

Towards a Reading of Post-Colonial Identity as a “Free-Floating Signifier” in Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road Trilogy*

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Abstract

*The paper examines the attributes of postcolonial African identity in Ben Okri’s abikutrilogy² namely *The Famished Road*, *Songs of Enchantment*, and *Infinite Riches* and roots them in a typical tradition, which gauges the equilibrium of the past that marked the identity of the society with the stamp of the co-existence of the spiritual and the material. It reads the post-colonial Nigerian/African identity as a “free-floating signifier”, which resists fixity. Through a creative use of the Abiku myth, Okri creates the character of Azaro, the narrator-cum-protagonist spirit-child that navigates between two ostensibly opposed worlds: the secular world of Western modernism and the spiritual world founded on Yoruba culture and belief to serve his purposes of a thoroughly imaginative purveyor of the sense of the doubling of identity. In *The Famished Road* trilogy, Nigeria, like the protagonist Azaro, is allegorically presented as an abiku nation whose identity is located in multiple realms. The very duality which characterizes Azaro’s identity, and by implication the dreamed of nation Nigeria, the paper argues, is a signifier of what Claude Levi-Strauss has called “the free-floating signifier”, a signifier that resists fixity, constantly “wandering” wishing to “stay” yet unable to do so, at least in Nigeria’s turbulent times. Therefore, the main objective of this paper is to shed light on postcolonial national identity as being fluid and always in the making through a close reading of Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* trilogy.*

Keywords: Identity, (Post)colonialism, Abiku, Free-floating Signifier, Chronotope.

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²Ben Okri’s abiku trilogy, which comprises *The Famished Road* (1992) and its sequels *Songs of Enchantment* (1993) and *Infinite Riches* (1998). Later referred to in the text/in-text citations as *TFR*, *SOE*, *IR*.

The paradigm within which Chinua Achebe looked the whole issue of how “things fell apart” with the arrival of the colonial white man is still prevalent in Okri’s *The Famished Road* Trilogy. Indeed, put simply, the Nigerian world fell from without with the colonial pressures and from within with the collapse of the balance between the spiritual and the material. As it has been argued by many postcolonial writers “colonialism put a knife on the things that held the colonized together and they fell apart.” (Ifowodo xxii) The experience of colonialism entails the experience of disjunctures, ruptures, fragmentation of physical boundaries and dissolution of identity. It leads to a collision of cultures and values with scientific and technological advancements constantly threatening traditional belief systems. In his article “On National Culture”, Fanon described the need of the colonizer to obliterate the past of the colonized thus:

Perhaps we have not sufficiently demonstrated that colonialism is not content simply to impose its rule upon the present and future of the dominated country. Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it. This work of devaluing pre-colonial history takes on a dialectical significance today (*The Wretched of the Earth* 210).

Mum’s speech in *The Famished Road* seems to echo Frantz Fanon’s when she speaks about the white man: “When white people first came to our land,’ [...] they brought guns. They took our lands, burned our gods, and they carried away many of our people to become slaves across the sea. They are greedy. They want to own the whole world and conquer the sun.” (TFR 282) When Azaro spat at a man in Madam Koto’s bar, people blamed his behavior “on the white man’s way of life which was spoiling the values of Africa.” (TFR 240) It becomes clear from the quotations above that colonialism is a traumatic event which shatters the individual’s identity. A trauma is “an injury to the body or mind, caused by a violent or catastrophic act or event, which shatters the existing frame of reference and defies ready understanding.” (Ifowodo 5) As Fanon argues, colonialism is a traumatic event that causes damage to the mind of the colonized, and so to his/her self-perception. The huge damage, which was done to the psyche of the (post)colonial subject is absolutely valid to the psychoanalytic critic. Ngugi waThiong’o shares the same project as Fanon when he speaks of the urgent need of —decolonizing the mind.

The postcolonial subject suffers an identity crisis because he/she lacks a wholesome sense of self. This identity crisis “is exacerbated by the —helplessness of the colonized under the sway of a seemingly irresistible ideological and political apparatus of colonial power, leading him/her to debilitating self-doubt.” (Ifowodo 6) Robert Jay Lifton argues that “the trauma of colonialism creates a radically altered sense of self, even a second-self different from the determined and traumatized self which supposedly recalls the original, pre-traumatic one. But because the colonized, in this traumatic state, cannot come to an accurate self-understanding, instability dogs him/her every effort to recapture the old self or to reconstitute a new one from the — ashes of the traumatized one.” (Caruth and Lifton 164) Hence this paper opts for a conceptualization of post-colonial identity as one which is free-floating, an identity which resists fixity.

The transition from a communal way of life to an individual one, it has been argued, was the cause of the ill-at-ease prevalent in colonized societies. Hence, there is a sense of loss because of the destruction of the old ways. The dilemma has to do with a lack as “the village code of conduct has been violated but a more embracing one has not been found.” (“Role” 159) The lack exists until today, and the writers explore its consequences, once it has been diagnosed. They weigh its impact on the individual and the community alike, as they are interchangeable. Achebe’s fiction sets out to articulate the problems of Igbo society as having lost the sense of balance between the spiritual and the material it used to hold it together. According to him, “the success of the culture was the balance between the two.” (“Role” 159) When in search for that balance, Achebe sees no other adequate way than to explore the past that is the balance between spirituality and the material side of life. He argues that “the past needs to be recreated not only for the enlightenment of our detractors but even more for our own education” (“Role” 158).

The past is not invoked because of nostalgia. Its invocation has to do with the determination of the self, the soul of the people, no matter how absurd, how incongruous, or irrational it might seem. The writer argues that the reason for revisiting it is that “the past with all its imperfections, never lacked dignity.” (“Role” 158) As an attribute, dignity and dignified determine attributes of the self and the community. Their loss is equated with the loss of the true self. So far, what filters from Achebe’s paradigm is the locking of self and community into one inseparable duality. Each is a definer of the other and none is or can be considered on its own. One cannot make sense of a character outside his/her community and vice versa. The paradigm locks two equally important component parts of the being of the community and the individuals making it which are the worldly and the spiritual in an incessant communication or better, a communion.

As a result of these double interlocking, the artist is required by the very subject matter of his/her work to adapt the form to the content. Consequently, the work becomes the site of experimentation and the arena for infinite dialogues between competing voices, each striving for a prominent place. It becomes a search for new old possibilities and innovative forms. In delineating the representation of the attributes of identity in the selected novels of Okri namely *The Famished Road* trilogy, this paper roots them in a typical tradition initiated by Chinua Achebe, that of gauging the equilibrium of the past that marked the identity of the society with the stamp of the co-existence of the spiritual and the material. It highlights Okri’s creation of a character that belongs in the two worlds to serve his purposes of a thoroughly imaginative purveyor of the sense of the doubling of identity. The very duality which characterizes Azaro, and by extension, the dreamed of nation is a signifier of what Claude Levi-Strauss has called ‘the free-floating signifier’, a signifier unwilling to settle down, constantly “wandering” wishing to “stay” yet unable to do so, at least in these turbulent times.

