

Perceiving Ben O’kri’s *The Famished Road*: The Role of Postcolonial Hybridity

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Abstract

Ben O’kri’s *The Famished Road* is a magical realistic novel that gives credibility to the idea of talking to the dead. A talking dead is not a new concept in the African culture for the child who returns to life in another body is an accepted notion. Being a Nigerian novelist, Ben Okri uses Azoro or Abiku as the main character who lives in reality with his family but originally comes from the immortal world. Depicting this scene, it is believed that Okri is influenced by the Nigerian culture; however, Okri uses this kind of Animist Realism out of a postcolonial indoctrination. Okri relies on the hybridity of the current Nigerian culture to help perceiving the intended political message. Nigerian readers are not required to willingly suspend their disbelief; however, they are asked to use their imagination, resulted from the colonial and the African influence, to conceive the message.

Keywords: *The Famished Road*, Hybridity, Postcolonialism, African Culture, Postmodernism, Politics.

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Résumé

The Famished Road de Ben O’kri est un roman de Réalisme Magique qui donne de la crédibilité à l’idée de parler aux morts. Un mort qui parle n’est pas un nouveau concept dans la culture africaine car l’enfant qui revient à la vie dans un autre corps est une notion largement acceptée. En tant que romancier nigérian, Ben Okri utilise Azoro ou Abiku comme personnage principal qui vit en réalité avec sa famille mais qui vient à l’origine du monde immortel. Représentant cette scène, la majorité des critiques pensent qu’Okri est influencé par la culture nigériane, alors qu’il utilise ce type de réalisme animiste sur une base postcoloniale. Okri compte sur l’hybridité de la culture nigériane actuelle pour percevoir le message politique visé par *The Famished Road*. Les lecteurs nigériens ne sont pas obligés de suspendre volontairement leur incrédulité; cependant, il leur est demandé d’utiliser leur imagination, issue de l’influence coloniale et africaine, pour concevoir le message.

Mots clés: *The Famished Road*, Hybridité, Postcolonialisme, Culture Africaine, postmodernisme, Politique.

ملخص

تعتبر رواية *The Famished Road* لبن اوكري رواية واقعية سحرية تعطي مصداقية لفكرة التحدث إلى الموتى. لا تشكل فكرة الميت المتحدث مفهوماً جديداً في الثقافة الأفريقية ففرضية الطفل الذي يعود إلى الحياة في جسد طفل اخر تعتبر معتقداً شائعاً لدى الافارقة. كونه روائياً نيجيرياً ، يستخدم بن أوكري أزورو أو أبيكو كشخصية رئيسية تعيش في الواقع مع عائلتها ولكنها تأتي في الأصل من العالم الاخر. يعتقد البعض ان تجسيد اوكري لهذه الفكرة ناجم عن تأثره بالثقافة النيجيرية و لكنه في الحقيقة يستخدم هذا النوع من الواقعية السحرية كوسيلة لتمرير رسالته السياسية. يعتمد اوكري على فكرة تهجين الثقافة النيجيرية الحالية لإدراك الرسالة السياسية التي يقصدها *The Famished Road* القراء النيجيريون غير مطالبين بتعليق تكذيبهم للأحداث و انما مطالبون باستخدام خيالهم الناتج عن التأثير الاستعماري والأفريقي لتصور الرسالة لسياسة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الطريق الجائع ، الهجين ، ما بعد الاستعمار ، الثقافة الأفريقية ، ما بعد الحداثة، سياسة.

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I- Introduction :

In the introduction to the 25th-anniversary¹ edition of *The Famished Road*, Ben Okri said: “The novel was written to give myself reasons to live. Often the wonder of living fades from us, obscured by a thousand things. I wanted to look at life afresh and anew and I sought a story that would give me the right vantage point.” Ben Okri admits that this novel was liberating for his thoughts after being locked out of board of structured reflections, in chaotic feelings and beliefs. The novel actually sums up Okri’s conviction of the existence of hybridity in the Nigerian society. Despite its tangled significance, hybridity was a homogeneous relief for Okri being a postcolonial writer. In this paper, hybridity is considered as a gathering pot for the African society. It is a matter of fact that the latter has been exposed to different cultures and beliefs due to its African existence (which itself consists of many beliefs and rituals) and because of the European colonization. Okri believes that the African society should cope with the newly met character of the Nigerian individual who is originally African, extendedly colonized and lately independent. Nigerian readers should be hybrid to be able to perceive Okri’s *The Famished Road*. If the reader uses his African descent purely to perceive it, he would overlook the political message. If he willingly suspends his disbelief, he would disregard the political message too.

This paper explores the characteristics of the hybrid Nigerian individual by digging into the outer and inner influences that formed this personality. It also seeks to depict the African cultural influence on contemporary characters. Hybridity is the means to explore this interrelated relation between the African and the contemporary. It shows the extent of tolerance when cultures meet. Our paper searches to explore how the African hybrid character perceives the magical realistic themes in *The Famished Road*.

I.1. Hybridity

Hybridity is a common concept in post-colonialism. It resulted from the cultural turn in recently freed African countries. Hence, the term was created to express the difference and coexistence between “the center and periphery, black and white, oppressor and suppressed, rich north and poor south, and self and the other and between races, genders, bodies, and the resulting identities” (Allolio-Nack 2014).

