A Dangerous Love: Ben Okri’s Persisting Commitment to Literary Experimentation

A once high-profile post-colonial writer, it is noticeable that the London-Nigerian novelist and essayist Ben Okri has all but dropped out of view within the literary establishment. While his earlier works still receive much academic attention and are deemed highly influential, critical engagements with his later fiction are almost non-existent. With this in mind, our aim is to map out the many transformations the author’s work has gone through and offer explanations as to the reasons behind Okri’s perceived decline as a creative writer. To understand the new directions the author’s current writings have taken, one must analyze the totality of his novelistic writings as a single collective body striving towards a sustained renovation of the literary form. Our premise is that this experimentation might, on the contrary, be hampering the author’s success, and our study shall, therefore, examine in detail the experimental nature of these later works and offer a series of perceptions as to these works’ possible short-comings.

Key words: Ben Okri; post-colonial writing; literary experimentation; spiritual resource-bases; hybridism; New Ageism

We can’t ask new literature to be like the old, to give us the same pleasures as those that have gone before. […] That would be mere repetition.

Ben Okri *A Time For New Dreams* (2011)

Ben Okri likens the form to a recipient which “holds” the text together and allows its literariness to stand the test of time, Yet, from an early stage in his career, one can witness the author’s commitment to the form, something he once defined as an entity “moving towards infinity” (Wilkinson 1992, 83). A salient aspect of Okri’s works is the author’s singular vision of what constitutes “reality”, and this ontology deeply informs his creative process at both an imaginative and a formal level. It is for this reason that we feel it fruitful to provide a brief analysis of Okri’s earlier works, analysed from these perspectives, so as to provide the reader with a deeper understanding of the directions in which the author is taking his more recent narratives. What we propose is that Okri’s search for a new form is an attempt to recreate the ineffable quality of “mysteries” that can only be expressed in quasi-mystical terms, while these deeper truths about what an augmented reality encapsulates become juxtaposed against the “real” world in its outer form.

There is a certain irony to the fact that *Dangerous Love*, which Okri’s does not rate highly due to its more conventional form, has been the author’s last novel to have garnered acclaim. Similar postcolonial authors, such as Abdulrazak Gurnah for example, have made life-long careers producing works of a similar nature and quality. In this light, our consideration is that Ben Okri’s unbending commitment to experimentation with the form could well be jeopardizing his career as a writer.

**1**

Fifteen years after the publication of *The Landscapes Within*, Okri re-wrote this same novel under the new title of *Dangerous Love* (1995). Fernández Vázquez (2002) had detected the classical *Künstlerroman* motif operating within *The Landscapes Within*, and the author sought to re-address the individualistic prerogative that operates behind this motif. Mamadu (1991), for example, had correctly detected the protagonist’s lack of a meaningful engagement with his community in favour of a withdrawal into the inner self. To understand how Okri re-wrote this individualistic ethos in favour of a more West-African collective consciousness one must turn to a very significant moment in both novels where Omovo, the novel’s budding artist and main protagonist, encounters a group of Egungun masquerades within the forest. In *The Landscapes Within*, the perceived “violence” of these masquerades was transmitted through a Modernist stream of consciousness, and the narration of this episode was, furthermore, performed at a confused distance, as if the narrator were incapable of deciphering the deeper significance behind these unfolding events. The ritual importance of the Egugun Masqueraders is that, having taken on the identities of important ancestors, these masqueraders may “beat” their audience with atori whips, although this violence is always performed within a highly ritualized framework **(1)**. Similarly, in *The Famished Road* trilogy, the terrific masquerade figure became a symbolic representation of the ruling class’s violation of inherited ethics within postcolonial Nigeria and, as Rea assures us, “Masks are themselves part of a wider structure of control over power or knowledge […] [and] this control is often regarded as being linked into general ideas about ancestral knowledge and legitimating” (Rea 1998, 100). Nonetheless, while the *Landscapes Within*’s form was incapable of managing the epistemological significance of the Egungun rite, a revisiting of this same scene in *Dangerous Love* now brought forth its deeper significance. Omovo’s spiritual awakening, the shift from an individualistic to communal prerogative (the rejection of *Künstlerroman* motif) is, furthermore, activated by his contact with these masqueraders. Therefore, by strategically appropriating this Yoruba tradition and displaying its transformative power, Okri was reactivating a cultural memory that had previously been silenced in *The Landscapes Within*. In *Dangerous Love*, the scene is described as follows:

Masked figures, bearing whips, burst out of the forest. [. . .] The lesser figures, whose masks didn’t have the size or the fearsomeness of the chief masquerade, began whipping one another. [. . .] They whipped one another’s feet. [. . .] There was no malice in their actions. [. . .] They whipped the year’s evil from one another, dancing round Omovo. They didn’t touch him. (Okri 1995, 270)

Turning to formal construction of this passage, we can detect the use of parataxis in this passage, what we define in linguistic terms as the ordering of propositions or clauses without indicating the relation of co-ordination or subordination between said propositions or clauses. In Tunca (2014), the author gives a detailed account of how Okri used these paratactic structures in *Dangerous Love*,and if one examines *The* *Famished Road* trilogy at this synchronic level one can find a similar use of parataxis. This particular device is employed so as to suggest the rhythms of West African oral discourses, yet it is our interest here is to establish a link between the use of parataxis Tunca establishes at the cohesive level, and an interpretative parataxis that operates at a diachronic level. Certainly, one of the difficulties in reading Okri has to do with the way discrete episodes are narrated; the reader is asked to hold in suspension a series of seemingly disconnected events and only towards the close of the narrative may a fruitful interpretation emerge. In comparison to parataxis, the hypotactic prose we find in much canonical literature tends to establish continual relations between propositions and clauses through connectives that are structured around an additive process that points backward or forward. Okri’s prose displays a marked lack of logical connections and, we suggest, it is precisely this lack of subordination that we find at the discursive level of text which is also reflected at the level the plot structure. We therefore propose that a distinct inner logic as regards the narrative events is created whereby, as such, no logical connections are established between the many discrete episodes that Okri’s novels tend to constructed around. Therefore, while a hypotactic prose directs the reader toward a specific narrative arch, the use of parataxis creates a distinct mode of interpretation. For example, the foreshadowing of future narrative events are noticeable absent; these are no longer syllogistically connected but, rather, function as a series of, seemingly, isolated incidents.

A good example of this can be found in *Infinite Riches*, specifically within the repeated episodes where both Azaro and Dad experience situations that involve fire. These episodes are not linked to any larger plot structure in the conventional sense but, rather, must be construed as narrative events that happen against what we can define as a flat background. We use this term “flat” in juxtaposition to the pyramid structure of dramatic plot development that include: exposition, rising action, climax, falling climax, dénouement and so forth. On the contrary, many narrative events in *Infinite Riches* function independently of each other and, at an interpretative level, the reader has to construe how the motif of fire is intimately related to the book’s main theme of karmic transformation. Therefore, the discrete events marked by the repeated motif of fire operate against this narrative flat surface, whereas overall meaning is only gained through symbolically linking together each of these episodes. Okri’s narrative strategy, therefore, consists in creating fissures within the temporal and the spatial that is performed through a concatenation of seemingly unrelated adventures, and this, no doubt, appeals to certain aesthetic tastes. Opinions, it must be said, have become divided as regards Okri’s continued use of disconnected narrative episodes; events that do not lead to recognizable denouement. Critics like Douglas McCabe (2005/ 2013) find these narrative “non-sequiturs” tiresome and frivolous, while others such as Philips (1997), Hawley (1995) see Okri’s incantatory style as creating a unique perspective within postcolonial literature.

The aforementioned episodes in *Infinite Riches* and their common theme of “karmic fire” are paradigmatic of the spiritual nature that impregnates Okri’s narrative, something that has gained prevalence in his later works­. As the author himself affirms, the form embodies a spiritual quality that is, “a meditation on the mystery of life […] the visible manifestation of spirit”, and a defining feature of Okri’s fiction is how the author strives to deconstruct the “real” from its opposite the “unreal” so as to create a diffusion of the existing boundaries between man and nature (Okri 2011, 127). Here, we find a merging of the form with this particular belief system, and Okri’s appropriation of Yoruba myth, in this respect, served as a means to initiate this imaginative process that sought to reconstruct a multi-dimensional reality. The author first explored the means of transmitting this otherworldly sensation through the short story format, and the formal strategies he employed in these yielded an ontological shift within his later narratives. *Incidents at the Shrine* (1986) and *Stars of the New Curfew* (1988) were the constituent stages of this experimentation and, as Ato Quayson assures us, “there has been an effort to problematize protocols of representation by routing several aspects of narrative discourse through the prism of indigenous beliefs about spirits and their relationship with the real world” (Quayson 1995, 148-49).