1. The Past, the Spiritual, the Worldly, and the Sense of Identification

Okri’s creation of the Abiku Azaro, as a narrator and protagonist, is a subtle reexamination of the aftermath of the colonial experience and a “re-visitation” of the identity of the Nigerians. In *A Way of Being Free*, Okri argues that “[t]here can be no absolutes: no absolute good or evil; no absolute way of living. No absolute truth. All truths are mediated and

tempered by the fact of living. Being alive qualifies all things.” (*A Way of Being Free* 54) This quotation encapsulates the main purposes of this paper in its author’s utter conviction of the indeterminate and therefore provisional nature of truth or reality. Okri’s statement highlights the shifting rather than constitutive nature of meaning, my argument is that identity cannot be fixed. It indicates a resistance to the pure and homogenous identity and lauds the liberation of the subject from the narcissism that defines identity in terms of fixity and purity of origins.

Abiku, an in-between subject, a child oscillating between the world of the Living and that of the dead, has made several appearances in literary works. McCabe credits the following works with Abiku characters or belief: Soyinka’s poem titled “Abiku, which privileges the spirit world consciousness of the Abiku and sees its unattainable cosmic knowledge as being beyond humans in the real world and his play *A Dance of the Forest* (1960), which employs a Half-Child or Abiku who symbolizes the tragic nature of cyclic human history and which, unable to reach maturity, projects a sense of sterility that symbolizes the stillborn embryo symbolising the newborn Nigerian state. Soyinka’s *Abiku* is defiant and experiences intense pleasure and satisfaction causing pain to its parents. Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* too uses abiku called Ogbanje. His Ogbanje/Abiku Ezinma represents the way the idea of the Ogbanje manifests itself in the physical world of Nigeria. Unlike Okri’s trilogy, there are no obvious magical occurrences in Achebe’s novel. The spirit world remains unseen in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, it never crosses the borders between the world of the living and that of the spirits. Abiku takes a special place in the novels of Okri. In *The Famished Road*, *Songs of Enchantment*, and *Infinite Riches*, the abiku child (Azaro) is the main character and the narrator. As Ato Quayson argues, Okri has incorporated the distinct ethnographic and esoteric versions of the above-mentioned author’s workings of the abiku myth into his narratives that produce a multiplicity of meaning. (*Strategic Transformation* 125) Okri’s main achievement lies in his creative use of the Abiku myth and its metaphysical dilemma as a perfect metaphor for the crisis in Nigerian /African history. However, Okri’s Abiku empathizes with his parents, has compassion for them, and decides to stay back to please, satisfy and give them happiness.

In the *Famished Road* trilogy Azaro (the name being a direct allusion to the biblical Lazarus), despite his condition of abiku, decides to stay on in this earth and break the tragic cycle. Okri, therefore, alters Soyinka’s abiku trajectory through Azaro’s determination to survive throughout his ontological journey; a determination which represents both a re-evaluation of the Yoruba mythopoeic and an exploration of the multiple dimensions of the literary use of abiku. (Ogunsanwo 49) My argument is twofold: First, Okri deconstructs the image of the Abiku child according to indigenous belief system by assigning to his protagonist spirit child the task and responsibility to stay, which is a social obligation Azaro has to perform. Second, Okri’s trilogy is not an exploration of the concept of the Abiku as an embodiment of the Yoruba myth rather he puts the same myth to use for his own purposes. Azaro states that:

...I spent most of my time in the other world trying to reason with my other spirit companions, trying to get them to leave me alone. What I didn’t know was that the longer they kept me there, the more certain they were making my death. [...] I realised that they (the spirit companions) had managed to shut me out of my life. [...] When I woke up I found myself in a coffin. My parents

had given me up for dead. [...] He [the herbalist Azaro's parents have brought in to sever his connection with the spirit world] was the first to call me by that name which spreads horror amongst mothers. [...] As a child I could read people's minds [...]. (TFR 8-9)

These opening pages of *The Famished Road* frame Azaro's consciousness within what will be his struggle through both the crudities of the ghetto and his ongoing conflict with his spirit companions who populate the esoteric interstices of communal space. "The fact that Azaro wishes to remain in the real world while simultaneously refuses to sever his privileged connection with esoteric knowledge that is afforded to him by the spirit realm has a profound effect on the narrative epistemology" (O'Connor 206).

The Famished Road trilogy is as much misunderstood by critics as the concept of Abiku. Much like the missionaries tried to "normalize" the Abiku concept by expressing it in Christian and scientific terms, literary scholars have attempted to normalize Okri's novel by classifying it into recognizable western genres. (Fraser 66) *The Famished Road* has been labeled fable, fantasy, allegory, myth, picaresque, postmodern, and magical realism. None of these labels adequately contain or express the particular genre that Okri has begun to create. McCabe argues that what is developed in this series of novels is an "Abiku literature" and calls for a full-length study of Abiku and their stories. He suggests that any responsible study of Abiku literature will look toward the concept of Abiku as expressed by Yoruba Bablawo and elders rather than toward Western frameworks (McCabe 1).

This paper attempts to summarize and present the general conclusions that literary critics have drawn about Okri's creative use of abiku in the trilogy. Grace depicts Azaro's existence as "symbolic of the nation's struggle to come into and remain in existence"; Hart and Ouyang also argue that Azaro operates as "a metaphor of political disempowerment in Nigeria" which is reflected in "the Biafran war, military regimes and inchoate political structures" (Grace, 148; Hart and Ouyang 10). Felicia Alu Moh discusses Azaro's Abiku condition as one of three controlling symbols in the narrative. She established his Abiku status as symbolic of the nation and identifies two "strains" in his presence in the novels. The first is the fragmented nature of Azaro's experience. He has a story in the physical world and a story that takes place amongst the ara-orun. The most important strain "shows Azaro's experiences as a symbolic representation of the nation's historical experiences." (*An Introduction* 75) She cites the commentary of Ade, who is Azaro's friend, to establish the symbolic importance of Abiku status: "Our country is an Abiku country. Like the spirit-child, it keeps coming and going. One day it will decide to remain. It will become strong." (TFR 478) This exchange, as Moh points out, occurs in the physical world, but in his journey in "dreamland" (a better word would be nonphysical or metaphysical) Azaro observes: "Dad found out that all nations are children; it shocked him that ours too was an Abiku nation, a spirit child nation, one that keeps being reborn and after each birth come blood and betrayals" (TFR 494).

Though Moh continues to emphasize the differences between the fragmented pieces of Azaro's experience, the similarities in the experiences and thoughts of Ade and Dad establish a continuity that closes the perceived gap between the heaven people and the earth people. She also emphasizes that there are no causal links between episodes of Azaro's experience at the same time she points that the connection is indeed Azaro himself. He is the unifying factor. Moh establishes the pattern of Azaro's life and the experiences of the nation as a

series of “hopes and betrayals” that is “a chain of endless recurrences” and calls this Okri’s rendering of “the nation’s history as one that revolves around hopes and betrayals.” (Moh 77) A series of events both constructive and destructive is indeed as good a definition of “being” as one could hope for.

Robert Fraser, who writes in a chapter titled “When the Road Waits, Famished” calls Okri’s creative use of the Abiku concept a combination of attributes. His analysis of Azaro’s Abiku status draws attention to the ways the Abiku concept has the power to both totalize and fragment. He writes that Abiku children both “delight and plague” the mother of such children (68). *The Famished Road*, through the Abiku symbol, metaphor, and narrative technique articulates an adaptability that simultaneously embraces combination and fragmentation:

...Okri has combined a local belief concerning child mortality both with the much broader conception of reincarnation espoused by several of the world’s religions and with the remote intimations of eternal blessedness to be found in Eastern and Western literature. The doctrine of the pre-existence of the soul, for example, can be found in Plato’s dialogues the *Phaedrus* and the *Apology*, while the notion that young children possess an awareness denied to adults of some prenatal bliss has a provenance reaching from the seventeenth-century mystic Thomas Traherne to Wordsworth’s ode “Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood”. Azaro combines these attributes, both with the precocious wisdom of someone who has lived many lives and with the naivety of a 7-year-old-boy. He is at one and the same time sage and innocent, possessing both a historical long view and a delighted capacity for surprise. Much critical endeavour has been expended in attempting to locate Azaro’s voice. The truth is that he has many voices and is both soloist and choir (Fraser 68).

