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**REDREAMING THE WORLD:
MULTIDIMENSIONAL REALITY
IN THE SELECTED NOVELS OF BEN OKRI**

LIM CHONG LIM

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ABBREVIATIONS OF TEXTS CITED

<u>ATG</u>	<i>Astonishing the Gods</i> (1995)*
<u>BOH</u>	<i>Birds of Heaven</i> (1996)
<u>DL</u>	<i>Dangerous Love</i> (1996)
<u>FAS</u>	<i>Flowers and Flowers</i> (1980)
<u>IATS</u>	<i>Incidents^o at the Shrine</i> (1986)
<u>SOE</u>	<i>Songs of Enchantment</i> (1993)*
<u>SONC</u>	<i>Stars of th New Curfew</i> (1988)
<u>TFR</u>	<i>The Famished Road</i> (1991)*
<u>TLW</u>	<i>The Landscapes Within</i> (1981)

*selected novels

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Ben Okri's Booker Prize winning novel, *The Famished Road* (TFR) has been described as possibly requiring "a dream-analyst more than a literary critic" (Hughes 28) for an interpretation. The critic cites the "overplaying" of "fantasy" and "archetypes [piling] upon one another" as reasons behind his opinion. Indeed, the critic would probably have similarly characterised Okri's two subsequent novels - *Songs of Enchantment* (SOE), the sequel to TFR, and *Astonishing the Gods* (ATG).

It is not surprising that the critic mentions 'dream-analyst' as the dream motif is extensively exploited to develop the novels' thematic concerns. The narrative worlds of these three novels - through which this thesis intends to explore the theme of multi-dimensional reality - have been noted for their dream-like atmosphere. Common notions of reality and dream are subverted as the boundaries between these two blur. Things are not what they seem to be, and uncertainty becomes the only certain fact. Roads are hungry, like the rivers they once were. Dreams begin to take on the aspect of waking consciousness, and living is like dreaming. In his exploration of multi-dimensional reality, Okri challenges our perceptions of 'reality', and tries to convince us that there are indeed more to what we normally see.

It must be noted that in the discussion on the nature of reality, there are two aspects to be tackled - Okri's narrative

mode, and his characters' mode of perception. Realism is defined in the Concise Oxford Dictionary as "the practice of regarding things in their true nature and dealing with them as they are". This definition may be applied to Okri's first two novels - Flowers and Shadows (FAS), and The Landscapes Within (TLW) - although the term conventional or mimetic realism would be more suitable. The characters in these novels apprehend their surroundings just as anyone conventionally would. However, in the later novels - TFR, SOE, and ATG - such a conventional way of perceiving reality is not truly "regarding things in their true nature and dealing with them as they are". Conventional sight proves inadequate and is even equated with blindness because it will not enable the perceiver to apprehend a higher or transcendental reality - a reality that is open to many wondrous possibilities.

In tracing Ben Okri's narrative modes through his first five novels and two collections of short stories to date, it becomes apparent that they have evolved from mimetic or conventional realism to the more experimental multi-dimensional realism. In multi-dimensional realism (as a narrative mode), Okri reveals the many dimensions of reality. The narrative worlds in the selected novels of Okri are more complex and multi-faceted than in his earlier fiction of mimetic realism. The characters in the selected novels are shown to live in bewildering worlds that often overlap.

Further, the characters' conventional sight, unlike a 'higher sight', will not enable them to perceive and realise the fantastic beauty of their existence and potential. In the three selected novels, Okri explores deeper into the nature of reality

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than he has done hitherto. Multi-dimensional realism (as a narrative mode, and the characters' mode of perception) is described by Okri as "reality with many more dimensions" (qtd. in CA on CD-ROM). The dictionary definition above would thus be more accurate to describe the term 'multi-dimensional realism'. In other words, actual reality - as redefined by Okri in his selected novels - is not a mere one-sided mundane perception, but is a fluid composite of possibilities limited only by man's dreams.

According to standard Marxist belief, "all reality is ideological" (Kumar 67), that is, one definite objective reality does not exist. Some philosophers, including Bishop Berkeley, even go so far as to question "whether physical objects in the ordinarily accepted sense could be said to exist at all" (Emmet 156). Berkeley posits that objects of human knowledge are either 'ideas' "imprinted on the senses, . . . perceived by attending to the passions and operations of the mind, or . . . ideas formed by help of memory and imagination" (Emmet 156). Unperceived objects have no existence of their own apart from our experience. In other words, an object is just a "name we give to a certain collection of ideas or sensations, but it is nothing else in itself apart from these ideas" (Emmet 163). David Hume, another philosopher, also postulates more or less along the lines as his contemporary, Berkeley. The former regards "material objects as an illusion or fiction whose reality could certainly not be proved, but whose existence in a sense it might be convenient to assume" (Emmet 169).

The question of material reality and man's perception of it has been subjected to intense debate over many centuries.

Basically, the arguments range from the denial of the existence of a physical reality on one extreme, through to the commonplace notion of what we see is what there is. Somewhere along the grid, we find a more conciliatory stand between the two extremes. There is a view that there are two realities - one made up of the material and one of the mental. Proponents of this theory acknowledge that "the mental world depends upon or is correlated with events in a material object" (Rock 3). On the other hand, phenomenologists say that whether or not the physical object exists is "pure inference . . . and [that] what is real is subjective consciousness, our ideas about the world" (Rock 3).

