

## **Unravelling the Post-Modern Narrative through the works of Ben Okri**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The unique style of developing the narrative is considered as one of the tenets used by post-modern writers in their works. Time and space are the two constructs present in any post-modern narrative that function diversely for different authors from different locales. Ben Okri, a prominent Nigerian postcolonial, postmodern novelist draws different mythical beliefs and rituals of his society around the real and spirit world by portraying 'Forest' as a post-modern space that marks the dominance of urban and colonial culture in his Booker Prize-winning novel *The Famished Road*. Similarly, *Astonishing the Gods* by Okri transports the reader to the journey of being 'Visible' with the passages of time expressed through the narrative. Patrick Bray in his article "Creating a Space for Time" talks about the maps that can be structured to situate the narrator within the imaginary figures and characters that are inherent in the narrative of the text. The present paper tries to look at the constructs used by Ben Okri to re-create the postmodern narrative in his selected works that are revealed through time and space.

### **KEYWORDS**

Mythical; Forest; Moment; Transport; Time-Space; Post-Modern Narrative.

Ben Okri, a poet and author of Nigerian descent, was born in 1959. Okri wrote several short stories and novels in which he explores the tension between the real and the imagined. Because he used magic realism in his writing, he was able to express himself, and because of this, he is frequently compared favourably to writers like Salman Rushdie and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. When Okri published his first book, *Flowers and Shadows* in 1980, he was just 21 years old and at the height of his fame. The novel combines society's current conventional and new approaches. The presentational style of Okri's second book,

*The Landscapes Within* (1981), changes and broadens from Bildungsroman to Kunsterroman. Through the continual conflict between the coloniser and the colonised as well as a fundamental struggle for identity, the novel captures the classic postcolonial image. 'The Songs of Enchantment' and 'The Infinite Riches' continue the tales of perilous pursuits and the struggle for tranquilly in an imbalanced land. This paper is focused on the study of the postmodern narrative through the constructs of time and space as revealed by Okri in his novels, *The Famished Road* and *Astonishing the Gods*.

The interrelationships between various temporalities in *Astonishing the Gods* create a gap between what is considered real or clock time and what is experienced. It can be claimed that any perceived present is likewise interlaced with many pasts and futures because time in any story is continually connected to memory and expectation. This experience is captured in narrative time. Any narrative's chronologically structured series of events may be portrayed in an endless number of different ways since a narrative is a specific and subjective presentation of a story through a representation. Since its 1995 publication, *Astonishing the Gods* has been criticised by several critics who have characterised it as a collection of nebulous, pretentious, and cryptic configurations that toy with the irrational nature of time and space. According to one critic, the novel's ad hoc plot serves as an illustration of how time and space interact (Bennett, 368). This ignores the potential of interpreting *Astonishing the Gods* as a book that suppresses the magical realist elements in the book by allowing the mind itself to become significantly present on the page. Okri redefined space and it contains the ontological experiences of feeling reality by experiencing the universe in its own forms. The creation of space talks about invisible realities as it is imaginary in its form - through ideas, dreams, and abstract concepts. In the story, the main character stays on the island and receives instructions from three different instructors in a way that suggests an ideal society. 'Astonishing the Gods' refers to the fluid interaction of time and space that allows 'magical' or 'supernatural' aspects such as spirits, mythological beings, many dimensions, etc. to be incorporated in a setting that is based on the real world. According to Brenda Cooper, who makes a valid point:

Magical realism strives... to capture the paradox of the unity of

opposites; it contests polarities like history versus magic, the precolonial past versus the post-industrial present, and life versus death. It is to reside in a third place, in the rich intervals between these extremes of time or space, that such boundaries between spaces are captured (1).

The interaction of time and space is depicted in the book, *Astonishing the Gods* where time is largely fictitious and space is created artificially. The enormous horizon of a magical realistic text is represented by the narrator of the novel frequently colliding between this nature of time and space while seeking the mysteries of visibility.