To explain the apparent contradiction in Azaro’s physical and spiritual state, Bill Hemminger, draws on Heidegger’s concept of “dasein” in his essay “Building Dwelling Thinking” in order to locate the nature of Azaro’s spirit, and thus the spirit of all things. By situating Heidegger as external to the tradition of the Western, rationalist perspective, Hemminger is able to show that Heidegger and Azaro operate in similar worlds. As Hemminger notes, “in the development of the concept of Dasein, being-in-the world, Heidegger breaks with Western philosophical tradition... Dasein is ultimately a refutation of the ‘metaphysics of presence,’ the notion that ‘reality must be thought of in terms of the idea of substance.” (“The Way of the Spirit” 68) Hemminger continues, quoting Heidegger: “existence is best thought of as a ‘happening,’ a life story unfolding between ‘birth and death.” (“The Way of the Spirit” 68) He concludes that what makes Okri extraordinary and worthwhile is a “nonmodern” reinvestment of the spiritual into a modern existence that relies too heavily on the rational. This is done through Azaro’s Abiku experience and narration of that experience. Azaro, whose seemingly binary being (dasein) in the physical and nonphysical worlds, in fact encompasses an infinitely open ontological condition. Hemminger calls the ‘being’ expressed by the Tao, Heidegger, and now Okri, a “constant negotiation between a person and the world of things around her, not an exercising of ego” (“The Way of the Spirit” 73).

The postcolonial subject and nation must both “struggle to transcend the nightmare of history”, colonialism’s legacy in much of Africa (“Looking Awry” 66). The young protagonist Azaro is struggling in his own way to traverse and overcome this nightmare; at the same time, he struggles to step over the threshold or liminal stage into maturity. “His

passage through the Lacanian mirror stage was incomplete since the mirror had cracks resulting from the trauma caused by colonialism. The acquisition of a coherent identity was not automatic as the image was unclear. The work to repair this cracked mirror is what he is attempting to do in his own way. Azaro is successful in holding off the spirit world's influences." (Anne Plettner 53) Azaro has felt the repercussions of the effects of the colonial dislocation. This indeterminate and traumatized state is signified through ambiguity which he experiences. He is confused about his identity and has the feeling that there is another inside him. For Azaro is constantly inhabited by the spirit side. Referring to those people who grapple with challenging realities in the modern world, Okri says that "Exile is a fleeing from one dream to another one. In the process we change, we metamorphose, and our new shapes are never settled." (*A Way* 54) This reflects the fluid conceptions of self-articulated by Okri, who, in his Azaro's trilogy "illustrates this by constructing a political landscape where subjectivities are always already in motion and the political is a product of unforeseen contingencies" (*Challenging Euro-America's Politics of Identity* 131).

Okri's concern with the issues of identity makes his novels an interesting subject for analysis. Unlike his predecessors, he uses the abiku myth in a very different manner. In his trilogy, the abiku marks all births as moments of exile. The Abiku's unsettling movements reflect the complexity of postcolonial identity. As Azaro notes, "[t]o be born is to come into the world weighed down with strange gifts of the soul, with enigmas and an inextinguishable sense of exile." (*TFR* 5) For Okri, birth is haunted by memory which echoes Michel Foucault's assertion that "what is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity." ("Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" 79) Azaro is similar to the postcolonial migrant because he embodies this disparity. "He is haunted by memories of the spirit world and by cycles of births and histories that bleed into one another, disrupting all possibilities of identity formation. He dwells in the in-between, alert to the songs of the spirit world, and attuned to histories and memories of countless births" (Fernandes 135) Okri does not only place his protagonist Azaro in the service of identity or national history but also "enacts through him a way of being in the world that celebrates the turbulent spaces of encounter. He accomplishes this not through narrative plot alone, but by transforming himself and his works into signs of the Abiku." (Fernandes 135). Much like Azaro, Okri navigates between London and Lagos, tracing the historical arcs of Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo, as well as the history of England. He dwells in-between the Nigerian and British identities.

In rejecting fixity and adopting fluid movements and repetitions, Okri engenders a politics predicated not in a national being, but in a being-in-between. That these labels are rightly used and prove to be fruitful areas of research in the establishing of current Nigerian identity identifiers is evident. What remains evident theoretically is that the novel, as a genre, is a bearer of the "one yet many identities." The novel narrating the nation shows how "The idea of nationhood is not only a political plea, but a formal binding together of disparate elements." (Brennan 173) It is these disparate elements that this paper undertakes to examine in the light of a principle of indeterminacy which Homi Bhabha delineates in his introduction to *Nation and Narration* when he asks: "If the ambivalent figure of the nation is a problem of its transitional history, its conceptual indeterminacy, its wavering between vocabularies, then what effect does this have on narratives and discourses that signify a sense of 'nationness'." (Bhabha 2) In other words, how Okri represents indeterminacy without trying to collapse it

into a whole which would transform into a hegemonic label and how he manages to let it float freely?

For Okri, “different and disparate worlds appear to coexist; there is an indeterminacy with regard to where literal reality ends and metaphor begins, a habitual elision of figurative and narrative space” as opposed to a reality which maintains “clear ontological boundaries between what is usually designated as observed and imagined experience, material and magical phenomena, and real and fictional worlds.” (*New Directions in African Fiction* 140) The novels explore the state of the nation without prescribing to it a narrow defining of its identity. They do use a broad framework but they do not stifle it. Theoretically, Ernest Renan’s theorizing of the nation accommodates the novel’s search for possibilities, as like his defining, they undertake to consider the issue in terms of a past and a present, in a similar vein to Renan when he writes “[a] nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form.” (“What is a Nation?” 19)

The spiritual dominates the events and the people as it is the pervading principle shared by the characters as a legacy but also as a present definer. The novels echo Renan’s pronouncement that “of all cults, that of the ancestors is the most legitimate, for the ancestors have made us what we are.” (“What is a Nation?” 19) This seems to be exaggerated in the sense that Renan singles out one cult and privileges it above any other ones. This is a form of essentialism that goes against a more visible characteristic of the novels, which is indeterminacy. Indeed, in Okri’s trilogy, fixing the contours of the identity question in a rigid framework may be counter-productive. For instance, if one takes Azaro as a signifier of the attributes of the Nigerian identity, one is likely to be baffled by inconsistencies, plurality, and a great potential for sudden transformations. The said novels explore the dynamism of identity in the making. With no introductions, they go to the heart of the matter which may seem of a dual nature, that of the spiritual and the material. Azaro keeps going and coming and facing what the narrator calls the “gateway” Going and coming, born and dead or dying, wanting to stay and not wanting to, wandering and returning are signifiers of duality but also of instability. They inhabit the character of Azaro, his making and his being as he says “[h]ow many times had I come and gone through the dreaded gateway? How many times had I been born and died young? And how often to the same parents?” (*TFR* 5) It is a form of stillness he seems to be unable to find its origins, its causes, and where it will lead him. Identity begins with a quest about the reasons behind his volatile nature, unwilling to settle down.