Historically speaking, the term “hybrid” was first applied to all colored people by white Europeans who considered them too impure to be human, so they were hybrid. When the European enlightenment emerged, it did not revolutionize the position of blacks within society since they gave them inadequate importance and considered them as unqualified and unequal. The European enlightenment was more about the whites who were newly regarded as equal. Enlightenment came with the idea that all whites should have the right to education and good life standard. Voltaire was one of the most important figures who carried out this ideology and defended it. He and his peers did not defend the black’s position within society; however, they changed the term “bastard” (colored people) and replaced it by “hybrid.” It was not until Robert Park introduced the term in a more social-scientific way, by clearing it from all racism and degeneration, that the term took its postcolonial context. Park claimed that immigrants in foreign countries persist in preserving their home culture, but the pressure of the new culture and the constant adoption of elements of the new culture raise doubts on their identities (Allolio-Nack 2014).

Hybridity in its broadest meaning refers the existence of two different or oppositional characteristics or beliefs in the same individual or society. Therefore, the hybrid character may also be the European individual. Hybridity in European societies appears in consumerism. The Consumer culture has been considerably influenced by several changes in the last century, as the invasion of the ethnic groups that blended in western societies. The new European consumer is characterized by a kind of acceptance and tolerance towards the multinational origins and multiethnic

characteristics of goods, information, and images flowing around the world. The accessibility of a broad range of different ethnic styles means that in many metropolitan centers of the West (cities like London, Paris, New York, Los Angeles, and Miami come to mind) one can consume food, clothing, music, and entertainment from several ethnic cultures in the course of a single evening. Therefore, in addition to becoming diverse in many ways, consumer culture has become more culturally and nationally heterogeneous. Likewise, the social experiences of urbanized Western populations have begun to accept the sense of new ethnic groups as Europeans, and migrants started to interact, allowing for a new exchange of cultural goods and meanings within an increasingly hybrid culture (Dunn 1998).

Hybridity is the coexistence of the different in the same area. Nowadays, most of countries and societies are hybrid; however, the term is more applied on the Third World societies, most likely, the African ones. It functions as a necessity being a good manner to express the new status of the post-colonial social order of countries that were longly exposed to colonial culture and simultaneously preserve their own cultural existence. Writers like Ben Okri use the concept to reveal messages that rely mainly on the awareness of the subsistence of both European and African cultures in post-independent African societies.

The perceptions of novels like *The Famished Road* depend on the awareness of the existence of hybridity in African societies. Post-colonial African individuals are divided into two categories: the category of the ones who are still influenced by the European culture and the one of those who have always kept their loyalty and uphold to their Africanity. The following is *The Famished Road* responded to by the two different viewpoints.

I. 2. African Perspective

The conception of death in the African culture has always been a good ground of study since most Africans believe that death is no more than the beginning of a new story. Different from other cultures that may see death as the very last end of the individual, African culture perceives death as the beginning of another life for the dead body and the immortal spirit meet finally and survive forever.

Death in African societies is uneasily accepted by members of family or friends that is why mourning is very important. Mourning is characterized by a series of cultural rituals and rites of passage which at times continue for as long as the living dead is remembered. It extensively continues to control the life of the livings. Therefore, there is no ritual that limits the number of days or even months of mourning, it can last for months or even years. Depending on the worth of departed one, Africans could refrain from their jobs for a long time to give time to practice the traditional rituals of grieving. These rituals are meant to prove the importance of the dead one and to holify the beginning of another life of him in the other world (King 2013).

Some Africans may consider Reincarnation as the belief in the returning of the dead people’s spirits in the bodies of their grandchildren, however, the concept is more likely to describe the everlasting livelihood of the spirits after dead. Many Africans believe that death can only take the body not the spirit. Therefore, the spirit is always there with the living ones. Hence, mortality for Africans has to do with the body not with its spirit. Some Africans also believe that spirits of the dead bodies may come back to life in bodies of other species (Baloyi 236). Consequently, spirits always survive after death. There is always a continuation of existence no matter what time, place or species they come back in.

Africans believe that they can communicate with the departed spirits using many customs. The grieving rituals are among these customs which they assume are

functional. Dreams are also forms of communication which uphold this resilient connectedness. For traditional Africans, the living dead are an indivisible and influential part of their being. That is why, when Africans perform rituals by the grave side, for example, they are not meant to talk to the spirit in the grave, they rather communicate with the spirit of the dead as they do with the living. The fact is a clear example of the living dead being regarded as genuinely and authentically living with and among the livings and having an influence on them (Baloyi 2014).

In *The Famished Road*, Azaro is considered by his people as an immortal spirit living in the body of Azaro. The writer reveals, in several occasions, the will of his parents to keep him in the mortal world. Using such a concept, Ben Okri is inspired and influenced by his own Nigerian culture. Azaro is actually a Nabiku, one of the child spirits that live in a body mysteriously chosen by the immortal world. The widespread notion of the abiku in Nigerian culture came from the belief that the membrane that separates life and death is actually easily penetrated that is why newborns survival after birth is lowly possible. Hence, Nigerian mothers created a new way of preserving their newborns by giving those names of specific significations. Names like “Malomo-Do Not Go Again”; “Banjoko-Sit Down And Stay With Us”; “Duro oro ike-Wait And See How You Will Be Petted”; and “Please Stay And Bury Me” are highly popular in Nigeria (Maclean 1971). All these names are given by mothers who think that their newborns are ones of these child-spirits. Mothers are supposed to do whatever they can to persuade the baby to stay in this difficult world, rather than having him return to the spirit-world where he will be bathed “in the ecstasy of an everlasting love” (Okri 1992).