Phenomenology arose out of the need for absolute certainty as a result of an ideological crisis in Europe. Cultural values were turned upside down following widespread political turmoil, especially after the First World War. As summarised by Eagleton, philosopher Edmund Husserl, who saw an urgent need to cope with the devastation, advocates a "return to the concrete" (56). In order to attain certainty, he rejects the belief that "objects existed independently of ourselves in the external world, and that our information about them was generally reliable" (55). Husserl argues that even though we are unable to ascertain whether our physical world exists independent of us, "we can be certain of how they appear to us immediately in consciousness, whether the actual thing we are experiencing is an illusion or not" (55). Objects are considered as things 'intended' by consciousness; consciousness is therefore not empirical but transcendental. Consciousness is not regarded as "a passive registration of the world, but actively constitutes or 'intends' it" (55). Husserl's main contention is that:

To establish certainty, then, we must first of all ignore, or 'put in brackets', anything which is beyond our immediate experience; we must reduce the external world to the contents of our consciousness alone. (55)

By building on the experiences that we can be certain of, phenomenology could serve as the foundation on which reliable knowledge could be constructed. This foundation opens out a whole new world of potentialities.

In many ways, phenomenology is relevant in describing some aspects of Okri's view of reality. Okri explains that what we see is not just what there is. Since reality is really a matter of individual perception, "human beings as a whole cannot sit down and say that we can agree on reality" (qtd. in CA on CD-ROM). Phenomenology and to a certain extent, Okri, too, accept reality as dependent on consciousness. For instance, in the abiku novels (TFR and SOE), whether a certain physical object (e.g. an anthill) is a mere mundane anthill, a shimmering palace, or a non-entity is dependent on the mind's eye. Regardless of the object, the mind 'intends' what man sees. However, despite the subjectivity of reality, Okri appears to believe that there are layers of hidden and even transcendent realities constituting 'truth' that lie beyond our everyday perception.

Theories developed by Saussure and Derrida are also interesting in illuminating the nature of Okri's multi-dimensional reality. In the linguistic theory of Saussure, "words are not symbols which correspond to referents. Rather, they are 'signs' which are made up of two parts" (Selden 52) called the signifier

(a mark, either written or spoken), and the signified (the 'thought'). Furthermore, the "relation between signifier and signified is arbitrary" (53). In other words, the connection between the mark (what is seen or heard) and the thought (what is thought of when the mark is made) is not a natural bond. For instance, a 'rose' in any other language is still a rose. Barthes' theory of the plural text is also somewhat similar to Saussure's semiotics where meaning or truth is concerned. Barthes contends that the "worst sin a writer can commit is to pretend that language is a natural, transparent medium through which the reader grasps a solid and unified 'truth' or 'reality'" (78). With the 'death' of the author, the reader is free to enter the text and let the signifiers "generate meaning at will and to undermine the censorship of the signified and its repressive insistence on one meaning" (78).

The theories outlined above, including Saussure's and Barthes' are particularly relevant in illuminating Okri's concept of multi-dimensional reality because they all question the nature of truth. The meaning of Saussure's 'word' and Barthes' 'text', like Okri's reality, has been shown to be more than what it superficially represents. Reality thus becomes endless in its possible meanings when it is seen not from the conventional perspective determined by an 'authority', but when the mind is unshackled to generate meaning at will.

Conventional perception of everyday realities necessarily equates with 'blindness' since it deprives the perceiver from apprehending the hidden and higher realities which contain perennial truths. Such blindness can either be physical, or symbolic, although they often occur simultaneously in Okri's

characters. Further, as is characteristic of Okri, blindness in certain characters, occasionally and paradoxically, produces 'sights' as well. For example, in SOE, Dad and the compound people are physically struck with blindness as a result of their refusal to see, acknowledge and take action to bury the body of Ade's father. Dad's blindness affords him 'blindsight' (or visions apprehended when one is physically or symbolically blinded), giving him fantastic visions of what lies beyond mundane reality. In other words, while man's perception of reality can be shaped by the mind, there are nevertheless certain external and physical 'higher realities' or abstract 'truths' that elude his mundane perceptions. The task is thus to discover the hidden potentiality of reality (whether in the mind or externally). To do so, certain dreams and visions, which offer a glimpse of this higher reality, become indispensable in bridging blindness and sight.

Okri's narrative shift from conventional realism to multi-dimensional realism begins to show from his two volumes of short stories onwards - Incidents at the Shrine (IAS), and Stars of the New Curfew (SNC). In the title story of IAS, for instance, Okri introduces the element of 'fantasy' into the narrative. Loosely similar to 'magic realism', this fusion of conventional reality with the fantastic engenders multi-dimensional realism. Ghosts and spirits freely co-mingle with humans in broad daylight, sharing the same living spaces. The narrative takes on a dream quality, radically departing from the earlier conventional realism. Okri, however, argues that this technique is dissimilar from the Latin American writers' 'magic realism' which can be found in, for instance, Gabriel Garcia Marquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude, and Of Love and Other Demons.

The writing of these Latin Americans who deal with magic realism has, Okri clarifies, "come through the journey of symbolism, surrealism, and then come right around to the reality of that particular place". He further explains that he writes from "the inside of the African world view" (qtd. in CA on CD-ROM). Okri's dream-mode narratives bear a certain resemblance to the ghost-novels of his literary predecessor, Amos Tutuola (including The Palm Wine Drinkard and My Life in the Bush of Ghosts). In Tutuola's ghost-novels, ghosts and spirits figure prominently in the lives of the novel's characters. The main character in the latter novel, for example, is involved in a journey through the many spirit-worlds. Emerging finally from the bush of ghosts after a series of terrible ordeals, he returns to his world elevated in stature. Taken metaphorically, it has been noted that the journey-quest pattern can also be seen as "a journey into the racial imagination, into the subconscious, into that Spirit World that everywhere co-exists and even overlaps with the world of waking 'reality'" (Neumarkt 141).