These oppositions do convey a contrast that the reader may be tempted to replace in the worn-out tradition of a paradigm of binary oppositions. Between worlds that seem to be opposed lies his self and the reason behind he is such a creature of the spirits and the bodies, hovering between the two worlds. They are like the body and soul, co-existing in contrast as when he says, “My spirit moved, my body stayed still.” (*TFR* 165) Given the structure of the novels, constantly moving back and forth between the two worlds the spiritual and the secular, one may be justified to fix them as organizers of the paradigmatic representation of identity. Azaro is there among his people, yet he is also travelling or, to use the word that is

much repeated in the trilogy, is “wandering.” This paper focuses mainly on the dynamism of the issue and attempts to seize the unsettling wandering between the two worlds rather than fixing attributes of that fluid identity. There is a constant movement in the novels’ structure yielded by constant shifts of places or worlds and shifts in situations.

The reader keeps following the main character from one space to another, from the world of spirits to the actual earthly world. The opening lines of *The Famished Road* begin with some enchanted world whose contours are unspecified. “In that land of beginnings spirits mingled with the unborn.” (TFR 3) The land as a concept is never delineated properly, much like the unnamed city or the compound in the trilogy. They all remain open spaces and open signifiers much like the inhabitants of that world whom we are told “knew no boundaries.” (TFR 3) The lack of boundaries begets a blend of a nature that is multiform and often made up of opposites as in that land the players “played much because they were free.” (TFR 1) It is a freedom that helps them partake of everything: “There was much feasting, playing, and sorrowing” (TFR 1) from that world of mixed bliss the reader is presented with the earthly matters of the world down on earth with Azaro as a troublesome child torn between the world of the unborn and that of the living.

The shift in places is a shift in situations. From a state of tranquility, the reader is led to a state of tension: first as a result of Azaro’s birth followed by innumerable efforts by the world of spirits to drag him back to their world and his unrelenting struggle to stay down on earth. Then, the state of tension is followed by a state of trouble where Azaro recounts the events as a witness first then as an actor, taking sides with his family and the people of his compound. In-between these shifts, there is a constant coming and going between the two worlds, as Azaro is interrelated several times by dreams, by apparitions, and by visitations.

The sense of ending of *The Famished Road* conveys a baffling stillness or what the narrator calls “quietude,” a sense of peacefulness is dominant conveying restfulness, and even a sense of bliss, where Azaro can realize that in the end, “there were no forms invading” their life. (TFR 500) This stillness is baffling as nothing is settled down in the trilogy. Indeed, if one considers the sense of ending of *Infinite Riches*, restfulness of the first novel is just a transient thing as attested by the following realization that “the respite was brief, and time quickened. We woke up one morning to find curfew hours extended,” (IR 337) the last chapter of the novel is a poem where the very ideas of unresolved issues seem to seal the trilogy with the stamp of unresolved issues as some of the lines show: “We who live through turbulent mysteries/ Do not know that a whole way is passing” (IR 338) before adding the sense of loss at not knowing what is to come.

From what preceded, one may gather that the “we” stands for the whole people and that the narrator is now the spokesperson of these people. By lumping himself with them, Azaro seems to imply that he identifies with them and they with him. Although the identification sends the reader to an old representation of others through self or self through others, whereby generalizations may be reached over the question of identity, the question remains valid and practical in several ways and for several reasons. Indeed, despite some distance from the people in general, and his own family at particular times, Azaro does identify himself with the ills of his community through his own parents. As such he can be the

representative of the identity of the people, or least the one attribute that makes who they are, they have been, and should be.

As an Abiku, we are told, that Azaro belongs in different worlds that may form a paradigm of the spiritual and the material. If this is correct, whatever research has been gathered about the history of the people, their culture, and their cosmography validates the strong cultural balance that has always marked them and that seems to have been lost, and after which they strive to regain. Because of these temporal and cultural considerations, an approach to the question of identity requires the seizing of its dynamic features rather than focusing on the so called stable and fixed attributes. Hence, what may be of interest is the search for the origins of such markers of identity. And this is actually what seems of paramount importance in the selected novels. Questions about origins, nature, and specificities mingle with the passage of time, experience, transformations, and a yearning for lost qualities to be regained.

At the heart of the question are the notions of lack and the sense of indeterminacy. If there is ambivalence, the question is not so much whether this is true or not as it is more about the roots of that ambivalence. Achebe once put it this way: “we need to know where the rain started to beat us or else we will become likethe man in the Igbo proverb who does not know where the rain began to beat him and so cannot say where he dried his body.” (*There Was a Country* 13) Confronted with their present, the people of the compound search for their other lost selves. Their origins as a people whose culture was basically tribal, articulating a great sense of solidarity, the sense of a close community with common structures of thought, common beliefs and practices that have been marked by ancestral roots, a dual world of ancestors, spirits and an earthly world. Coming and going between these two worlds is not strange for them as it roots them in a cosmography that embraces the body and the soul, life hereafter and life beyond.

If Azaro may rightly be considered as a prototype of the seeds of that identity, the question is more about how, navigating between two worlds, he may belong in both at the same time? And if Azaro is an Abiku, in what ways his own father, Dad, and mother, Mum may be affected by his presence, marked by his volition and their own volition? In fact, dealing with identity matters not only for the aforesaid trio. It goes beyond them to hover in the skies of a whole nation. Musing about why he chose to stay on, Azaro ends up realizing that he does it because of his mother. The passage is worth quoting at length:

How many times had I come and gone through the dreaded gateway? How many times had I been born and died young? And how often to the same parents? I had no idea. So much of the dust of living was in me. But this time, somewhere in the interspace between the spirit world and the Living, I chose to stay. This meant breaking my pact and outwitting my companions. It wasn't because of the sacrifices, the burnt offerings of oils and yams and palm-nuts, or the blandishments, the short-lived promises of special treatment, or even because of the grief I had caused. It wasn't because of my horror of recognition either. Apart from a mark on my palm I had managed to avoid being discovered. It may simply have been that I had grown tired of coming and going. It is terrible to forever remain in-between. It may also have been that I wanted to taste of this world, to feel it, suffer it, know it, to love it, to make a valuable contribution to it, and to have that sublime mood of eternity in me as I live the life to come. But I sometimes think it was a face that made me want to stay. I wanted to make happy the bruised face of the woman who would become my mother. (*TFR* 5)

Of all the possible reasons he invokes, the major one singled out by him is his mother and the desire to make her happy. While other reasons such as his desire to experience what humans are going through and to share with them all sorts of feelings like sadness and joy may be good reasons, the most legitimate and ultimate one seems to be love for his mother.

As a unique child, Azaro is much loved by Mum who cares for him and cherishes him. Strong ties between them attest to his decision to stay on. However, the story is much more complex that it seems as this identification between the child and the mother is rooted in a more symbolic symbiosis of mother-son. By extension, Mum can stand for Nigeria and Azaro for the prodigal son. Azaro's birth brings happiness on her face which bears the marks of poverty. In return, her desire to give birth to her child is rewarded by Azaro's wish to remain into the world of the living for her sake: "[b]ut sometimes I think it was a face that made me want to stay. I wanted to make happy the bruised face of the woman who would become my mother." (*TFR* 5) The bond between the mother and the child is unique. The son chooses to remain into Mum and Dad's world to make Mum happy although in this way he breaks the rules that govern the enchanted world of the abikus. Mum's world gravitates around her child and she loves him so fiercely that no one, not even Dad, will ever touch him without suffering severe repercussions: "[i]f you touch my son, you will have to kill me" (*SOE* 10), Mum threatens Dad when he intends to hit the child. When discussing the mother-child relationship, Nancy Chodorow argues that the mother and the son form an isolated dyad. (*Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* 87) They inhabit a magic circle that isolates them from the rest of the world and where the bond between them grows stronger every day.