A collapsing of the boundaries between the real and the supernatural was a recurring feature in *The Famished Road* (1991) and, in this respect, we would like to speak about two formal elements that the author employs to create this effect. The first technique functions similarly to a musical score, where a composition comprised of two scenes is played off one another in a contrapuntal fashion. In *The Famished Road*, Azaro picks up a mask he finds in the forest and, on looking through the mask, he finds he is now inside a mythical world where tigers with silver wings and magic bulls roam. While he is wearing the mask, Azaro is no longer privy to the happenings around him; the mask isolates Azaro from his reality. As he proceeds to put on and take off the mask the reader is presented with two discrete sets of narratives that are played off each other (Okri 1991, 244). The second formal technique that Okri employs is one where the real and the supernatural are narrated at the same time. While the contrapuntal device separates both worlds, a simultaneous narration creates an amalgam of experience within the reader that heightens his sense of the supernatural being embedded within pedestrian reality. This technique is repeated throughout the novel; for example in many of the scenes that take place in Madame Koto’s bar we find grotesque ghouls from the otherworld mingling with the parishioners. What we can, therefore, conclude is that while the contrapuntal form creates a call and response technique between the two sets of realities, the simultaneous protocol creates a cacophony of experience, as if too many instruments were being played at the same time. These two formal aspects are important in shaping the reader’s perceptions of Azaro’s world in as much as the narrative point of view is channelled through *his* psychic perception. Furthermore, the manner in which Azaro relates those events where the “real” intersects with the otherworld tells us how much in control he is of his own esoteric powers; there are moments where he navigates the porous boundaries of reality with ease and thus a contrapuntal form is used whereas, when the supernatural comes rushing into the real to create a cosmic chaos, a simultaneous form of narration is employed.

Mid-stream through the writing of *The Famished Road* trilogy, Okri produced *Astonishing The Gods* (1996), a short novel which was, already, signalling a creative shift away from both Yoruban resource-base and its West African setting. Where *Astonishing The Gods* converges with *The Famished Road* trilogy, nonetheless, is in its shared atemporal quality as regards the time of the narrative events and its marked reticence to specify the location where the events take place. The “invisibleness” of the protagonist remains an enigma throughout, and his wanderings through this unnamed location become a search for meaning, primarily for “the secret of visibility”, while the transformations of the physical landscape, impregnated with “myth”, become a reflection a series of inner transformations within the protagonist (Okri 1996, 159).WhatOkriattempts to create through these narrative strategies is a slowing down of the reading process through a process of defamiliarization; bereft of the temporal indicators of the more pedestrian novel, the reader finds himself moving through an ambiguous and disconcerting space that is akin to the oneiric. Within the novel, these non-defined temporal-spatial vectors serve to harness the potential of the dream narrative. They create a multidimensional cosmos that questions perceptions of reality and by extension Realism as *the* organizing narrative principle; a rubric also applicable to *The Famished Road* trilogy.

This experimentation, however, is weakened by a separate narrative voice “telling” the reader about the metaphysical nature of the protagonist’s search rather than the body of the text allowing the reader to perceive this in an organic fashion. Furthermore, the unnamed Southern European setting fails to create what we define as a “protocol of suggestion”; the paralinguistic elements that the reader can access through a series of carefully selected descriptions and suggestions. On the contrary, in his short story “In the Shadows of War”, for example, the reader is offered a series of carefully honed motifs and symbols that bring forth the ghosts of Biafra, something *The Famished Road* effectively manages in a similar fashion. *Astonishing The Gods*, on the contrary, does not successfully manage this protocol of suggestion and we shall be seeing further down how a similar problem is repeated in Okri’s later fiction.

**2**

More than an African writer, we view Okri as a cosmopolitan writer and, as such, one can detect in his works a need to give creative outlets to his extensive knowledge of world culture. Nonetheless, it is our opinion that West Africa, as a narrative setting, generates a richer protocol of suggestion in his novels. Okri assures us that a child’s perception contains a certain quality of genius “that lingers in the depths of the mind, like an imperishable melody” and, while place of origin must never become a creative straight jacket, it is the author’s reconfiguring of his Nigerian later childhood into a literary form that we feel has produced his greatest works to date (Okri 2011, 33).