The Abiku are believed to function as a kind of disturbance for their mothers. The Yoruba community believes that these children torment their families by their existence, on the one hand, and their families’ will to keep them alive, on the other hand. Abiku are believed to occupy multiple worlds (the bush, the spirit world and the earth) (Ouma 2020). Abiku are believed to die early as children (referring to their depart to the other world), hence, families practice some rituals to beg them staying on earth.

The Yoruba society is believed to be blessed by the high rate of twins’ birth and also cursed by the high infant mortality. The infant mortality is explained in the phenomenon of the Abiku. To prevent mortality, mothers consult special divination priests, who use ceremonies and medicines to convince the children to remain in the community. The Nigerian artist Twins Seven-seven depicts this ritual in his painting *Healing of Abiku Children*. The major figure in this work is a mother, who holds one of her abiku twins while the other sleeps on her back. The priest is painted on the left, by the door mixes the potions he will use on the children. The rest of the space is filled by people busily performing various tasks, their large eyes and facial scarification matching traditional Yoruba ideals of beauty (Southgate 2005).

Having a society that believes in all these rituals, magic and supernaturalism is a fact that allowed Ben Okri to introduce the concept of the Abiku in his novel. The novel follows the life of Azaro, a spirit child, travelling in Nigeria. He is pressured into leaving the mortal world in favor of the spirit world but due to his personal and familial ties, he insists in remaining on Earth. The novel seems to show Okri’s belief in another world after death, a concept that is highly accepted by African people who believe in all the rituals of death, mourning, grieving, and the Abiku. However, Ouma believes that “the Abiku’s tropological significance in African literature has allowed writers and critics to comment on the complexity of the interfaces of identity, particularly in regard to colonial modernity and African tradition, as well as in relation to evolving postcolonial African worlds” (2020).

It is believed that Ben Okri’s novel is meant to convey a message out of the traditional beliefs incorporated in the novel, though, African people like the ones

described by Azaro, in the novel, "who are seeded in rich lands, who still believe in mysteries" (Okri 6), people who hold that "one world contains glimpses of others" (Okri 10), and people who acknowledge a personal relationship with these spirits in the course of daily life, would never help perceiving the message. Consequently, an African reader with his pure Africanity is not able to envisage the message, he needs more hybrid identity.

It is also believed that an African character with a European personality who may deny the existence of the Abiku, livelihood of spirits and life after death is not able to conceive the message too. However, there is what we call suspension of disbelief. It may help pretending that the events are real, hence, enjoy them.

I. 3. Contemporary Suspension of Disbelief

In times past, the conceptions of Halloween, Gothicism, and dark music were not extensively spread all over the world like they are nowadays. If we take the example of African people, they did not know about the western culture more than Christianity, which was for most of them, a religion. Pratt admits that in the late 1980s and the 1990s, "Halloween did not rival Christmas around the world; dark tourism² was not a rapidly growing industry; death studies³ were not part of the school curriculum; funerals were incomparably more traditional and uniform; and Santa Muerte⁴, was a marginal observance, not an international cult" (Pratt 2019). More recently, death, Gothicism and advanced spirituality became a subject matter for scholars and researchers who came to the idea that the notion of spirituality has changed radically, and there appeared what we call postmodern religion (Holland 1988).

The notion of spirituality has changed several times through decades. Before the 19th century, spirituality was a term that referred directly to religion. Europeans were more religious than any time. Christianity was on the top of their priorities in spite of poverty and ignorance. The church was more than a place of worshipping; it controlled everything in life, even arts. With the appearance of what we call romanticism, eastern America (especially) has witnessed the emergence of a movement called transcendentalism⁵ that favored the worshipping of the self through nature. After that, in the late 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, Modern spirituality started to call attention to the relation between the self and the self regardless of the external world.

Modernism emphasizes on the centrality of individualism, whereas postmodernism gives more importance to the relation of the self with the outer world. Postmodernism does not deny the fact that the individual is born with a self-centered interest, regarding instincts. However, it sees that he has to interact with the rest of society because it can be an important part of his personality and character. Modernism considers relations with other people as accidental and unoriginal; however, postmodernism considers them as important and constitutive. Postmodernism does not promote the idea of the individual being self-contained creature who can be trivialized by others to become more impure. This interaction with society is rather considered as important relations that could not affect the essence of the individual (Holland 1988). As Holland states: "The relations one has with one's body, one's larger natural environment, one's family, and one's culture are instead constitutive of one's very identity. The assumption that people growing up in a city will be essentially the same as their grandparents who lived on a farm is therefore completely unfounded" (Holland 1988).