Mum and Azaro's relation is special from the very beginning. She is more deeply involved in this relation and feels it more intensely than Dad. She is ready to sacrifice everything for her child and she never expects anything in return. Her sacrifice is unconditioned. It is Mum who comforts Azaro and nurses him when he is ill. In *The Famished Road*, when she finds out that he is "trapped in a house of ghosts", Mum gives away her small fortune saved from hard work, borrows the rest of the money, and pays a reputed herbalist to break the spells surrounding the boy so that she can bring him home safely. (*TFR* 30) As she knows that her child is a special one, not from this world, Mum would do anything to keep him into the world of the living. She goes as far as to implore him not to leave them for his spirit companions: "[i]f a spirit calls you", Mum said, "don't go, you hear? Think of us. Think of your father who suffers every day to feed us. And think of me who carried you in my womb for more than nine months and who walks all the streets because of you." (*TFR* 306) Mum's total devotion to Azaro, the sacrifices she makes for him are the foundations of the desert island/ the magic circle the mother-child dyad inhabits according to Chodorow. "Mum and Azaro's isolation is partly the result of the parents' troubled relationship and Dad's violent outbursts. These make the two continually intrude on each other desperately trying to defend themselves against the man's violent demeanour." (Anca Maier 3) The child suffers when Dad beats Mum and finds shelter and comfort in her arms whenever the father directs his violence to him. Mum takes the son's side at the risk of being herself punished by Dad.

There is a scene that best sums up the bond between mother and child when Mum kept waiting in the rain for her son until she found out where he was held captive: "Mum had waited in the rain, outside the house, for three hours. She had stood patiently, with thunder growling above her, as lightning flashed in different places, over many houses and trees."

(*TFR* 31) Her waiting may denote the love of the mother but equally the strong desire to see her prodigal son appear. He would be the savior and the redeemer.

2. Mother Africa and Azaro

The idea that Azaro may stand for the prodigal son who comes as a symbol of the true Nigerian new old man that Nigeria is waiting for is further corroborated by the fact that he would be not just the son of his mother only, but of all women in the story. If this is so, it adds to the validity of the symbiosis between Azaro as the representative of the complex Nigerian to be born and the women and men who would identify with him. Azaro has parents to worry about his well-being and to want him to live. It is the “warm presences and the tender energies of ... parents” (*TFR* 33) which maintain the basic health of the society. The child is generally illustrative of an innate indestructible goodness which not only makes him the ideal protagonist and central consciousness, but also legitimizes his topological weight. The worth of a woman can be gauged by the kind of children she begets. Azaro’s father makes a most damaging remark about Madam Koto when he declares “[s]he is a witch, a wicked woman. That’s why she has no children.” (*TFR* 306) As already stated, women in Africa and therefore in African literature, constantly hanker for children.

The idea of the mother is very important in most African societies where in the absence of a real mother, there are many willing to take on the task of mothering. Even a man could assume such a responsibility. Consequently, Madam Koto, the unnatural mother who nurses fiendish foetuses in her womb, is damned because she supposedly ate children. When she repeatedly calls Azaro ‘ugly’ it does not say much about the child but rather it reveals the sterility and the corruption of the ranting adult. It is significant that she never actually gives birth to a child. Therefore, the mother figure is very meaningful in these novels. As the Cameroon proverb “young palm trees grow on old palm trees” shows, the mother cannot be forgotten if one has to arrive at an assessment of the child’s position in African fiction. (*The Ultimate Colony: The Child in Postcolonial Fiction* 45) Azaro’s mother’s total concern in life is with her family especially with Azaro. She is the primary reason that the abiku child decides to ‘stay’. It is she who will wrest him from the mouth of death so many times.

The conflation between mother, nation, and motherland is expressly established. As Elleke Boehmer says, in “nationalist mythologies ... mother figures cradle their children in comforting and capacious laps.” (*Mothers of Africa* 1) The mother becomes the signifier of something basic to the identity of the children and hence of the nation. The talk amongst the people after the riots in *The Famished Road* also points to the connection between the two: “They say he is looking for the spirit of Independence.’ ‘They say he is looking for himself.’ ‘For his own spirit.’ ‘Which he lost when the white man came.’ ‘They say he is looking for his mother.’” (*TFR* 167) Meenakshi Bharat, in her book *The Ultimate Colony: The Child in Postcolonial Fiction*, argues that: “This quest of the child [...] emphasizes the idea of the quest itself which gives direction to the search for identity. The second quest is for political and therefore psychological independence.” She goes on to argue that “this quest is synonymous with the search for individual and national identity is transparently clear” and [u]ltimately, the whole search is subsumed in the quest for the mother.” (82)

Regarding women, the way he is welcomed by them as a hero is described in *The Famished Road* as follows:

I WAS AWOKEN by voices in the dark. I was on Mum's shoulder and I saw faces of women in the rain, faces lit up by lightning flash. They crowded us, arms outstretched, eyes warm. We were surrounded on all sides. The women touched me and looked at me as if I were a wonderful thing that had fallen from the sky. They fondled my hair, rubbed my skin, and felt my bones as if, in being lost and found, I belonged to all of them. I had brought with me a new hope. They too became reasons for staying on this earth, to sometimes taste the joys of homecoming. (*TFR 28 emphasis in original*)

What is of relevance to this paper is the fact that Azaro feels he is not just staying for the sake of his Mum only. He belongs in this community of women, who by extension are Nigeria. If they embody the community as much as Mum does, then Azaro is justified that they are his Mum, too. They and Mum may be said to be interchangeable. He stays for Mum and therefore for them too. He is a gift from the skies, a savior and a redeemer because he is the embodiment of the values that make up the whole community. His attributes are theirs too, or they are the ones they yearn to either possess or be led by.

Belonging is the key concept in the passage quoted above. It is not only a matter of features shared by the whole community. It is more a question of identification with some lost values they can recognize and find in Azaro. They belong to him and he belongs to them. As to the deeper reasons, the notion of hope further determines their strong and natural attachment to him. It is a form of moral and spiritual communion between their souls and the hope for the future, one that is rooted in the past cosmography that unites the living with the dead, the spiritual with the material, and the earthly with the above. Finally, Azaro stresses homecoming as a yearning for return to the community, for the natural land of the ancestors. It is also associated with a sense of celebration that takes the form of caresses and other forms of welcoming for what has been missing and found. Homecoming is also related to restfulness and staying on as opposed to departing. The sense of union and even communion is evident in the embrace that unifies the son and the mother(s).

To sum up, the passage is carefully calculated to convey a shared belonging to a form of identity that is characteristic of a long tradition whereby the people's lives are configured in a paradigm that is not fixed, hovering between at least two dimensions, the spiritual or the metaphysical, on the one hand, and the material, the worldly, or the temporal on the other hand. By extension, other characters in the novels be they good or bad Nigerians are also representatives of the balance or lack of it. Another issue about any consideration of the notion of identity that filters from the narrative structures has to do with identity as a project. Is it finished, on the move and therefore unsettled? As a result, one may put forward the idea that as unfinished or unsettled questions, identity matters linger in the air.