Okri's departure from conventional realism, and his venturing into multi-dimensional realism, reaches a more mature form from TFR onwards. Like Tutuola's narrative world, the spirit-world offers an alternative reality in TFR and SOE. Okri's multi-dimensional realism is influenced by the African worldview, in which the spirit-world is perceived as part of everyday reality. Phenomena involving spirits and ghosts which the Western world may consider fantastic are accepted as ordinary in the African worldview. In African traditional beliefs, ghosts and spirits are in constant contact with the living. The Egungun ritual described in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart demonstrates how the dead ancestors continue to exist in another

realm and they often return "to hear and put right the complaints of people left behind, to bless them with human and crop fertility and also with general prosperity" (Ojo 175). The Egungun cult serves as a channel of communion and communication between the living and their ancestors who have passed on to the spirit world. After crossing over to the spirit world, the ancestors continue to be "spiritual superintendents" of family affairs and continue to bear their titles of relationship like 'father' or 'mother'" (Idowu 184).

It has been postulated that "African life in general is thoroughly permeated by religion" (Ojo 158). Superstitions abound in African religious beliefs. Spirits of the hill and tree are worshipped. Rivers and seas, believed to be the abode of certain gods and goddesses, too are worshipped and sacrifices made to appease and placate them. The abiku (spirit child) is believed to be from the spirit-world, sent to make mischief and bring anguish to mothers who bore them. Drawing his materials from Nigerian religious beliefs and myths, Okri infuses them into his abiku novels - TFR and SOE - creating a different kind of reality from the conventional understanding of reality. In a way more authentic and true to the spirit of Okri's homeland Nigeria, this fusion of the spirit-world and the conventional world constitutes part of the sum of multi-dimensional reality.

The fusion of the spirit and the conventional worlds in Okri's abiku novels does not come with a clear-cut boundary between these two realities. In Tutuola's first couple of ghost novels, spirits usually remain in their own world beyond the forbidden bushes. Separated from the living, the spirits' contact with the living is confined within their realm. In Tutuola's My

Life in the Bush of Ghosts, the protagonist enters the bush and remains trapped in the spirit-world for years before eventually finding his way back to the world of humans. The protagonist returns to his homeland as a more mature and powerful figure after his years of adventures encountering innumerable ghosts and spirits. Upon the hero's return to his own sphere, his ties with the spirit-world are relinquished.

Unlike the Tutuolan reality, spirits and humans do not just remain in their respective worlds but often oscillate between them in TFR and SOE. Whatever boundaries that exist often blur, to the extent that the spirit-world and the conventional-world overlap. In the abiku novels, spirits roam in the realm of humans, communicating and influencing them in their actions. Although bushes and forests are regarded with taboo and are believed to be the haunt of spirits, these spirits are also traditionally believed to "meet on the trees in market places or make their abodes on them" (Ojo 167). Conversely, in TFR and SOE humans wander in and out of the spirit-world, whether physically or through the subconscious or dreams. As a result, Okri's abiku novels are imbued with a dream-like quality.

Dreams play an important thematic role in the three selected novels in demonstrating the many dimensions of Okri's reality. In Okri's narratives, a dream can refer to the usual state one goes into while asleep (REM dream, or nightmare), the dream-like spirit-realm or a situation of dream-like quality one enters by will or otherwise (lucid dream, or hallucination), or the hopeful visualisation of desirable future states and events to be attained (vision). In some aspects, these novels can even be seen as having religious or sacred, and Christian connotations. In the

Bible itself, there are “over 130 references to dreams and almost 100 to visions, the bulk of them in the Old Testament” (Parker 7). The Book of Revelations is a whole book about God’s vision to John, intimating what is to come on Judgement Day. Another instance can be found in Job (7.13-14) - “When I think my bed will comfort me . . . even then you frighten me with dreams and terrify me with visions”.

Dreams “can become a vehicle by which God can communicate with us” (Parker 8). They can prophesy the coming of spiritual renewal, and one of the signs would be that “young men shall see visions and your old men dream dreams” (Joel 2.28). Interestingly, ‘harlam’, the Hebrew word for ‘dream’ means ‘to make whole or healthy’. To be deprived of dreams can therefore be seen as being inhibited from becoming whole and complete. In contrast, vision “implies the ability to perceive with an inner eye” (8). A vision may be perceived whether in sleep (“vision of the night”), or when wide-awake (“visions of my head”) (9). Although the idea of a Christian God is not overtly apparent in Okri’s vision, the world is viewed by Okri as a shrine which is sacred. This ties in with C.G. Jung’s theory of collective consciousness or “the sum of primordial images of age-old experience which we inherit from the human past and from the universal spirit”. The dreams in which the symbols occur “allow people to tap into their whole being, and at the root of this is the need to re-own the sacred” (20).

A survey of previous works done on aspects of modern dream interpretation is fruitful in understanding the significance of Okri’s dream motif, and his dream-mode narrative. For Sigmund Freud, the unconscious mind is responsible for dreams,

a theory similar to Plato's which regards "dreams as the place where the bestial side of man could safely vent its anger without fear of damage" (Parker 17). Freud believes that the purpose of dreaming is wish-fulfilment, an attempt to come to terms with the emotional pressures of one's present response to life. Unlike Freud, however, Carl Gustav Jung's contention is that dreams are not a device to deceive the individual. Rather, they give "a true picture of the subjective state" (Parker 19) rather than cryptic symbols to unravel. Posing as hints, dreams compensate for what is inadequate in waking life, and reflect the bearing which the subconscious personality wishes to proceed towards. Through a process called 'individuation', dreams can be utilised to help the individual harmonise with the entire range of his personality. Other modern dream researchers also have something similar to say. Frederick (Fritz) Perls sees dreams as messages to be deciphered and fitted together to form an awareness and integration with the self. Ann Faraday's psychotherapeutic approach to dream interpretation demonstrates that dreams offer the individual the avenue of getting in touch with subconscious thought which is often ignored or remain unknown.