Unlike other characteristics of postmodernism that highlight the loss of truth in all fields, spirituality came to give more importance to the acceptance of the outer influences as real and moderately effective on one's individualism. The reason behind this conception of spirituality is that postmodernism found a relief in getting rid of

traditional religions and of civic communities. However, postmodernists could spiritually retain the positive characteristics of their grandparents while detaching only those characteristics associated with the restrictions of these communities. Another feature of postmodern spirituality is its organicism, through which it concurrently transcends modern dualism and modern materialism. Unlike dualistic modernists, postmodern persons do not feel like aliens in a hostile or indifferent nature, rather, they feel at home in the world where all species are supposed to be friendly associated (Holland 1988).

With due acknowledgement of claims of the new death movements, it is not viable to ignore the fact that the twentieth century has seen changes in the social form of religion as well as in the individual religious beliefs, both having become less objective and more spiritual. Consequently, the “sacred” notion of religion is definitely returning but in a different form, with only a superficial resemblance to its pre-modern shape. The new religious conceptions that are taking shape assume an essential oneness of “microcosm and macrocosm”⁶ and a presence of the godly in man and in the world. The fundamental distinction between the “temporal and supernatural” worlds disappears, which seems to carry the advent of a new kind of spirituality based on the idea of “immanence” (Tacey 2003). The new all-encompassing spirituality leads to many types of expression and is concerned with “the sacredness of life, nature and the universe and all pathways that lead to meaning and purpose” (Tacey 2003).

Giving the notion of Gothicism⁷ and black tourism that Pratt mentions, postmodern spirituality may help perceiving these concepts in a more vivid way. In fact, Holland believes that, previously, Gothic, horror, and slasher movies were not predictable entertainment; and vampires, zombies, cannibals, and serial killers did not appeal largely the greater mass of audiences. This kind of entertainment is more recent. Even the cult of death reinvents death as entertainment in recent times. Lately, monsters are more attractive than ever and vampires are widely admired by audiences. Pratt believes that the disillusionment with humanity and its harshness is the responsible of monsters being more attractive (2019). Hence, it is always a matter of relief.

Death is currently seen as an underestimation of the humankind being mortal. So, the idea of human exceptionalism is no more supportive to those who think that the human being is superior to other species (Pratt 2019). Having other species mortal too, researchers support the idea of the superiority of the unordinary creatures. Pratt believes that the popularity of these concepts among the common people is due to the commercial spreading of new concepts like vampires and monsters. The cult of death says more about attitudes toward human beings than it does about attitudes toward death. Despite the fact that several researchers claimed the existence of a set of aspects of the fascination on death, violence, and the undead, people do not have a convincing explanation of the increasing demand for images of violent death and the dramatic changes in death-related practices. And this is not astonishing, since we can barely explain concrete manifestations of the cult of death without considering them as features of a single cultural movement (Pratt 2019). These death cultural movements require an explanation of the particular cultural and historical circumstances that triggered the general acceptance of the cult of death.

In contemporary literary fiction, death is given so much importance. Writers, like Ben Okri depict death and the other world as interrelated with the real world. Okri does not dread to talk about the other world’s beings with their physical and moral descriptions. He even goes far to make them existent and seeable in the real world. Characters in his novel can see and talk to some characters that seem peculiar for us.

This reference to the dead world in literature is not new. Actually, many literary texts have dealt with the issue of death, each in its way. Death in literary texts can evoke all kinds of sensation like, emotions, bitterness, grief, liking, repulsion,

admiration, and embarrassment. However, death does not only concern dreadful emotions, in literature like comedy, especially black comedy, death can be depicted sarcastically, or even ironically.

Many examples can be given about the different depictions of death in literature throughout history. Dante’s *the Paradiso* and Bunyan in *Pilgrim’s Progress*, are two literary works that show their protagonists ascending to heaven. In Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, when Ivan is dying, he expresses his experience of death that resembles to the one narrated by some people (we hear about) who have already approached death but returned to life. In the novel, as death comes within reach of him, Ivan says: ““So that’s what it is”, and he suddenly cries out aloud: “What joy!””⁸. In addition, Horror literature is a genre devoted to evocation of extreme fear; sometimes modulate by disgust (Clasen, 2017).

Death is also depicted as dreadful in horror literature. Carroll thinks that “Ghosts, vampires, werewolves, zombies, demons, knife-wielding psychopaths, and malignant forces lurking in the hearts of humans—these are the standard dramatis personae of horror” (2019). Concerning the supernatural events and the mystery of the other world, Fairy tales and folk tales are the old traditional way of depicting horror. Moreover, writers like Edgar Allen Poe and Stephen King write about death in a scary trembling way (Carroll 2019). Edgar Allen Poe’s *Hop-Frog*, *The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar*, *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, and *the Black Cat* are among the scariest stories of him in which he evokes the issue of death and otherness.

Horror, death and supernaturalism are also a part of drama and other literary genres that are not mostly fictional. For example, Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, *Golding’s Lord of the Flies*, and Heller’s *Catch-22* are fascinating works of revulsion. Moreover, Elegies are considered as the most traditional literary expression of sorrow. They are poems that remind people of the dead person in a kind of mourning. Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* offers a significant example. This grieving sentiment of elegies also appears in many novels and plays. However, plays are more likely to be tragic. Tragedies typically involve violent passions such as rage, jealousy, outraged pride, implacable resentment, and hatred. Carroll argues that “Tragedies conclude in exhausted sorrow among the survivors. Examples of tragedy include the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides; Shakespeare’s *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *King Lear*; Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*; Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*; and Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy*” (Carroll 2019).