3. "The Free-Floating" Self

According to Stuart Hall, floating signifiers can be used to comment upon a concept like race or gender. (*Race: The Floating Signifier 2*) Such words are stable but their signification is abstract. The words mean several things according to their use, to the context in which they

are used, and to the users. Roland Barthes uses a “floating chain of signifieds.” to mean concepts or chains of concepts open to interpretation. (Barthes 39) The American flag is used as an example to mean the USA as a nation, patriotism, US government, some US values such as capitalism, free trade, competition, and liberty. The concept is associated with indeterminacy and the negation of any determinable meanings to words or signs. Jacques Derrida uses the “free play” of signifiers: to negate any fixed meanings already present and favors an “indefinite referral of signifier to signified.” (Derrida 25) As Rodolphe Gasché explains in his book *The Tain of the Mirror*, a signifier is there to explain and explain again. The sense never stops but keeps referring on and on. Its implications and its infinite nature account both for its lack of stability and fixity.

Abiku is such a signifier whose signifieds are many, indefinite, and each time it is invoked, it keeps referring to something. Azaro is a case in point. When trying to consider the concept in relation to an entity like the world of spirits, it slips into another world as it signifies the unborn, too. The world of the unborn is not stable itself as it partakes, in the novels, of “the world of the living”, those of “the dead ancestors” and those of the immortal. On earth, it is that which is neither human nor totally angelic or demonic. Trying to hunt it down on earth, it flees and wanders in unknown territories that are uneasy to identify. The slippery nature of the Abiku lends the narrative its complex story lines.

If one is after the major characteristics of the signifier, one can argue that wandering and at times travelling point to the unceasing shifts of signification. Talking about the inhabitants, movement and travel are key concepts like in: “The inhabitants of the area never missed an opportunity to move on. They themselves seemed anxious to move on, to travel the roads to a new destination.” (TFR 491) Elsewhere, Azaro says he followed his father “in his dreams” and the latter become “great realms and spaces.” They are seen as “worlds before birth, the worlds of pure dreams and signs.” (TFR 493) It is this hovering and floating that render meaning unattainable in full, always referring to other parts of a sum whose total is more than its simple parts, no matter how numerous or complex they are.

What the narrator recounts attests to the swarming of these worlds with interrelated signifiers forming what Barthes called a chain of signification as in the following passage:

I followed him sometimes in his brief reunion with his own primeval spirit and totem, in his fleeting contact with glimmerings of his true destiny. I saw angels erasing some of the memories of his journeys. He travelled far and his spirit ached and as he sweated in our room, dampening the bed, it poured with rain outside and the floods rearranged the houses of the road. The rains were sporadic. Frogs and bugs and diseases roamed in our lives and children died in the mornings when the politicians on their trucks announced the dawn of our new independent destiny.

And Dad travelled the spheres, seeking the restoration of our race, and the restoration of all oppressed peoples. It was as I followed Dad that I learnt that other spheres of higher energies have their justice beyond our understanding. And our sphere too. The forces of balance are turning every day.

Angels and demons are amongst us; they take many forms. They can enter us and dwell there for one second or half a lifetime. Sometimes both of them dwell in us together. Before everything was born there was first the spirit. It is the spirit which invites things in, good things, or bad. Invite only good things, my son. Listen to the spirit of things. To your own spirit. Follow it. Master it. So long as we are alive, so long as we feel, so long as we love, everything in us is an energy we can

use. There is a stillness which makes you travel faster. There is a silence which makes you fly. If your heart is a friend of Time nothing can destroy you. (*TFR 497-8*)

The passage does convey the blend that is unavoidable to talk about any sensible form of the community identities). It is a series of signifiers that collapse everything into a ceaseless going and coming into spaces where the dead, the unborn, and the living cross roads and partake of the attributes of the community.

It is actually the Abiku that, for convenience sake rather than for any sense of definiteness, is chosen to identify the people as a community sharing with their ancestors a unique plethora of a common unique heritage. Dad is the most outspoken character, after Azaro, of the chain of signifiers of the people's identity(ies). Talking to Azaro about the family history he reveals to him the fact that he was the head-priest of their shrine, "Priest of the God of Roads." He was special in that he formed a kind of intermediary or bridge for people wishing to travel or do whatever they needed to do; "Anyone who wants a special sacrifice for their journeys, undertakings, births, funerals, whatever, goes to him." (*TFR 70*) Dad could have succeeded him, but the elders objected. What is of interest for our purposes here is the constant reference to the going and coming of the people, the trafficking that was going on between the worlds of the spirits and the ancestors and that of the living.

The natural belonging of the community is that indefinite, constantly moving, and forever dynamic temporal-spiritual dimension. Like azaro's grandfather, all the members of the community are supposed to be able to travel, wandering, like him, "through the village and the world..." And if, for one reason or another, they feel not as powerful as their old people who have "all kinds of powers" then it is because they "are forgetting these powers," Dad adds that "now, all the powers that people have is selfishness, money, and politics." The latter attributes do not constitute the true complex components of the identity of the people. It is a return to the balance between the spiritual and the earthly that would enable the people to regain what was lost: their true self. Some of the most important pronouncements about the people and identity issues are made by Dad like that above-mentioned musings. Others relating to the destiny of the people are quite illuminating as when he says, "All human beings travel the same road." Generalizations about the people, destiny, and the past combined in the future or the future stemming from the past do convey a sense of belonging to a culture that is marked by the representation of identity in poetic forms.

In this respect, instances of such pronouncements are insightful like when Dad, addresses Mum and Azaro; "My wife and my son, listen to me. In my sleep I saw many wonderful things. Our ancestors taught me many philosophies. My father, Priest of Roads, appeared to me and said I should keep my door open. My heart must be open. My life must be open. Our road must be open. A road that is open is never hungry. Strange times are coming." (*TFR 407*) The vision Dad has is multiform from "wonderful things" to his father's advice, dad is fully confident and makes a statement to this effect the bulk of it is there should be no fear for them from outsiders: "We are protected, you hear. We are fortified against invaders and wicked people. Nothing evil will enter our lives." (*TFR 407*) Dad has access to the world of ancestors, a world that enables him to foresee the present and the future as if he were a living-dead, and an ancestor belonging to both worlds. His conclusion is that they "must look at the world with new eyes, we must look at ourselves differently," What he can see and hear

become wisdom in their own way guiding not just his family but the whole people of the compound and the nation like in his open statement about seeing and hearing: “people who use only their eyes do not SEE. People who use only their ears do not HEAR.” (*TFR* 498 emphasis in original) What Dad has advocated is at the heart of the complexity of their being, a blend of dreams and awakened moments, a mixture of the earthly and the spiritual, the unceasing relations with dead ancestors, gods and mortals coming together to decipher the nature of life, its multiple and infinite meanings, and their own significance.