In African religious life, whether traditional or Christian, and even before Freud and Jung, dreams are rarely ignored. They are generally believed to be a channel of revelation and communication. Dreams have been accepted as having a certain authority in dictating what should be done. After receiving 'vocational' dreams, medicine-men, priests and mediums have been known to enter these professions. Departed members of the family sometimes appear in the dreams of their living relatives to impart certain requests and knowledge that may help the dreamer

avert future calamity, to prepare for things to come, or to take certain curative steps when he is faced with illness.

Usually taken at their face value, certain dreams are regarded as symbols to be interpreted and heeded, not an end in themselves. To illustrate how seriously dreams are taken by Africans in general, John S. Mbiti gave an example of how President Idi Amin of Uganda expelled Asians from his country, as a result of a dream he had in which God gave certain directives, causing massive political havoc (41). Dreams affect and drive not only the good to action, but also the oppressors in the abiku novels. Just as there are dreams that feed hope to the poor compound people, there is also the more sinister form of 'dream' for power that drives the corrupt to clash with and destroy the good dreams. In short, dreams can be a medium through which transcendent reality may be glimpsed, and also a medium of oppression. In Okri's abiku novels, the good dreams of the oppressed can bridge worlds and is a subversive power source for re-inventing the world. As Okri puts it, the "greatest inspiration . . . comes from a higher realm, a happier realm, a place of pure dreams, a heaven of blessed notions" (BOH 13).

Many politically oppressed characters in TFR and SOE like Dad and Azaro (the abiku) are often thrust into the realm of dreams. In these dreams that they enter, either through sleep, or when rendered unconscious or in full consciousness, they often struggle with spirits and demons to return with some kind of enlightenment or vision. Insights and resolutions, formed as a result of such dream-trips, help prepare them for the future. Okri has in his various essays emphasised the significance of dreams. In his essay, "Redreaming the World", Okri speaks of the

suffering and the “dreams of the oppressed” which can serve as tools to “transform their realities” (21). He calls for the transformation of a world riddled with oppression, corruption and injustice into a reconstructed reality based on the people’s collective dreams - this philosophy being especially apparent from TFR onwards. His vision of an ideal and possible future is to a large extent born out of the ravages of Nigerian Civil Wars. A large portion of his works - fiction, poetry and essays - have the war-torn Nigeria placed in the background. Okri’s philosophy has become progressively more complex and his themes more cogent with each published work. The central themes remain the same throughout but become more mature. Okri’s preoccupation is intrinsically didactic. Dissatisfied with the conditions of his country and mankind, Okri records his response to these conditions with a desire to initiate socio-political reconstruction.

The African role of the writer often differs from the Western. For many African artists, individual preoccupation is secondary to social responsibility. Achebe believes that they “moved and had their being in society, and created their works for the good of that society” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 126). Okri, like Achebe, uses his writing as a medium of instruction and to exhort change. “Nations and peoples are largely the stories they feed themselves . . . if they tell themselves stories that face their own truths, they will free their histories for future flowerings” (BOH 21), writes Okri. However, unlike Achebe and other writers who employ the ‘realism’ technique, Okri is more bent towards a more fantastic form of realism (i.e. multi-dimensional realism), a narrative mode which allows for more latitude in exploring his thematic concerns. Okri says that:

for anything new, for something good to come about, for it to reach a level of art, you have to liberate it from old kinds of perception, which is a kind of destruction. An old way of seeing things has to be destroyed for the new to be born. (qtd. in Wilkinson 81)

The above quote explains the necessity of moving on from mimetic realism, hence the narrative departure to multidimensional realism, especially apparent from TFR onwards. In doing so, the narrative indirection and symbols as form (in TFR, SOE, and ATG) will thus agree with the subject matter - which is the instability of conventional reality and the multiple possibilities of meaning.

Many of Okri's works are essentially subversive in nature, and Okri himself admits that stories are "always a form of resistance" (BOH 34). In 'In the City of Red Dust' (a short story from the collection SNC), for instance, Okri presents a picture of the people's dismal destitution and the governor's monstrous corruption. Vehement in its denouncement of the ruling party, the short story is overtly subversive in its critique. Poverty is so severe that the poor are literally driven to sell pints of their blood in order to survive. The governor is accused of having "set up and censored" state universities; and "received gold necklaces from secret societies and multinational concerns" (SNC 55).

Even from his first novels, - FAS and TLW, the themes of corruption and derealisation are explored. In FAS, Jeffia has to pay for the legacy of corruption he inherits from his businessman father Jonan Okwe. In TLW, Okri revisits the theme of the government's high-handed corruption and the derealisation

felt by Omovo, the main character. Based on his surrounding environment, Omovo paints the ghetto's scumscape. The "snot-coloured" painting serves as "a commentary on our damned society . . . all on a drift, a scummy drift" (TLW 48) as well as the landscape within himself. The failure of Omovo's father to cope with the stress of modernisation points to a dilemma of derealisation experienced as a result of the detribalisation of Nigerian society.

Thomas Adeoye Lambo, a Nigerian psychiatrist believes that despite Nigeria's progress, the people still need their African roots for support. Losing the "herd solidarity" (Bass 82) or social support and not being prepared for social change, the people become estranged from their culture. As a result, they "end up walking around the streets . . . disorientated, sleepless, feeling as if [they] don't belong. This is the penalty we pay for progress" (80). In varying degrees, the Nigerian society that Okri portrays in many of his works of fiction reflects Lambo's observations. For instance, in TFR and SOE, the Egungun mask, symbol of societal cohesion is perverted and manipulated to suit the needs of certain political factions. Violent clashes between the political parties and the compound people can be seen as more than politically driven.