Ben Okri does not refer to death the way Dante, Tolstoy or Edgar Allen Poe do. Okri, in fact, gives a picture of the mortal and the immortal world as interconnected. It is as if he puts magic and reality in the same pot. So, his reference to death is not scary or ironic, it is rather, magically, real. Even the mourning in *The Famished Road* is not meant to be elegiac and death is not for the sake of tragedy. Death in Ben Okri’s novel is meant to paint a realistic view of the African society while adding some magical elements.

Magical realism is one of the literary genres that require a high degree of suspension of disbelief. Including supernatural phenomena and irrational events, magical realism tends to target a specific kind of readers that may differ according to the culture, environment and beliefs. Nonetheless, Magical Realism in literature has flourished globally because of continual travel and migrations, with the decrease of time and space through technology, with the growing violation of human life on nature, and the contact between and within cultures (Tuzet 2020). These changes forced communities and nations to change their perception of concepts like supernaturalism and irrationality. Therefore, Contemporary Magical Realists have to cope with the changes in cultures or what we call in our paper “hybridity.” To cope with changes, contemporary writers have to consider hybridity as a part of the reader’s personality.

Coleridge claimed in chap. XIV of his *Biographia Literaria* that poetic faith involves a suspension of disbelief (BonJour 1985). The suspension of disbelief is the willing delay of the doubt that the reader may have on the reality and the credibility of events in an artistic work. Disbelief is suspended when a literary fiction is involved. The main reason is that literary fictions can barely be appreciated if they are not convincing. Their aesthetic value depends on the credibility of events that may not be true but the reader pretends to believe for the sake of enjoyment. Though, suspension of disbelief has indeed some limits that differ from one genre to another and from one age to another (Tuzet 2020).

Being a contemporary postmodern reader of *The Famished Road* requires a high degree of suspension of disbelief. With the change in the concept of spirituality in postmodernism, the postmodern reader is willingly fascinated by the concepts presented in *The Famished Road* for Abiku could be as fascinating as vampires and the African death rituals are as important as Santa Muerte. However, postmodern religious faith is not sufficient because fascination is not enough to perceive the novel's message. The high degree of supernaturalism mixed with reality needs more of Coleridge's delay of doubt. If the postmodern reader, who believes in ghosts, Gothicism, horror movies, and zombies, perceives the novel the way he perceives other death, horror elements, he would enjoy the aesthetic side of it, however, the postmodern reader is required to understand the message out of the novel. The postmodern reader is asked to be African as well to be able to estimate the significance of the message intended by Okri.

As the African reader needs the postmodern character's suspension of disbelief, the postmodern character needs the African belief in the reality of events to identify the real sense of *The Famished Road*.

I. 4. Hybrid Characters

Cultural hybridization in literary texts as *The Satanic Verses*⁹ is considered as a revolt by eastern readers. However, the western culture may see it as a normal criticism of the holiness of the eastern life and religion being inferior to the western one. Westerners see that the east is not only inferior in terms of religion but also in literature, philosophy and arts. Having writers like Salman Rushdie underestimating their mother culture is considered as a "leftover of Imperialist colonial thought." This tendency is also apparent in the field of contemporary western philosophy, which continues to remain resistant to acknowledging the numerous concepts from the Veda to the Vedanta¹⁰ (Godiwala 2007)

Nederveen Pieterse believes that the use of hybridity as a theory to get rid of critical thoughts and practices like racism is not successful because hybridity itself is based on the same critical framework that requires more definition. A number of arguments appeared in which supporters and attackers dispute on the uses of the hybridity theory. Most of those discussions can be criticized as being excessively criticizing in theory and prevailing to some unhelpful arguments on the direction hybridity go. For example, racial theory, post-colonialism, cultural studies, or globalization have been overlooked after the appearance of the hybridity theory, however, not in a suitable way (2004).

Regarding Nederveen Pieterse's opinion, novels based on hybridity as a key to understand the meaning should be more precise and lucid in conveying the message because, in his opinion, hybridity is already not a complete understandable theory, in the sense that it has been used and manipulated by many theorists and thinkers who use it as means to change existing assumptions and concepts (2004).

In *The Famished Road*, Ben Okri highlights the issue of hybridity, out of a necessity, to make his message clear by using three observable hybrid characters. Each of Azaro, his father and Madame Koto has a double-sided personality that could say a lot about his hybridity.

I. 4.1. Azaro and Abiku

Azaro and Abiku are, in fact, the same character but with different characteristics. Azaro is the first example of hybrid characters in the novel. He is depicted as having two oppositional personalities that overlap in a specific time of the novel to create a stronger one. Azaro is the child of a poor family whose distinctive existence being an abiku makes him less sociable. Azaro is indeed seen as eccentric and foreign and thus estranged from other children. Since Abiku children are seen as spirits whose existence on earth is erroneous, most members of society neglect them and warn their children about them. Yagoba society is heavily informed about what an Abiku child may face as strange events and supernatural deeds. Azaro describes his way of life as an Abiku child in many occasions in the novel. By the middle of the novel, he says:

One MOMENT I was in the room and the next moment I found myself wandering the night roads. I had no idea how I had gotten outside. I walked on the dissolving streets and among the terrestrial bushes. The air was full of riddles. I walked through books and months and forgotten histories. I was following a beautiful woman with a blue head. She moved in cadenzas of golden light. She floated on the wind of a royal serenity. Superimposed on distant plangency of Mum praying in the dark, the woman turned and beckoned me. I followed her smile and listened to the fugal birds. She drew my spirit on to fountains of light and lilac music and abiku variations (Okri 1992).