While *Starbook* (2007) may represent Okri’s return to a West African theme, its time frame is located within the epoch of Black Atlantic Slave Trade and the action takes place in an unnamed forest that is moreover archetypal in nature. While the mythical presence of the forest as a magical force continues to inform the book’s epistemology, a West African resource-base is no longer employed. (In *The Famished* Road, Okri appropriated the folktales of Fagunwa and Tutuola where the forest transformed the mundane into a freakish experience that brought supernatural events to the fore.) A recurring feature in Okri’s narratives, we find a marked reticence as regards both setting and background events, and it is only through the supernatural that the reader is offered glimpses of pending The Middle Passage.

As in *The Famished Road*, Okri employs a contrapuntal technique as a means to narrate the supernatural; the “present” time of the forest is played off a “future” time which envisions the Prince’s enslavement and his subsequent humiliation in the New World. The shamanic dreamtime is the means by which the text merges distinct narrative time into a single continuum. For example, it is through the heron that the prince envisions a maiden who belongs to a “tribe of artists”, and the prince comes to sees as his “true” people due to their heightened vision of reality and their “divination through art”. In this respect, Michael Harner (1980) speaks about the idea of entities that guide shamans on their quest for power and knowledge. This belief is common to all shamanistic-orientated cultures; in Mexico they go under the name of *nagual*; in Siberia they are called “tutelary spirits”, while in Australian aboriginal societies they are known as “assistant totem”. To acquire these guardian spirits, the shaman must initiate a spirit quest, “in a remote pace in the wilderness”, and it is for this reason that, in *Starbook*, the prince instinctively travels from his village and deep into the forest. As Harner assures, “The guardian spirit is often a *power animal*, a spiritual being that not only protects and serves the shaman, but becomes another identity or alter ego for him”, and the heron, in this respect, becomes the prince’s power animal (Harner 1980,54). This shamanic motif gives symbolic cohesion to the, many, isolated episodes regarding the heron, and through these isolated episodes we also come to understand the significance of the Middle Passage; how its futurity has already impinged upon the present narrative time of the forest.

To collapse these distinct narrative times, Okri uses the device of “gaps” which are encountered gateways, invisible to the uninitiated (O’Connor 2008, 20). Both the prince and the maiden move through these time conduits and these become nodal points from where the characters embark on their travelling through, what the text defines as passages “into a dream, or as if from a dream fading in daylight” (Okri 2007,288). Again, we find an appropriation of shamanic resource-base; Harner tells us that the shaman moves through different cosmological planes through “special holes” which are entrances that exist “in ordinary reality as well as in nonordinary reality” (Harner 1980: 31). In *Starbook*,these “gaps” are both physical spaces located within the forest space and are also inside one’s own consciousness. During the prince’s process of initiation at the master’s workshop, he enters a trance-like state and travels into the dreamtime through a “gap”. This takes him to the New World where he finds himself “half naked in a marketplace, being sold for the price of a dog” (Okri 2007, 299). Through this collapsing of a teleological perspective in favour of a layering of narrative times the reader therefore becomes primed for the future horrors of the Middle Passage.

*Starbook* drew less from West African resource-base and more from Shamanism, and *Astonishing the Gods*, in this respect, also signalled a search for a form that relied less upon the Yoruba myths and folktales. What remains a constant within Okri’s work, nonetheless, is his pronounced gravitation towards otherworldly themes, and *Tales of Freedom* (2009) continues along these lines where reality becomes fused with dream narratives. “The Comic Destiny”, the longest piece in this collection, is structured around a series of absurd dialogues that function through a call and response technique; the characters engage with each other at cross-purposes, a technique employed to create a comic effect. However, behind these absurdities lie traces of madness which are provoked by the unnamed predicament the characters find themselves embroiled in. These characters relate past brutalities in a nonchalant manner, which transmits a message to the reader that says, “all is normal”, however, this banality augments a pervading sense of absurdity and creates a contrastive effect which lends to the surreal quality of the freakish events. *The Famished Road* employed an analogous open tone for similar reasons; harrowing situations were given a neutral treatment as, perceived from Azaro’s consciousness, death was an inspirational place, free from the constrictors of ordinary life. “The Comic Destiny”, in this respect, displays a similar attitude as regards life and death, and this theme is conveyed through the aforementioned open tone. Devoid of any psychological dimension beyond that which the *mise-en-scène* provides, the protagonists move through a liminal space delimited by the mundane and the supernatural. There is a dream-like quality to their existences, something that is heightened by the predominating *lieu vague*, a recurring feature in all of the other shorter stories in this collection.