Lambo explains that detribalisation can result in a psychological state termed 'malignant anxiety' - "a condition of excruciating, impulsive anxiety that is action oriented" which compels one to violent behaviour (Bass 80). Ironically, benign traditional tribes are forced to give way to modern political factions in Okri's Nigeria-based fiction. The coming of Nigeria's independence heralds fear and disillusionment, rather than joy in

TFR and SOE. In these two novels, Okri can be seen to confront the “new realities of power and politics” in Nigeria and “reappraise their role in society” (Obiechina 122). Similar to other African writers like Armah, Soyinka and Achebe, Okri explores his country’s political scene and the meaning of Independence through his novels, especially TFR and SOE. Through some of his characters like Dad, Azaro and Ade, Okri critically examines the state of the nation that is likened to the abiku cycle of birth and death.

The birth of a nation occurs with the achievement of independence. However, independence only holds within itself the potential to realise the people’s dreams of a better life. The road towards a real sense of democratic nationhood is, in reality, treacherous and full of obstacles. One of the main obstacles that can thwart the achievement of this nationhood is a corrupt government that abuses the political and economic power transferred into their hands. “Generally in traditional African thought, political power was sacred, if not mystical” (Osaghae 57). Rulers were regarded as caretakers and symbolise the people’s collective power. With the advent of capitalism and the new era of materialism, many leaders no longer hold sacred their position in society. The people’s aspirations are turned into nightmares when their leaders begin to plunder the nation’s wealth and dreams for their own benefit. These leaders are, however, only partially responsible for the state of the nation. In TFR and SOE Okri believes that whether or not the nation gives up and dies is also dependent on the people. The nation’s will to live on can be sustained by the people’s collective dreams and aspirations. Metaphorically, the nation can be likened to the abiku.

The Nigerian abiku myth has it that these spirits or ghost children are visitors from the spirit world sent to plague their earthly mothers. They are also sometimes believed to be "forest spirits incarnate which are always seeking to return to their own home" (Parrinder 98). Before the spirit-child is born into the conventional world, a pact is made between the abiku and his companions, where the abiku promises to return on a predetermined date. He then leaves his spirit-world and enters the mother's womb to be born, in order to die (the word 'abiku' literally means 'born to die'). After the spirit-child dies by will, the cycle is repeated, and they are sometimes born to the same mother, again and again. If the suspected abiku child dies within days of birth, his body is whipped and mutilated to deter his return. Life is painful for the abiku child because he is reluctantly separated from his blissful spirit world when born into a world of pain and suffering. Often sickly, the abiku mercilessly distresses his earthly family with his constant need for medicine. Sacrifices made to bind the abiku child to his earthly home also impoverish the family. To sever the abiku's ties with the spirit world, his magic token, usually buried in a remote area, has to be found and destroyed. Sometimes though, the abiku may decide to break the pact with his companions and remain a human.

The abiku's cycle of life and death is used metaphorically to symbolise the nation's repeated cycles of birth and death. A potential nationhood requires commitment to stay and grow even if it would be more convenient to renounce existence and suffering. Despite the landscapes of filth and decay which his characters populate, there is also, present in the squalor, a certain beauty and pathos in the existence of the characters. The suffering endured contains within itself the promise of a utopian

nation. Okri explains that "suffering is one of the great characters" in TFR (qtd. in Wilkinson 85). As also seen in SOE and ATG, dreams can feed on despair. The dreams of the oppressed make them "farmers of dreams" whose "harvest could make the world more just and beautiful. It is only the oppressed who have this sort of difficult and paradoxical responsibility" (Okri, "Redreaming" 21) Suffering, seen in a different perspective, becomes, paradoxically, a source of power for the poor. Okri further states that:

Those who suffer are always in that place that binds roots to the earth. They are always also in exile. Suffering is a centre. The oppressed live within the stomach of their oppressors. They need the thinking and the structure of their oppressors to transform their realities . . . suffering should also give rise to something beautiful. It is possible that a sense of beauty, of justice, of the interconnectedness of all things, may yet save the human species from self-annihilation . . . Hope and striving have magic in them. Those who have much to strive for, much to resolve and overcome and redream, may well be luckier than they think. The struggle is the life. And there is something awesomely beautiful and history-making about those who have set out to climb the seven mountains of their predicament, towards their new destinies that lie beyond, with the star of hope above their heads. (21)

Many of Okri's essays speak of a similar philosophy. His 'mysticism', as some see it, is fundamentally a deep-seated belief in the possibility of achieving an ideal state of existence. While some will see suffering as ugly, unnecessary and torturous, Okri

sees it as something magical, but more importantly, a prerequisite for the realisation of that ideal state. Okri's utopian vision is derived from his belief that there is more to reality than is usually perceived. A higher reality is transcendent because it enables one to grasp the truth, beauty and potential mankind is capable of achieving. Dreams, (as variously defined earlier) born out of suffering, offer a glimpse of this elusive but always-present reality. It is possible to redream an ideal world into existence when coupled with action. The journey towards such an objective is however long and arduous. The realisation of Okri's utopian vision, built on a foundation of suffering, is not a permanent state. When forgetfulness of past struggles sets in, the world becomes undone and is plunged into chaos. Thus, the struggle, conforming to the cycle motif, is consequently never-ending. Similar to the Buddhist concept of nirvana, man has to undergo many births and deaths before he achieves, if ever, the state of nirvana or perfection.

Okri's utopian vision is mainly a response to Nigeria's political instability and his disillusionment as a result of his country's failure to realise the promises of independence. Through TFR and SOE, Okri offers his vision of an African/Nigerian utopia. Although these two novels are concerned with Nigeria, the philosophy propounded by Okri is also applicable on a wider context. In ATG, the background is no longer Nigerian. The allegorical 'adult fairy tale' can be seen as the condensation of Okri's philosophy variously developed in the earlier works.

