to have observed the aura around Madame Koto and sensed the profound meaning of her eyes. So the author chooses the SNP on the one hand to explain her mental change and retains the SEP to describe her physical change on the other hand. With the two kinds of perspectives combined, readers get a vivid picture of her change, and thus find out how much influence can power, money and politics impose on a person. We can also see that, by then, although Madame Koto stood on the side of the Party of the Rich, she still had some sympathy for the poor. In some sense, her sympathy was the embodiment of the remaining conscience of the Party of the Rich that had not yet died out.

However, as the conflict between the Party of the Rich and the Party of the Poor got more and more fierce, most of the poor finally caved under the overwhelming power of the rich. By the end of the story, the Party of the Rich had finally seized the power to rein the country. Together with the Party she belonged to, Madame Koto had grown more powerful and cruel, and her image had changed again:

Madame Koto grew more powerful.... She developed a walk of imposing and languid dignity.... she was scornful of everyone.... she stole the people's energies. (She was not the only one: they were legion.)... While Dad ranged the spheres crying for justice, Madame Koto sucked in the powers of our area.... Slowly, while the people of the area grew weaker, more accepting, more afraid, she grew stronger. That was when I understood that conflicting forces were fighting for the

future of our country in the air, at night, in our dreams, riding invisible white horses and whipping us, sapping our will while we slept. (Okri, 2009, pp.567-568)

Here we can find the author chooses the SNP to describe what Madame Koto, a symbol of the Party of the Rich, had finally become after she got rich and gained power. We know how she and her Party oppressed on and exploited from the poor; how the weak people lost their strengths and voices under the abuse of power, and sometimes even under the circumstances that they were not aware of. Eventually, we know that the rich had seized power in Africa with their dirty and cruel means, and then tyrannically governed the poor, while the poor might even not have a chance to fight back. Even if some of the poor did have struggled to get justice, like Azaro's father did, they could not do anything with their limited strength. And what made things worse was that most of the poor did not even had any awareness of the value of freedom and independence, they simply accept what happened to them. The more we know about the political dilemma of Africa, the more we understand the political meaning of the the ROAD: When it kept stretching long, even though no one could see where it was heading to, it still held a life. But once it stopped, its life ended, and so was the destiny of Africa. The life of the ROAD lied within the constant political struggles and conflicts, which, though making people feel annoying and miserable, sprouted new flesh and blood, and new possibilities for Africa as well. In this sense, it echoes the theme Okri intends to express from Azaro's perspective:

...the probability that no injustice lasts for ever, no love ever dies, that no light is ever really extinguished, that no true road is ever complete, that no way ever definitive, no truth ever final, and that there are never really any beginnings or endings? (Okri, 2009, p.559)

The author never uses a traditional omniscient perspective (A perspective that the narrator knows all and makes condescending comments from time to time) (Shen Dan, 2001, pp.206-207)) to tell his story. Instead, he tries to build trust with his readers, get them curious about and involved in his story by letting Azaro tell most of it. When he does want to make comments, he chooses the SNP to set Azaro, the combination of a normal child and a spirit child, as a narrator to tell us what he saw, what he heard and what he thought. As we can see here, he delineates the profound theme of the novel from the sophisticated spirit child Azaro's self-narrated perspective. From the theme, we can see that, although the author seems to be very pessimistic about the future and destiny of Africa, he still holds some hopes. A bold guess can be made here that Okri hopes Africa's future would stretch like the endless road in his novel, though full of uncertainties, also full of possibilities. Furthermore, we can see the writer's greatness from his deep concern about Africa and its people.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has used the narrative perspective theory to analyse Ben Okri's masterpiece *The Famished Road*. Through probing into the use of different perspectives, the transformation between and the combination of them in the novel, we can see how the choices of perspectives become really important for characterizing roles, promoting plots, deepening themes and clarifying the author's creative intentions. We can also see how much a great author has tried to express his concern on Africa and its people from his elaborate and ingenious creation. Through the above analysis, this paper wishes to help readers better understand *The Famished Road* and develop some interest in African English writings or even in African literature.

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