In Chapter 1, unidentified traditions that may be traced back to a certain period of unseen time take the form of centuries during which they were unremembered but not entirely forgotten. This time is the "Story Time" (Panasenکو, 12), as it discusses the duration of time since it is depicted in the story. The duration of "story time" refers to the time spent telling (or reading) a narrative story in which the order of events as they appear in the story is reflected in the discourse. The institution is described by the narrator as a place where 'He' learns that time is something that can be measured, hence space is something that is closely tied to time in this passage. As the narrator recounts: 'Their lives can be stretched back into the centuries that are invisible and it all came from the legends and the traditions, unwritten and therefore remembered...He was sent to school where he learned all about odd alphabets and also discovered that time can be written in words' (Grass, 3).

As we can see in the story of *Astonishing the Gods*, there are various contrasting conditions such as success/failure, happiness/unhappiness, visible/invisible, and so on. The world is a spatial vicinity of differences and contrasts

while life is a rotation of various contrasting events and situations. Time itself has no historical context or value in the book. The term "narrative universe" (Ryan, 744) refers to the cosmos that can be imagined following the text as well as all the metaphorical and make-believe worlds created by characters like hopes, fears, hypotheses, dreams, and fantasies. There are open, legendary places in the ray of light that the omniscient narrator follows. The line, "The marble fountains had the beautiful carvings of the ocean blue fishes with water sprouting from their mouths" (Okri, 35) hints at the fantastical realms. The metaphorical environment of the city, which is made up of sounds, rhythms, and tones of life, contrasts sharply with this imagined area. The phrase "narrative world" refers to both real and imagined settings that overlay certain textual regions according to the actual world's geography. As the narrator narrates:

The myths present in the air made the narrator feel like leaving the soul and entering into the temple of world dreams...the city composed of songs and the stones ringing with the statues, cathedrals, merchant banks and the visible buildings of state (Okri, 37).

In his essay "Creating a Space for Time," Patrick M. Bray describes the situation in which he found himself at the start of the text, from which he can go to an ambiguous location, and from which he will eventually be free to roam across both time and space. Bray has experienced the visible impacts of space, and because of this, he is able to understand the function of time as it affects things like death, love, and life. The steady locations that served as the novel's framework were replaced by a practice of place, which included both a literal movement of space and a metaphorical movement of a changing identity. The narrator in chapter ten is talking about such a space which is

imaginary but is invisible in its form and structure. Bray's concept of 'Creating a Space for Time' could be located here when the narrator narrates 'the depth of a great ocean, forgetful waters, the great city of stone, churches-libraries-palaces' (Okri, 27). The building of a great city of stone, mighty pyramids and all such unseen wonders of the world is what shows the role of the work of time that brings changes in the cyclical movements of life. 'The building of a great new future in an invisible space...' (Okri, 27) is the narrative world (or story world) that is conceived of the imagination as a concrete and coherent one, materially full with existing geographical entities.

The cyclical idea that denotes the end of a circular journey is at the centre of the book *The Famished Road*. Since the story is told from the viewpoint of a Nigerian Abiku child, Azaro, the book's protagonist epitomizes this idea. The character of Azaro, a spirit child who wants to stay in the space of the living world and rejects the spirit realm, also illustrates spatial structures in the book. This cycle of Abiku being born in the living world is ended by Azaro. While doing so, Azaro ends the idea that time is constantly changing and moving from one end to the other. He also ends his ongoing rejection of the spirit realm and his denial of any other spirit children who are born in this abiku world.

Time in Book 1 refers to the length of time as it is described in the story. It is the period of time that includes the duration of the story's telling (or reading) and the order of events as they are stated in a discourse. As the narrator describes the institution as a place where the person "He" learns that time needs to be recorded in words, space over here is something that needs to be learned. Adventure time, which in Book 2 includes all of its constituent parts—moments, hours, and days—is seized from the temporal process of

cyclical movements of time. This kind of fiction frequently uses phrases like "at the same moment," "the next moment," "the next day," "a second earlier later," and so on, when describing temporal events. Knowledge of the item outside the author's creative knowledge in terms of time, space, and culture is crucial in understanding this. We can see how the narrator emphasises time's immobility. The 'lived time' length refers to the passing of time as it is experienced daily.