In “The Comic Destiny”, save a table and a white house with a blue door, the setting is empty and no attempt is made at creating a verisimilitude of place. As far as mimesis is concerned, this sensation of the “bare stage” seems to point towards a form that wishes to convey the surreal. This particular device points towards a more generalized tendency within Okri’s recent writing where descriptions are kept to a bare minimum. The question of descriptive narratives and their aesthetic value *per se* is an aesthetic debate that has run for some time, and how descriptive devices are managed within literature is still deemed as paramount within contemporary writing. Vladimir Nabokov (1981), for example, posits Nicolai Gogol as being revolutionary in his deployment of descriptive techniques for formal ends; Russian literature prior to Gógol, Nabokov tells us, was “purblind” inasmuch as it traded in “hackneyed combinations of blind noun and dog-like adjectives […]” (Nabokov [1981] 2002, 54). Where Gógol injected new life into the descriptive passage through a defamiliarization of what Nabokov determined as a series of automatised descriptors “Europe had inherited from the ancients”, Okri has taken this question one step further in his eschewing of *all* description. This, however, we suggest, is risky and, on the contrary, might be creating an unnecessary flattening of the narrative. This strategic lack of description is coupled with an absence of character psychology, something that is a recurring feature in most of Okri’s recent writings. It would seem that the author is suggesting that, through this radical minimalism, the reader is given more space to activate an unconscious response to the text and, therefore, participate in a more profound interpretative process. Coupled with this radical minimalism is the formal arrangement of apparently non-related situations which only gain coherence at the end of the piece. The absurd journey being made by the characters in “The Comic Destiny” emerges as a traversing through a purgatorial state, and this reading, once again, evidences the paratactic nature of Okri’s form. In the first section of “The Comic Destiny”, Pinprop is leading Old Man/Old Woman through the forest towards an unknown destiny. The pervading sense of hopelessness that permeates throughout is offset by the idea of redemption which is seen as the only reprieve from the existential void in which the characters find themselves. The postlapsarian wasteland which the characters move through is counterbalanced by a redemption which comes in the final pages of the text when New Man/New Woman emerge naked from a white building with the blue door and proclaim:

‘Let’s dream again, said New Man. […]

‘Of Eden when it was new.’

‘And after we have restored it.’ (Okri2009, 105)

The remaining sections of *Tales of Freedom* are comprised of much shorter pieces, what the author defines as “stokus” or an amalgam between the short story and the Japanese *haiku*. While in the haiku a *kiru* or “cutting word” marks the contrasting image and enhances the way in which the elements relate to each other, the stokus deliver the contrasting element through short, declarative sentences. Similarities can be found between “The Comic Destiny” and these stokus in both their oneiric quality and the open tone employed to relate darker aspects of human existence. “The War Healer”, for example, tells the story of a newly-wed groom who must return to a “fighting zone” so as to continue his work as a healer and ‘burier of the dead’. His bride, subsequently, joins him and soon her bridal dress has become “all bloody and darkened with gore, mud, blasted out brains and intestines spewed up from all the shelling” (Okri 2009,189). The nuptial white, stained with the colour of death, functions as a visual metaphor of love and hate occupying a common space, and it is this single contrasting element upon which the piece hinges its dramatic effect.

It is “The Mysterious Anxiety Of Them And Us”, nonetheless, that best delivers the contrastive power of haiku that Okri was searching for through his compacted short story form. A group of people are gathered at the grounds of a “magnificent estate” where an outdoor feast is laid out before them. The host, however, does not invite them to take their places at the table and a palpable anxiety arises as to how to proceed. The narrator now “finds” himself amongst those who have taken it upon themselves to start eating. He tells us, “Those who were at table, ate. That’s it. That’s all”, yet, behind these diners forms a body of people who have not come to the table and who wait passively for their situation to change (Okri 2009,120). Through the single image of those sitting at the plentiful table and the murmuring people to whom these people have turned their backs on, the narrator develops a contrasting theme, and in an attempt to mitigate the guilt that this unequal situation produces, a moral argument is generated so as to shore up this predicament: “So to turn around and offer them food would automatically be to see them as inferior. When in fact they behaved in a manner that made things turn out that way” (Okri 2009,20). Therefore, the contrasting aspect of the haiku serves to establish in the reader’s mind the complex relationship we harbour as regards injustices or human suffering, and it is through the form that this theme becomes effectively activated.