A utopia is a blueprint or vision of an ideal but possible future. In essence, it means, "to live in a world that cannot be

but where one fervently wishes to be" (Kumar 1). Utopia shares the quality of a dream because it transcends the existing socio-political reality. It is "first and foremost a work of imaginative fiction" (27). Unlike social and political theory that only elaborates a certain idea, fiction actually demonstrates how man will live and respond in set environments. Likewise, Okri's utopian vision has to be translated into a fictive world in order to show the struggles and sacrifices made by the people to realise that vision.

As mankind approaches a new millennium, strife and misery will reach a climax. But with the advent of evil, the millennium also evokes "eschatological hope" (Kumar 18-19) in the people who believe that after the cataclysm, order and a period of peace will be restored. The millennium is, however, not considered by some to be a real utopia due to it being preordained by some divine force where "human agency remains questionably relevant" (36). In Okri's selected novels, the 'millennium' is at times taken not so much as the dawn of a new period of one thousand years' length, but a new cycle of events. Just as birth and death go through an eternal cycle, the cycle of chaos and peace too follows a certain pattern. Nevertheless, the cycle is partially dependent on 'human agency' since suffering can provide the impetus for the people to redream a new world order.

George Orwell saw utopia as "the dream of a just society which seems to haunt the human imagination ineradicably and in all ages" (Kumar 43). Indeed it is this undying hope of mankind for a kind of golden age that Okri tries to emphasise in the selected novels. The "principle of hope" (Kumar 43) sustains and

keeps Okri's anguished characters from falling off the edge into defeat, and promises a new and reconstructed world. Utopian literature is thus a subversive form of "social and political speculation . . . meant to engage our sympathies and our desires in the direction favoured by the writer" (24). In this light, Okri can reasonably be considered as a political writer whose intention is to seek reformation of the world, especially his homeland Nigeria. In short, utopia (and the selected novels) challenges "by supplying alternatives. It shows what could be. But its most persistent function, the real source of its subversiveness, is as a critical commentary on the arrangements of society" (87-88).

In his article, "Time To Dream The Best Dream Of All", Okri basically sums up his utopian vision. In it, he urges the United Nations to become stronger amidst the chaos of war and factions. The world body should "dare to have a greater vision, a truly world dream and goal - and the fearless courage that goes with such passionate dreaming" (5). Approaching a new millennium, he calls for mankind to move "towards a greater global sense of humanity" (5). Okri believes that the "time to dream the best dream of all" is now (5). Collectively directed by a singular vision, mankind can achieve a state of utopia where there will be no starvation and oppression. Justice and liberty will then prevail. Thus by "overcoming our pettinesses and our fears, we might begin to astonish even the gods" (5).

Okri's utopian vision in the selected novels can be realised by the suffering and the oppressed masses if they dare to dream it into existence. To redream the world, or, to alter reality for the better, vision-oriented action must be taken to halt regression into

further chaos, and complete annihilation. In the poem, "Plea for Somalia" (17), Okri writes:

[A] new religion now we must dream
That speaks from heart to heart, from ocean
to dried-up stream
We are all inheritors of divine mystery
We are not gods
But can have the effects of them
Who can feel and soothe another's misery
Man is god to man,
That's what some Africans say . . .

Man may not have the powers of God, but he holds his destiny as well as others' in his hands. Reality, vision, and destiny are all major themes found in TFR, SOE, and ATG. In the following chapters, this thesis will explore these themes alongside other related ones.

CHAPTER 2

THE ABIKU NOVELS: THE FAMISHED ROAD AND SONGS OF ENCHANTMENT

i. THE FAMISHED ROAD

Okri says in an interview that:

[It] is consciousness, it is the way we perceive the world, it is our mythic frame that shapes the way we affect the world and the way the world affects us. It's these invisible things that shape the visible things. (qtd. in Wilkinson 88)

His response to the interviewer's question on vision and blindness in TFR highlights one of the central aspects of the novel - the 'mythic frame'. It refers to the world-view or more precisely, the African aesthetic that is "bound to a way of looking at the world in more than three dimensions. It's the aesthetic of possibilities, of labyrinths, of riddles . . . of paradox" (87-88). Although the frame has its specific socio-cultural origin, it also has a significant function as Okri's literary device that literally frames his narratives. Within the socio-culturally-derived framework, we find stories that are, in turn, suffused with an African colouring as well as Okri's guiding philosophy.

"When we started telling stories we gave our lives a new dimension: the dimension of meaning - apprehension - comprehension" (BOH 23), Okri explains. To him, the function

of art is "to enchant, to transform, to make life more meaningful or bearable in its own small and mysterious ways" (BOH 5). It also seeks to "transcend its primary condition and become something higher" (BOH 5). Storytelling, writes Okri, should be taken to "the highest levels of enchantment and magic" (BOH 20). Indeed, we find, in the selected novels, realities which go beyond the mundane.

Matters of consequence are often invisible to those who are not aware of their potential. At the same time, the "invisible things" referred to in the quote above may also be taken to include ghosts and spirits that are "made visible [but are] not seen" (qtd. in Wilkinson 88). The inclusion of the African traditional belief in spirits and the abiku myth in TFR and SOE is one of the ways through which Okri explores the multi-dimensionality of reality. Okri's use of Azaro, the spirit-child, as the narrator in these two novels is by itself an act that subverts the common notion of the existence of one fixed reality. In qualifying the abiku myth, and by showing that ghosts and spirits not only exist but also are in constant contact with the living, reality has effectively been split in two.