Vanishing Space is ubiquitous and it moves constantly. This kind of space dissipates throughout time and is not visible in the present or at the conclusion of the narrative. Because of its propensity to reach the infinite point at which something vanishes or ceases to exist, it is also known as "Vanish at Infinity." This kind of space is similar to time in that it disappears after a given amount of time and has an impact on the story's plot. Space is shown as both free and liberated while simultaneously being restricted and limiting. As with Robinson Crusoe's Island, a little location might be viewed as a place where countless discoveries can be made. The limited and confined invisible space is discussed in book three's chapter six. Although it is enclosed and small, this unseen space is a component of lived space because the narrator is occupying the surroundings. The narrator, who is cautiously making his way into the city, is jubilant in the small area since he has never previously seen such a stunning and magnificent city. A new sensitivity resulted from such enthusiasm. He observed the city in a way that he had never before observed anything, the narrator says. He noticed things that had not previously existed. He could sense the life in the shadowy areas. He arrived in the city conscious of everyone and everything around him (Okri, 64). Bakhtin believes, "Space becomes meaningful as time becomes endowed with the power to bring change" (120).

Azaro's meeting with Madame Koto left her frustrated when Azaro says that the bar of Madame Koto is full of spirits. Madame Koto shouted at Azaro and instructed him to leave her alone. After Azaro left the bar of Madame Koto, he entered the edge of the forest through the widening paths and discovered the trees groaning. The passage in which Azaro described the forest he entered has a spatial undertone in it. The presence of fragmented space in this passage captures the reader's attention. As the narrator says 'By leaving Madame Koto all alone, I went round to the front and searched for a branch that was forked at the end' (Grass, 161). The change of space over here indicates the change of incident as Azaro leaves the bar of Madame Koto and enters an unknown domain and from there he can feel the space of the forest growing unnatural as if resonating with the spirit world. This strange happening has been described as 'Azaro reached at the edge of the forest and can hear trees groaning and crashing down on their neighbors' (Grass, 161). Azaro listens very carefully to the inner sounds of the trees falling as if the space has become much more lively and is responding with the pain and agony inflicted on it: 'Azaro listened to trees being felled deep in the forest and can also hear the rhythm of the axes on the living wood of the trees' (Grass, 161).

With his use of various postmodernist tactics closely related to magic realism in his book *The Famished Road*, Okri explores the origins of reality while also developing a variety of perspectives on narratives. Time is one of these dimensions, and space is another. Okri is straying from African literary tradition, which has been exploited in the form of the Western book to portray the history of indigenous Africans, as well as Western naturalism by doing this. Only specific references to time have been used to describe the past in *The Famished Road*,

where the character Azaro serves as a reflection of the past. Azaro frequently enters and exits the spirit world to represent his previous existence and link it to the present. Azaro can be seen moving between the spirit and physical worlds before going back into a trance and ultimately being harmed or beaten by the spirits. Okri has not, however, closely adhered to the model of folklore dream narratives, where supernatural power is present and frequently clearly distinguished from reality. In this instance, Guignery's statement that *The Famished Road* was born from dissatisfaction with the limitations of realism" (4) is appropriate to use. Okri carefully handles time and place in the story of *The Famished Road*, as evidenced by the way the amount of time and space in each book's chapters directly affects how the story progresses.

### Conclusion

The phrase "The Famished Road" should therefore always be conceptualised in the plural because, for the most part, the area is changing and expanding at its own rate, as exemplified by Madame Koto's bar, which "had moved deep into the forest" (Okri, 59). In *The Famished Road*, Okri portrayed the country as an imaginary community that was interlaced with certain conventional notions of the contemporary nation-state. Okri uses

magical realism to create a method of belonging in *The Famished Road*. Okri has skillfully braided magic and realism together in this story in a variety of ways so that readers may observe how the two strands interact to form the narrative web. Beginning with the search for becoming visible rather than invisible, *Astonishing the Gods* by Ben Okri concludes with the solutions and the secrets of visibility and invisibility. The whole story focuses on Okri's assertion that "Becoming Visible is like living the actual life and becoming invisible is like living the dead life". The plot of *Astonishing the Gods* takes readers to a strange and magical island where a lonely man who had become invisible began looking for ways to make himself visible to others. The touch of imagination and suspense has given a new height to the story of *Astonishing the Gods*. Okri uses irony, suspense, humour, and a serious tone to treat time and space artistically in this dream-like narrative. Okri is consciously attempting to construct a dubious world of myth, magic, and enchantment that coexists with the real world, which includes the magical realm. The dream scenes, which are substantial and can be seen and felt by both readers and the novel's protagonists, have been used to illustrate the limits between reality and the esoteric realm.

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