As we have already seen, Okri’s past experimentation through the short story format yielded its dividends yet *The Age of Magic* (2014), Okri’s most recent literary fiction, has not brought to fruition the experimentation with the form that *Tales of Freedom* seemed to have been heralding. This novel functions as a sequel to *In Arcadia* (2003) which narrates a train journey across Europe; a film crew has been commissioned by a mysterious patron to undertake the search of Virgil's pastoral idyll, and a closer reading of both texts reveals a certain affinity with Borges’ “The Aleph”, where the common themes include: the excessive need for public recognition, the instability underlying the illusion of permanence, or the ineffability of psychic experience. At a structural level, *In Arcadia* is conducted in two movements, the first being the (uncompleted) outward journey towards the Peloponnese and, the second, an inner search for a personal Arcadia. *The Age of Magic* furthers the train journey initiated in *In Arcadia* wherethe train tracks represent a metaphorical travelling through life, with death as a *memento mori* flanking the moving train on one side and the utopian ideal of transformation flanks the opposite. The text referred to these as Hades and Arcadia respectively, and Fox (2005) establishes a link with similar themes found in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and Dante’s *La divina comedia* respectively. The underlying tensions created by these images of paradise and hell are contextualized within a dream sequence that opens *The Age of Magic*: Lao has fallen asleep and now finds himself in conversation with “a Quylph”, a mythical creature who suggests that his fear of Malasso defines his actions.

Okri re-introduces Malasso from *In Arcadia*, an invisible *metteur en scène* who imposes his arcane will upon the film crew. Through the figure of Malasso, the narrative attempts to create an overarching ambiguity; his presence remains phantasmagorical throughout, and his relation to each of the protagonists becomes a device that merges their outer reality with their inner, psychic space. Furthermore, his presence is intimately linked to the dreamtime of each of the characters and, as in *The Famished Road*, there is an attempt to establish an interplay between a series of pasts, futures and “presents” within the narratives that “extends to the mental lives of the characters […] so that their dream lives constantly inform their daily doings and vice versa” (Fraser 2002, 69).

On a similar note, Gutleben situates *The Famished Road* with an African Gothic genre, and sees the presence of ghostly figures in the novel as “historical beings” that serve to reactivate the ancestral culture of West Africa (Gutleben 2013, 53). While Okri has distanced himself from this resource-base, his interest in the spirit world continues to deeply inform his fiction and Malasso, in this respect, can be seen as a gothic spectre. For example, when Lao awakes from this brief dream a figure appears from beyond the train window “attired like a dark magician” and, in this respect, the uncanny return of Malasso is linked to the oneiric subplot that runs parallel to the principal narrative; the merging of the outer journey with the inner. These attempts at creating parallels between the real and the oneiric/ghostly presences can also be found in the novel’s denouement; Lao glimpses the Quylph and this induces in him a transcendental experience, a dream-like encounter with this benign spirit that serves to finally liberate him from his self-doubting. The narrative mediates this epiphany through the motif of sight, “that whole world, that vast reality, came into being when he was not looking, when he was not trying to see” (Okri 2014, 269).

“To see something one must first be something. One must become oneself” Okri assures us, and much of his fiction employs this idea of vision; a recurring leitmotif that displays a link to the discourses of New Ageism (Okri 2011, 23). Lao’s subsequent transformation — his unconscious need for recognition and the solipsism that this drive produces— offers an alternative model to the Faustian motif explored earlier on in the text and, seen from a broader perspective, the journey towards the physical Arcadia takes on a metaphorical significance; Lao chooses to “see” his personal Arcadia over visions of his own self importance. This personal denouement is linked to the larger theme of one discovering the magical facets to human existence; a quasi-mystic revelation present in most of Okri’s fictional and non-fictional works. Fox (2005), in this light, defines *In Arcadia* as an exercise in postmodern utopian fiction, framed within such classical utopian texts as Thomas Moore’s *Utopia* and Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis*, and this reading is also applicable both to *The Age of Magic* and “The Comic Destiny” where we can find many digressions on the perniciousness nature of a secular modernity that has stifled the magic present in heightened realities. Both texts champion the energizing role of art and the possibilities of a new way of being, understood as an active dreamtime that runs parallel to our pedestrian realities; an ideal that occupies centre stage in Okri’s work.