The signifier of identity in Okri’s trilogy hovers between infinite possibilities. It takes different forms which are interrelated, forming a network whose meanings are infinite because they have no clear beginnings and no endings. They have no definite shape or contours to help delineate them in their totality. Each triggers a concatenation of signifiers in an endless referral chain always there from time immemorial. The signifier of identity may be said to be characterized by indeterminacy. To articulate the indeterminacy in the representation of identity, two recurrent concepts are presented in ways that obliterate fixity of meaning about them. They are the road and the river. There are instances where the road is singled out as an itinerary by itself, travelled by various characters in real life like Azaro and in dreams, especially by Azaro and his father. It even has a King of the Road who, we are told, behaves like a monster always famished and insatiate. The road is said to have no beginning or end and is always unfinished and therefore remains incomplete. It is neither straight nor circular in shape. It may be winding, large or narrow and has links with the forest(s). In concrete terms, it is never visualized and remains abstract. It could mean life, destiny, history, and it can belong to everyone to tread. As such, it blurs the meaning of every single life and prolongs the suspense about its nature and where it leads to if it is trodden by people.

The river is another concept that conveys the movement with no clear directions. Traditional metaphors of the river and crossing the river associated with bathing and purifying are rather absent from the selected novels. It is not laden with a specific imagery like the Congo River or the Thames in Conrad’s *Heart of darkness*, for instance. Its association with the road has nothing to do with the sense of crossing as it is rather a question of interchangeability, one yields or replaces the other in the novels under discussion. Technically, the road becoming a river or the river giving birth to the road entails a horizontal movement as opposed to the seemingly vertical one of the spiritual vs the material. The bend in the river and the twist in the road lend significant signifiers to the travelling identity that is best seen as wandering like its own would-be holders. Hence, the spatial configuration of the markers of identity is both temporal and geographical. They fuse into what Bakhtin has called ‘the chronotope’ or fusion of time and space. Bakhtin defines the chronotope as follows:

We will give the name chronotope (literally, “time space”) to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. This term [space-time] is employed in mathematics, and was introduced as part of Einstein's Theory of Relativity. The special meaning it has in relativity theory is not important for our purposes; we are borrowing it for literary criticism almost as a metaphor (almost, but not entirely). What counts for us is the fact that it expresses the inseparability of space and time (time as the fourth dimension of space). We understand the chronotope as a formally constitutive category of literature; we will not deal with the chronotope in

other areas of culture.' In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope.

The chronotope in literature has an intrinsic generic significance. It can even be said that it is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions, for in literature the primary category in the chronotope is time. The chronotope as a formally constitutive category determines to a significant degree the image of man in literature as well. The image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic. (*The Dialogic Imagination* 84-5)

The chronotope of the river- road becomes the organizing principle of the selected novels with a wanderer who keeps losing track of his road and finding parts of it in his dreams and real life. Bakhtin adds that chronotopes are "points in the geography of a community where time and space intersect and fuse. Time takes on flesh and becomes visible for human contemplation; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time and history and the enduring character of a people." Bakhtin's inclusion of the community relates the chronotope to life and to history, and future: "Chronotopes thus stand as monuments to the community itself, as symbols of it, as forces operating to shape its members' images of themselves." (84-5) They become the source of inspiration for the people and their guides to know themselves and their history and to project themselves in the future.

The chronotope is dynamic, always unstable and changing. It involves past events, present ongoing ones, and future possible ones. It is a long complex road, we are told, leading "Everywhere. It leads to the world of human beings and to the world of spirits. It leads to heaven and hell. It leads to worlds that we don't even know about." (*TFR* 326) The complexity of the chronotope lies in its multi-directions, its changing nature as it takes the form of the river, flowing "against the direction" of its travelers (*TFR* 327), but mainly remaining endless. Azaro asks the spirit about whether they are travelling to the end of the road and the spirit answers in the negative, stressing the paradox of the road. He justifies the paradox by saying "[fr]om a certain point of view the universe seems to be composed of paradoxes. But everything resolves. That is the function of contradiction." (*TFR* 327) All one needs to do is to see "everything from every imaginable point of view" to be able to understand. (*TFR* 327) The paradox is that the spirit who advocates this recognizes that he cannot understand the indeterminacy.

The road is said to be something that is to be built. In the novels, people tried to build it but they succeeded only in building a small portion and it remains an unfinished enterprise. Ending the road or finishing the building of the road is equated with death as Dad seems to have reached a somewhat conclusive response: "I suppose they will have nothing to do, nothing to dream for, and no need for a future, they perish of completeness, of boredom." (*TFR* 329) Completeness or resolution is deadly in the process of cultural identity as Dad affirms. The road is the chronotope of identity which keeps the people going on and on. It is "their soul, the soul of their history" (*TFR* 329) and therefore could never be finished.

Azaro sees it as very beautiful, a true “work of art” and when he asks the spirit for the reason behind the sublime about it, the latter responds that the secret of the beauty lies in that fact that every generation begins building from scratch connecting “the origins for themselves.” (*TFR* 330) The dynamism characteristic of the chronotope is never a finished product. It is constantly made and unmade, begun but never finished, floating and never settling down like the history of a people finding its roots in the past, striving to mark the present and stretching into a distant future.

4. Trauma and Identity

The representation of identity raises questions about the traumatic effects similar to those occasioned by the labors of a pregnant woman giving birth to a child who might live and might die, whose parents wish the child might stay and grow rather than be taken away. This is first evident in Mum’s case, but Dad, as a major character undergoes various anxiety attacks, and so do Azaro, Ade, and the photographer. Mum is constantly portrayed as working, waiting, and worrying. Even when she is ill, Mum goes to her stall to earn a living and she worries lest they have no food, not money to pay for the rent. She often keeps her worries for herself and when she complains she does it just to let her frustration go rather than showing any signs of giving up to her husband or child, or life. The most difficult moments of her anxious mind have to do with waiting for husband to come home safe and her son to return from his nasty habit of wandering.

In all the said situations, she worries. But Mum the worrier is the dominant trait as it embodies restlessness until the end of the first novel. Worrying has been so internalized by her that she came to cope with it so naturally. It became an attribute and a definer of the self. It is a feeling of concern about her family and these concerns are a form of enduring anxiety as it endures. It does not end with the end of the cause of the concern. It is deeper and has to do with becoming. It is true that in some cases, especially after Dad’s recovery towards the end of the novel, she seems to surmount her anxiety by welcoming him back to their family life, and the novel ends with the two of them having left early in the morning for work. It is also evident that Dad and Mum spent the night as lovers, but her anxiety is overwhelming her character because she develops finer feelings and attitudes regarding the nation as a whole, and her family as a signifier of the nation.

Like Mum, Dad does worry about the wanderings of his son and his precarious situation. However, the true source of his anxiety has to do with the ills of his people and what could be done for a better future.

But Dad’s spirit was restless for justice and more life and genuine revolution and he kept ranging farther out into other worlds where the promises of power were made before birth. And Dad travelled the spheres, seeking the restoration of our race, and the restoration of all oppressed peoples. [...] The wind exposes the hungry, the overfed, the ill, the dying, and those who feed on the unseen suffering of others. But the restorations are slow because our perception of time is long. Time and truth always come round; those who seem to hold sway and try to prevent the turning of justice only bring it quicker; and Dad wanted the turning now. He wanted justice now. He wanted truth now. He wanted world balance now. He raised the storms of demands in his dreams. He raised impenetrable questions. He kept asking: WHY? After eons he asked: WHAT MUST WE DO? And then he asked: HOW DO WE BRING IT ABOUT? Pressing on, he wanted to know:

WHEN? Relentlessly, twisting and turning, he demanded: WHAT IS THE BEST WAY? And with a bit more serenity, not drawing back from the inevitable self-confrontation, he asked: WHAT IS THE FIRST STEP? [...] A child was born and didn't get to its body. Was I being reborn in my father? In his journeys Dad found that all nations are children; it shocked him that ours too was an abiku nation, a spirit-child nation, one that keeps being reborn and after each birth come blood and betrayals, and the child of our will refuses to stay till we have made propitious sacrifice and displayed our serious intent to bear the weight of a unique destiny. (*TFR* 494 emphasis in original)

As far as Azaro's traumatic experiences are concerned, he grows to learn to worry about himself and his parents throughout the trilogy.