In this passage, Azaro describes a supernatural phenomenon that happens to him while he thought himself sleeping at home. He surprisingly finds himself outside seeing and experiencing supernatural events, like seeing some past events in history that, we understand, are not known for humanity now. He meets a fairy lady that takes him to a fascinating atmosphere of beauty and art. In *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe refers to Ekwefi’s story. It is the description of a woman who is unable to fulfil her normal role of motherhood within the social structures of her village. She was plagued with what was known as “ogbanje” children, a quite mean set of supernatural beings that are literally born to die. “Ogbanje” are the “abiku” in Yoruba mythology, these children’s transversal journey from the chthonian realm to the world of the living are made through endless rotations of life and death through the same woman. The abiku-ogbanje phenomenon in southern Nigeria has been a focus of critical examination of the border of folk beliefs and modernity and has also been used as metaphors for the disconnection in the rites of unified cultural memories (Achebe 1980).

The characterization of Azaro in *The Famished Road* is not a new tendency in African fiction, Chinua Achebe and others tend to refer to their Mythical culture, each in his way. Ben Okri uses the Abiku as an allusion to the two hybrid characteristic of Azaro. He is not only some weird child who is seen as evil by his society, he is also very intelligent and inspirational. Having this big connection with the spiritual world makes him inherit a strangeness that determines the way he conceives reality. Azaro is capable of distinguishing between reality, possibility and unreality. This capacity gives him, synthetically, a power to perceive and understand. *The Famished Road* highlights this side of conceiving reality through a state of mind that is totally dual.

As a child, Azaro struggles to handle his gift of being on familiar terms with the other world, but ultimately he learns to use it to fight for the sake of good, helping his family and village. He is repeatedly fighting spirits who try to win him over to join the spirit world, but he resists for the love his family. Although his life is tough and his family struggles economically and socially (because of him), Azaro remains hopeful and committed to good. Azaro's suffering comes from knowing. He is the example of the African character who is educated enough to be aware of both the ignorance of his people and the continuous domination of the French neocolonization.

In many occasions in the novel, Azaro expresses his agony of seeing what is unrealizable for his people.

I noticed that in a corner, across from where they ate with such innocent relish, sitting forlorn and abandoned, was the ghost of their son. He had lost both of his arms, one side of his face was squashed, and both his eyes had burst. He had bluish wings. He was the saddest ghost in the house (Okri 1992).

The passage is a reference to what a hybrid character in an African society could suffer. Metaphorically, Azaro sees the ghost of these people's son lingering near while they are eating in an enjoyable mood. Probably, the ghost represents all what is ignored by African people due to their lack of culture. Azaro is also aware of the agony of people in real life.

A stray dog wandered up the passage. It was a dull morning. The sky was grey as if it might rain. The noise of metal buckets clanking at the well, the sound of water being poured, a woman raising her voice, grew on the morning air. The school-children were in their uniforms. A cock crowed repeatedly. Mum got her tray together. I was ready for school. Mum went down the street, swaying, moving a little sleepily, with one more burden added to her life. Soon she was merely a detail in the poverty of our area (Okri 1992).

Despite his young age, Azaro represents an mature hybrid character who can think in many different ways. First, as a person who have the capacity to see what other people cannot see (in this case, as an intellectual African character), and second, to feel other people's pain, like his mother's being not able to support a pile of problems, (in this case, as a traditional African character who have the social spirit).

I. 4. 2. Azaro's Father and Black Tyger

In *The Famished Road*, Azaro's father is also depicted as having a dual personality. He is the kind of character who is believed to be idealist in his way of loving the others, especially his family, however, he has another side of his personality that hurts and punishes. Azaro's father is believed to be so passionate, yet, does not know how to manage this passion. At the beginning of the story, he is depicted as being cruel towards his family; he sometimes hits Azaro and his wife. The reason is probably the trouble Azaro brings to his family since his birth. Consequently, Azaro's father develops his hybrid character. One side of him does not believe in the sincerity of the Yagoba myth. He actually admits in the following saying his doubts about the sincerity of all herbalists:

They were in debt. And my father, who was rather fed up with all the trouble I brought, had grown somewhat

skeptical of the pronouncements and certitudes of herbalists. If you listen to everything they say, he told Mum, you will have to perform absurd sacrifices every time you step outside your door. He was also suspicious of their penchant for advocating costly ceremonies, the way quack doctors keep multiplying the ramifications of ailments in order to make you spend fortunes on their medicines.

Azaro's father is always annoyed by the sacrifices his wife has to give to keep her son alive.

His anger keeps increasing until he finds a way to manage it, through boxing. Hence, he develops another side of his personality, which is the Black Tyger. Azaro's father decides to become a boxer and begins training. He fights spirits as well as men until he finally defeats the most famous boxing opponent for miles (a ghost in a white suit). After defeating him, Black Tyger secures a large sum of money for his family as well as restoring peace to the village's spirit world, an effect which also brings peace to Azaro himself. In fact, he becomes wiser:

We must look at the world with new eyes. We must look at ourselves differently. We are freer than we think. We haven't begun to live yet. The man whose light has come on in his head, in his dormant sun, can never be kept down or defeated. We can redream this world and make the dream real. Human beings are gods hidden from themselves (Okri 1992).