Azaro - an abiku - originates from a world of pure dreams. Although reluctant to be born, Azaro chooses to stay with his earthly parents partly out of compassion, and partly because he wants "the liberty of limitations, to have to find or create new roads from this one which is so hungry, this road of our refusal to be" (TFR 487). Azaro may have forsaken his companions, but he has not been able to sever links with them. Further, even though he has opted to end the abiku cycle of death and rebirth this time, and to remain in the conventional world,

Azaro continues to oscillate between the two realities. Often without willing it, Azaro moves in and out of the two worlds. Azaro is also able to “apprehend both worlds simultaneously and [he] finds them both real” (Ogunsanwo 44). In one scene, Azaro is determined to die and return to the spirit world after being thrashed by his father for breaking the blind old man’s window. Even as his spirit travels the roads of the interspaces, Azaro is able to hear Mum’s wails and Dad’s pleas for his return.

The multiplicity of worlds in TFR and SOE is not a simple clean-cut division between the spirit and the conventional worlds. In his essay, “Orality - (Theory) - Textuality” (all references from author’s copy without pagination), Ato Quayson explains that unlike the novels of Tutuola which reproduce “the consistency of the traditional folktale universe”, Okri’s TFR explores “the viability of some of the traditional folktale concepts within contemporary real-world existence.” Quayson writes that TFR inverts Tutuola’s “crossing of a threshold” by showing the crossing from the spirit-world to the conventional world. Further, instead of fear when crossing it, a sense of loss and sorrow is felt by Azaro for having to leave the enchanted world he originates from. When Azaro is in the conventional world, he often slips into another world of spirits unlike the one he comes from. This other spirit world is often populated by strange beings. In one scene, Azaro follows a baby spirit into a clearing which is the beginning of an expressway. There he comes to a gash in the earth, hears a sharp noise, and finds himself transported into the under-road. In “the stomach of the road” (TFR 17), Azaro encounters a giant talking turtle. Later he cries himself to sleep and wakes up in a pit. Azaro enters this other world without “any

sense of the crossing of boundaries", as a result of Okri's subtle narrative shifts.

Quayson's list of the general characteristics of the links between the spirit and the conventional realm is helpful in tracing certain aspects of Okri's multi-dimensional reality. As seen in the example above, shifts between the parallel worlds - the spirit to conventional world, and vice versa - can occur "within the same geographical space in which that place is located simultaneously in both realms". The spirit realm also emerges as unstable pockets in the conventional world. They are not always at the same geographical space, but are triggered off by the person who walks into them. These pockets are often found in forests that Azaro sometimes walks into.

An instance of this phenomenon is seen in TFR when Dad leads Azaro through the bushpaths and into the forest. When they reach a flowering pole, Dad tells Azaro to stay and wait for him while he goes off somewhere. Not long after that, noises begin to accumulate in the forest, and Azaro sees a deformed woman stepping out of a tree. The woman, laughing dementedly, reaches for Azaro's neck. An owl suddenly falls to the ground and turns "into a little pool of yellow water and evaporated into the air" (TFR 39).

Another characteristic concerning the spirit-conventional reality link that Quayson outlines in his essay is that spirit figures, seen or recognisable only by Azaro, often "emerge into the reality-plane to interact with real people". After escaping from the kidnapping "cult of silent women" (TFR 14), Azaro wanders in the streets and suddenly sees people walking

backwards and other strange sights. He then realises for the first time that “it wasn’t just humans who came to the marketplaces of the world. Spirits and other beings come there too” (TFR 16). On numerous occasions, spirits actually emerge in the conventional world to lure the spirit Azaro back to the spirit world. An instance of this can be seen in the scene where the three-headed spirit sent by Azaro’s spirit companions convinces the spirit-protagonist to travel in the interspaces.

Although the narrative worlds can be generally split between the spirit and the conventional world, there are in effect various types of spirit worlds. One of them, as explored above, is the world where ghosts and strange spirits live in. Also different from the spirit world that Azaro comes from - “the world of pure dreams, where all things are made of enchantment, and where there is no suffering” (TFR 4) - it is similar to the world of dreams that mortals enter. The dream world, unlike Azaro’s “world of pure dreams” can be entered by will or otherwise, through sleep. This dream world is also activated when certain characters, rendered unconscious, undergo a near-death experience. When Dad lies near death after the duel with the man in the white suit, Mum has to dream herself into Dad’s dreams and sing for his return. When Dad is in the dream world, he is actually travelling the “spheres, seeking the restoration of our races, and the restoration of all oppressed peoples” (TFR 494). Redreaming the world as he sleeps, Dad awakes as one wakes up from blindness or death. Later in the novel, Dad is again ‘reborn’, and he returns to the conventional world with a renewed and sharpened socio-political vision - “a new idealism” (TFR 408). The ‘rebirth’ motif is significant in Okri’s later novels as it points to an awakening to a potential destiny.

Albeit there are, at this point of discussion, effectively two separate terrestrial realms in the setting of Okri's abiku novels; some critics have rightly noted their apparent seamlessness. There may be a two-way traffic going between the two worlds, yet the boundaries between these realms are often indeterminate. Various related comments made by Okri can be recalled to shed light on the seamlessness. Okri explains that "[the] best fiction can become dreams which can influence reality. Dreams and fiction blur the boundaries" (qtd. in Wilkinson 82). He also mentions in the same interview how the structure of TFR is akin to the seamless "moments in tidal waves, sea patterns" (83). Further, Okri says "many things that will seem puzzling in the book are actually in the possibility of a life being lived simultaneously at different levels of consciousness and in different territories" (all emphases mine) (83).