First, Azaro discovers the solid links of love he feels are binding him to his mother, then the strong links of affinity drawing him to his father, and he worries lest he should lose them.

Suddenly I had a vision of her death. It came and went so fast and it left me perplexed. I remembered her face when she nearly died just after my homecoming. I remembered that it was because of her bruised face that I had chosen to live, to stay, in the confines of this world, and to break my pacts with my spirit companions. One of the many promises I made before birth was that I would make her happy. I had chosen to stay; now she wanted to die. I burst out crying. I threw myself on the floor and thrashed and wept. The demon of grief seized me completely. Mum tried to hold me, and console me, and find out why I had so suddenly begun crying. She didn't know how inconsolable I was at that moment, because she didn't know the cause of my grief. She didn't know that the only thing that could make me stop was a promise from her that she would never die. (*TFR* 228-29)

The passage is about a scary vision of the possibility of his Mum's death and the event is considered as a tragedy for Azaro. The tragic is conveyed in the paradox expressed by the character who strove to stay for the sake of his mother when she is likely to quit this world and leave him a helpless orphan. He is seized by an overwhelming grief that Mum is unable to understand. His helplessness is expressed by the verb cry which is repeated to convey his impotence in front of the situation. That he cannot be consoled is a sign of his helplessness and utter desperation. To the perplexity at envisioning the occurrence of her death will follow a burst of grief at the idea of losing her. Her death will affect Azaro and its traumatic effects will be hard to die.

Azaro weeps over his strong attachment to his parents and part of his crying has to do with the anxiety of either losing them, one of them, or the bliss of having a family. His determination to stay on is behind the fears of not being able to fulfill his inner desire to settle down to a life with his parents on earth. His decision is irrevocable as he says that "it did not matter whether they saw my protest or not. I was determined to stay like that to the end of time." (*TFR* 322) his determination betrays his eagerness to feel that he belonged in a family because, unlike his friend Ade, he felt that they cared for him.

His feelings for his father are as strong and genuine as those he has for his mother. His involvement in family matters like the painful and anxious waiting for Dad to recover from the physical pressures exerted on him conveys a sense of truthful worrying about the health of his father. In the following passage:

DAD STAYED AT home for six days after the fight. His bruises got very big, his eyes swelled to extraordinarily bulbous proportions, and his lower lip grew larger than a misshapen mango. He wasn't ill, but he wasn't well either. He lingered in a curious state of shock, between agony and amnesia. He was silent the whole time and his eyes were vacant. Occasionally he would give me a concussive smile, an idiotic wink. We had to feed him pap, as if he were the biggest newborn baby in the world. (*TFR* 359 emphasis in original)

Azaro's sense of observation is similar to that of any normal child anxiously waiting for an improvement of his father's health conditions. It does also reveal the patient nursing he was involved in as a member of the family when he says, "we had to feed him." His participation in nursing his father is a natural return of what his parents did when he was ill himself. It is natural and conveys a genuine love.

Those long moments of waiting for an improvement of Dad's health conditions are described in terms that convey the trauma of waiting for a change that is so much yearned for. They translate the sense of anxiety which is described in terms of anguish as in "We waited all night for Dad to return. It seemed our lives kept turning on the same axis of anguish." (*TFR* 279) His description of his mother's busying herself until her husband's return to his normal state captures her stoicism:

When Mum had slept enough she dressed her wound with the ash of bitter wood. She showed no signs of pain. She made food, cleaned the room, and counted her money in a tin-can. She calculated her profits without any light in the room. When she finished she began to repair our clothes, sewing on buttons, patching holes in Dad's trousers. She stayed silent and worked with abnormal concentration, her forehead wrinkled, like someone using one action to focus on the pain of waiting. (*TFR* 280)

'The pain of waiting' is veiled by Mum's dignified attitude whereby she keeps making herself busy doing various sorts of things to instill dignity in her son too. Azaro notices what she does and understands what she aims at, which he seems to share, given the situation. He has fully integrated the everyday life of his family. He is now part of a unified small cell of which he is a full member sharing everything with them including the anxiety that further unites them, unlike his friend Ade, the other spirit-child in the novels.

As a spirit child, Ade buries his worries into grief as he is led to take the decision to leave "the world of the living" and join that of "the spirits." His is not an anxiety in the sense felt by the other characters. It is rather a sad realization that when changes occasioned by struggle and hope will occur, he will not be present to share with the people. Contrary to Azaro whose parents are loving and caring, his are presented as indifferent and sometimes brutal. Azaro's recounting of the conversation he had with Ade over his decision to leave and join the land of the spirits conveys the latter's grief in half veiled ways: first, Ade's attitude inspires fear when Azaro says "He stopped. There was a long pause. Then he continued, frightening me." (*TFR* 478) Azaro seems to be moved by the gravity of Ade's tone as the pause and the expectations are very serious. Seriousness is conveyed in the pondering over what will happen in the future as Ade says:

'There will be changes. Coups. Soldiers everywhere. Ugliness. Blindness. And then when people least expect it a great transformation is going to take place in the world. Suffering

people will know justice and beauty. A wonderful change is coming from faraway and people will realize the great meaning of struggle and hope. There will be peace. Then people will forget. Then it will all start again, getting worse, getting better. Don't fear. You will always have something to struggle for, even if it is beauty or joy.' (TFR 478)

Wonderful changes, justice and beauty, meaning, peace and forgetfulness are mixed with suffering, ugliness, and blindness. It is these seemingly contradictory things that Ade will miss. Knowing that they are part of what make a people a nation and that Ade will not be there to experience them is the source of his grief, more than the fact that his parents are careless about him. His "I won't be there," is laden with the sense of regret that matches the quality of his voice which Azaro describes as "quivering". Throughout the trilogy, expectations combine with patient waiting and hope, but equally with anguish and fear. Rather than an after-event effect, trauma is a series of sensations and anguish that are combined with the present of a sweet painful suffering and the anxiety of the unknown.

Suffering is both sweet and painful, therefore traumatic leaving traces that define the self in adversity and project a sense of relief that is most welcome. Anxiety and apprehension of the unknown are traumatic in that they may bring about what the heart does not will and the mind wishes to discard. Hence, trauma in relation to the issues of identity is not a psychological feeling of the consequences of a past experience and its devastating effects. It is already inherent in the present daily life of people and it is future oriented. As Abdelkader Ben Rhit argues in his article entitled "Local Moods, Global Modes in Benn Okri's *The Famished Road Trilogy*" "identity construction and self-discovery in Okri's trilogy are articulated around the painful experience of trauma and its healing process, which necessitates the rewriting of black history through the act of narration." (60) If the traumatic experiences the Nigerians have been through during the colonial, the transition, and the post-independence periods affect the individual and the nation, the kind of identity they yield is complex, in constant search of possibilities, and in the mold. It is never a finished product like the very verbs which are frequently used in Okri's trilogy and which play the role of definers like 'wander,' 'travel,' and 'stay'. This identity is rather problematic as even if it conveys rest or a sense of stability, it remains a free-floating signifier.

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