Ben Okri believes that the source of the insightful vision of life for Africans does not mainly come from education; it can be achieved by uneducated people like the Black Tyger. The real source is the agony of life. After experiencing many painful incidents of hunger and misery, Black Tyger is able to say these words:

My son, our hunger can change the world, make it better, sweeter. People who use only their eyes do not SEE. People who use only their ears do not HEAR. It is more difficult to love than to die. It is not death that human beings are most afraid of, it is love. The heart is bigger than a mountain. One human life is deeper than the ocean. Strange fishes and seamonsters and mighty plants live in the rock-bed of our spirits. The whole of human history is an undiscovered continent deep in our souls (Okri 1992).

Hybridity of Black Tyger appears in his achievement of a double perceptive vision of his society and humanity as a whole. By the end of the novel, he is able to see what characters like him, being just the cruel father, can see and others like him as a successful boxer can see. Black Tyger is more like the typical character of the African individual that Booker T. Washington called for at the beginning of the last century. In his novel *Up from Slavery*, Booker T. Washington says that "It means a great deal, I think, to start off on a foundation which one has made for oneself" (Washington 1971).

I. 4. 3. Madame Koto and the Witch

Hybrid characteristics can be traced in Madame Koto's character as well. At the beginning of the novel, Madame Koto is an independent owner of a bar in the village; however, her consciousness around the conditions of the village appears when she opens her bar to the rich contestants and their supporters during elections. Madame

Koto seems to be aware of the political situation of a newly independent village and the effects of a new political system on the individuals. Azaro describes her appearance after starting to receive the rich:

She looked different. She wore a new lace blouse, an expensive wrapper, coral beads round her neck, and copper bangles round her wrists. She wore eyeshadow, which darkened her eyes, and powder on her face, beneath which her sweat ran. The day had become hotter. It seemed impossible to avoid the sun. I was thirsty (Okri 1992).

It is thoroughly possible that Madame Koto chooses to belong to the powerful rather than the weak. Her tendency to support the rich and the powerful does not deny the fact that she is a pure superstitious African character. She keeps Azaro around because she believes he encourages peaceful spirits to frequent her bar. She also goes beyond that to wanting to steal Azaro's blood to make herself look younger.

Madame Koto appears to be one of those people in superstitious societies who take the responsibility of taking care of the abnormal individuals. Jiménez-Gómez thinks that in societies, like yagoba, people are not willingly able to accept the individual to talk and express his feelings, though, they encourage more facial expressions and attitudes that may give hints about the individual's state of mind (2019). Madame Koto hosts Azaro in a daily way in her bar to help him getting rid of his anomalous problem; nevertheless, Azaro believes that she is a typical African woman. In describing her credulous rituals, he says:

Madame Koto came in carrying a fetish glistening with palm oil. She dragged a bench under the front door, climbed on it, and hung the fetish on a nail above the door. I noticed for the first time that she had a little beard. 'I don't like chicken's head,' I told her. 'Eat it. It's good for your brain. It makes you clever, and if you eat the eyes you will be able to see in the dark.' (Okri 1992).

In *The Famished Road*, Madame Koto is hybridized in a specific way. She hangs a lucky fetish on her bar and eats strange food, but also support the western way of life.

II- Methods:

The methods used in this research are mainly descriptive, diagnostic, predictive and prescriptive. At the beginning of the research, we describe hybridity in its broadest meanings to reach the core of the research, which is African hybrid character. Then we diagnose the concept of death in regard of both the African and the European point of view to come out with a result for each of the diagnosis. We also predict the fact that Ben Okri's targeted readers are actually hybrid. Throughout the course of our study, we recommend *The Famished Road's* readers to be more hybrids to be able to understand the novel.

We also use the theory of postcolonial hybridity as a basis to our study. We analyze the readers' response through discussing the possibility of having two identities of them to assure the right understanding of the novel. In addition, we analyze the characteristics of persons in the novel, like Azaro and his father, by hybridizing them in a postcolonial context.

III- Results and discussion :

Most critics believe that *The Famished Road* is a Trans-realistic story. The specific issue of realism depicted in the story lies in the fact that it conveys a political message. There are two paradoxical worlds in the novel: the real world and the

supernatural (magical) world. The use of these two different worlds in the same story is common in Latin literature; however, Ben Okri makes the supernatural world more real to the extent that it interacts directly with the real world. Also, the supernatural World in Latin literature is only apparent for some few characters whereas in, *The Famished Road*, supernatural beings, like the three-headed creature, appears to everyone.

The Famished Road embraces a system of beliefs in myths, rituals, and cults of ancestors that dictate the way it is tasted, read or seen. It is also a narrative that refers heavily to the contemporary character. Hence, it is concurrently embedded in an Africa that is resolutely contemporary and postmodern.

In *The Famished Road*, Ben Okri combines between the African and the Western cultures to fight against foreign colonialism and domestic neocolonialism¹¹ in Nigeria. Regarding his understanding of magical realism, Okri confirms the realities of neocolonial political struggles and stresses the sociopolitical injustice, corruption and the ineffectiveness of the political system in his native postcolonial Nigeria.