**Conclusion**

The meshing together of the otherworldly with the mundane at a formal level has been at the heart of Okri’s literary success and *The Famished Road*, in this respect, was paradigmatic of the fine balance the author struck between these two vectors. There is, however, a sense that Okri’s work has become progressively more spiritually orientated with time and has lost touch with the human struggles that *The Famished Road* poignantly portrayed. Appiah (1992), however, had already detected what he defined as New Ageism in *The Famished Road*, while McCabe (2005) viewed the text as verging “on being a New Age allegory” and thus problematized those interpretations that framed the text within a postcolonial/postmodern discourse. Regarding the otherworldly nature of *The Famished Road*, Ato Quayson’s (1997) study was highly influential in defining the novel’s spirituality as resting within a Yoruba resource-base, although Renato (1999) gave testimony to other spiritual discourses such as shamanism operating in parallel with this West African resource-base. In this light, *Starbook* initiated a third stage in Okri’s writing where these pan-spiritual discourses now eclipsed what Quayson had correctly defined as a marked affiliation with West African spirituality. The astral voyage, telepathy, the collapsing of space-time, and so forth now became a central part of the form, while West African resource-base was no longer employed. While we, in part, disagree with McCabe’s (2005/2013) reading of *The Famished Road* as purely New Age spiritualism (the novel is much more layered, polyphonic, and with many political sub-plots to resist this simplified reading), the author’s later works do tend more towards the spiritual allegory that McCabe had detected at the margins of *The Famished Road*.

There are, however, two principal issues that we feel subtract from, rather than add to, the ineffability that Okri seeks to create through the form. The first issue has to do with the manner in which he pares the narrative down to a skeleton text. As a formal device, this economy attempts to produce a sense of the unfamiliar, yet part of reason we feel that this economy does not work is that the bare *mise en scène* anda *lieu vague* presented in these texts fail to provide the protocol of suggestion we mentioned earlier on in this essay. While Okri produces a polished, minimalist style that suppresses all qualifiers and eschews verbal pyrotechnics that attempts to convey a sense of the unreal, considered as an overarching aesthetic effect, this device falls short of its mark. While the elusive nature and predominant lack of closure did create a continuum within the reader in his earlier fiction, the lack of closure and elusiveness in his later works now, we feel, produces indifference.

The second error Okri has incurred in is his increasingly messianic vocation. This has eclipsed other, and more essential, elements of the storytelling form which have become subordinated to these philosophical speculations of a marked spiritual nature. For example, in *The Age of Magic* there is a dubious connection of ideas between Lao’s and that of the disembodied third person narrator; they express the same thoughts and this weakens the impact of these ideas as we see Lao as a mouthpiece for the narrative point of view. This particular defect in the structure is related to the author’s habitual use of digressions in much of his work, digressions which mostly have to do with the author’s utopian and spiritual leanings. This is also true of *Astonishing the Gods* and *In Arcadia,* and while one can abandon the “story” to develop a particular theme, we feel this device does not work for the kind of form Okri wishes to develop. We, therefore, suggest that there is a profound conflict of interests operating within Okri’s fiction: a conflict that is drawn between the writer of stories and the essayists, a genre he dominates with much finesse. It is our opinion that the author would do better to limit these spiritual digressions to the essay form and to develop a more suitable form that better transmits his, respectable, belief in the nature of spirituality and human existence. In *The Age of Magic*, for example, while its strength lies in how Malasso as a multiple psychic projection versus invisible *metteur en scène* hasthe potential to create a series of uncanny events that can destabilize the reader’s perception of reality, this psychic transferal of the characters’ dream material onto the action is, once again, arrested by the digression (both gnomic asides and superfluous scenes). We therefore conclude that what the author may see as a conscious and purposeful expression of the form might well be a subjective illusion of the poet. Or perhaps it is that his work, like that of William Blake whose poetic imagination has exercised a considerable influence upon Okri, may not be accessible to the spirit of the literary moment.

**Footnote**

In Yoruba culture, the tradition of the masquerade, known as Odun Egungun, is celebrated during festivals. The purpose of these annual ceremonies is to honour the dead and thus assure the ancestors a place among the living. The ancestors compel the living to uphold the ethical standards of the past generations of their clan, town or family. In The *Famished Road* trilogy, the masquerade represents a violation of this tradition and the subsequent breaking down of the natural order established by tradition.

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