The depiction of Azaro as a revolutionary spirit that fights in both worlds is actually a reference to the postcolonial Nigerian character. Seeing Azaro moving back and forth between the two worlds is like seeing the Nigerians suffering from the recurrent injustice after independence. Azaro, his father, and madame Koto try to make real progress possible, despite difficulties. The spiritual world, actually, represents colonialism and neocolonialism and the real world is the Nigerian society after independence. Okri thinks that Colonialism keeps chasing the Nigerian society in all forms and they have to fight it like the characters in the novel do.

This paper proves that, in order to be able to perceive the message, readers of *The Famished Road* should have double glasses to see both sides of society. Readers are actually asked to be hybrid enough to perceive the novel and its main objective.

IV- Conclusion:

Ben Okri is among the contemporary African Writers who have a tendency to bring about change in their societies by means of art. *The Famished Road* is a well designed novel that may seem repetitive in a way that the same kind of struggle reoccurs every time, however, the objective is to create an allusion to the reoccurring problems of Nigerians with the same foreign domination, whether it is colonial or neocolonial.

Okri wants to convey the major message through using this “Famished” title. The title refers to the myth that Azaro's father tells about the “King of the Road”, who was always famished: “He ate the trees, the bushes, the rocks, the sand, and he even tried to eat the earth” (Okri 1992). Then the strangest thing happened, he began to eat himself. Accordingly, the human greed should come to an end and the famished could never get full. Okri calls his society to fight repeatedly while meeting many kinds of “famish” that will lastly end. Also, Okri calls his society to accept their hybridity as far as it does not lead them to be famished.

Referring to this paper, future studies may concern the ability of African writers to detect a more purely mature African character that can be an untainted postmodern.

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¹ **Ben Okri**, "'The Famished Road was written to give myself reasons to live' – Twenty-five years after Okri's Man Booker-winning novel was first published, the Nigerian author reflects on what motivated the magic", *The Guardian*, 15 March 2016.

² **Dark Tourism** involves travel to places historically associated with death and tragedy. Recently, researchers suggested that the concept should also refer to the reasons tourists visit a specific place, since the place's attributes may not make a visitor a dark tourist. The main reason why dark locations get more attraction is their historical value rather than their associations with death and suffering. For example, the Holocaust tourism contains aspects of both dark tourism and heritage tourism.

Isaac, R. K., & Çakmak, E. (2014). Understanding visitor's motivation at sites of death and disaster: the case of former transit camp Westerbork, the Netherlands. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 17(2), 164-179.

³ **Death Studies**: Nowadays, there are some journals devoted to death studies like the *Journal of Death Studies*, which is a peer-reviewed academic journal published ten times a year by Routledge and sponsored by the Association for Death Education and Counseling-The Thanatology Association. It focuses on issues related to death, dying, bereavement, and death education.

⁴ **Santa Muerte** is a idol female goddess or folk saint in Mexican neo-paganism and folk Catholicism. Santa Muerte (death in Spanish) personifies death; however, she is associated with healing, protection, and safe delivery to the afterlife by her devotees. Chesnut, R. A. (2017). *Devoted to death: Santa Muerte, the skeleton saint*. Oxford University Press.

⁵ **Transcendentalism** is a philosophical movement that developed in the late 1820s and 1830s in the eastern United States. Transcendentalists believe in the inheritance of

uprightness of people and nature, and since society and its institutions have corrupted the purity of the individual, people are good and honest when truly "self-reliant" and independent.

Goodman, R. (2003). Transcendentalism.

⁶ **Macrocosm and Microcosm:** The paired concept of Macrocosm and Microcosm presents the idea that there is a corresponding similarity in pattern, nature, or structure between human beings and the universe. The concept of microcosm/macrocosm views man as a smaller representation of the universe and the universe as an anthropomorphic existence.

Microcosm and Macrocosm. (2018, October 3). New World Encyclopedia, . Retrieved 06:51, December 28, 2020 from

https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/p/index.php?title=Microcosm_and_Macrocosm&oldid=1015004.

⁷ **Gothicism** was a cultural movement in Sweden that believes in the glory of the Swedish Geats, who were identified with the Goths. The movement was first founded by Nicolaus Ragvaldi and the brothers Johannes and Olaus Magnus. It gained its power in the 17th century, when Sweden was a great power following the Thirty Years' War, but lost most of its sway in the 18th. It was renewed by the Viking revival and Romantic nationalism in the early 19th century, this time with the Vikings as heroic figures.

⁸ Tolstoy, L. (2005). The Death of Ivan Ilyich. *ACADEMIC MEDICINE-PHILADELPHIA-*, 80(9), 856.

⁹ **The Satanic Verses** is Salman Rushdie's fourth novel, first published in 1988 and inspired in part by the life of prophet Muhammad. As with his previous books, Rushdie used magical realism and relied on contemporary events and people to create his characters.

¹⁰ **Veda and Vedanta** are schools of Hindu Philosophy.

¹¹ **Neocolonialism** is the fact of using economics, globalization, cultural imperialism, and controlled aid to influence a country instead of the previous colonial methods of direct military control like imperialism.