From the quotes above, it becomes apparent that the blurred boundaries between the spirit and conventional world are part of Okri's larger design for TFR and SOE. When boundaries blur between terrestrial realms, and between the state of dream and waking, new and paradoxical meanings or realities will emerge to upset commonly accepted notions - that there are more to what we superficially see. For his challenging of accepted norms in the selected novels, Okri has been regarded as an innovative post-colonial postmodern writer. TFR, for instance, has been compared to Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children. Olatubosun Ogunsanwo is among the critics who sees Okri as a "veritable postmodernist . . . [who] has inscribed and contested the literary use of Yoruba myths in a way that calls for a critical re-evaluation of the myths and their multiple dimensions" (49). Ogunsanwo supports his claim by making references to the

“radical point of departure from the conventional rendition of the abiku myth” in *TFR* (46). Citing the abiku poems by Wole Soyinka and J.P. Clark as examples, the critic argues that the abiku in these poems is sadistic while Okri’s Azaro is compassionate, albeit at times saucy and mischievous.

The portrayal of the abiku in Soyinka’s poem (‘Abiku’) is consistent with the traditional Yoruba version. In the poem, the child mocks the supplicatory items proffered to it:

In vain your bangles cast
Charmed circles at my feet
I am Abiku, calling for the first
And the repeated time.

Must I weep for goats and cowries
For palm oil and the sprinkled ash?
Yams do not sprout in amulets
To earth Abiku’s limbs. (qtd. in Nwoga 62)

In Clark’s poem of the same name ‘Abiku’, the persona poignantly appeals to the abiku to stay, even though what is offered to the child is inferior to what it can enjoy in the spirit world. The poem registers “Clark’s characteristically humanist outlook that allows the implied author to accept the abiku myth from the humane approach” (Ogunsanwo 47):

Then step in, step in and stay
For her body is tired,
Tired, her milk going sour
Where many more mouths gladden the heart.
(qtd. in Nwonga 61)

“Okri’s recontextualisation of the abiku myth is concerned with the complexity of the myth itself as well as with the complexity of the abiku’s plight” (Ogunsanwo 47). Olatubosun asserts that Azaro is an ironic parody of his predecessors’ abiku; and that the parodic intertextuality deepens when the title of Okri’s novel, TFR, is related to Soyinka’s poem, “Death in the Dawn”:

the mother prayed, Child
May you never walk
When the road waits, famished.

The journey in Soyinka’s poem above is related to a car journey in which the traveller is eventually killed in a road accident. In TFR, instead of using his unbreakable will power to resist his parents, Azaro draws strength from it to keep himself from perishing while travelling on the symbolic famished road. In this respect, Okri’s use of the abiku myth differs from the convention. Further, in fusing the reworked folktales including the abiku myth (as used in forming the multi-dimensional narrative) with the conventional ‘realistic’ portrayal of everyday life, Okri manages to “[de-emphasise] the centrality and dominance of the “conventional well-made realist novel” while enhancing the traditionally off-center, ancillary African folkloric and mythic narration, “encentering” its functionality and so

giving to both narrative modes the same attention" (Ogunsanwo 50).

This aspect of the fusion between the 'mundane' and the 'magical' in the abiku novels reminds one of a similar technique found in Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children (MC). The similarity is not, however, limited to stylistics but also extends to characterisation. A brief comparison between Okri's abiku novels and Rushdie's MC is useful to illustrate how the two 'postcolonial postmodernist' writers subvert commonly accepted truths and offer alternative realities. In these novels, the narrators are children (or at least Saleem is a child for the most part of MC). The fact the writers use child narrators is significant because, as Jacqueline Bardolphe puts it, "like all epic heroes, the young children represent a nation or a people at a particular moment of their history" (45).

Reality as is commonly perceived is shown to be an incomplete picture when viewed through the eyes of the child narrators. In the abiku novels, Azaro who has the insight of an abiku, sees not a linear progression of history but a flow and overlapping of time: "Sometimes I seemed to be living several lives at once. One lifetime flowed into the other and all of them flowed into my childhood" (TFR 7). Through Azaro's worldview, we gain paradoxical insights into a world full of riddles, which among others include the interconnectivity of things, and the true nature of suffering that can be transformed into hope.

Predestination also figures prominently in the lives of Azaro and Saleem Sinai. Interestingly, the Yoruba belief of

destiny has it that prior to a person's birth, his destiny is already set by the ancestor ori, or 'head'. An ori, according to Benjamin C. Roy, is:

a semi-split entity having two complementary aspects. One aspect is located in the person's head and constitutes the essence of his personality or ego. The other is located in the heavens and constitutes the person's alter ego or 'guardian' soul. Taken as a whole, the ori represents the partial rebirth and incarnation of a patrilineal ancestor: hence it is sometimes called the person's "guardian ancestor." (135)

The 'predestined share' or ori's 'lot' - somewhat similar to the Buddhist concept of karma - determines "a person's character, occupation, success in life, and time of death . . . [thereafter], the ori in heaven helps the person to realise his destiny during his life time on earth" (136). The set destiny cannot be changed, but a good destiny can be "partially spoilt" (136) by certain influences, including that of gods, witches, and sorcerers. Yet, although predestination seems solidly unalterable, "there is room for considerable personal freedom and initiative" (137) since:

life is a delicately balanced scale. On the one hand, it is divinely preordained and sociologically conditioned, yet it is also significantly related to controllable personal and spiritual elements, one's character and one's ori. Each person must find his own way, guided by his personality and his destiny and attuned to the numerous countervailing socioreligious forces. (137)

The Yoruba belief of destiny as quoted above is helpful in critical attempts to understand Azaro and other abiku children's plight of constant rebirths. If abikus have an ori, Azaro's other half of the ori in heaven - the guardian ancestor - brings to mind the spirit king who has on numerous occasions helped Azaro out of dire straits when malevolent forces try to overwhelm the abiku child. There are some suggestions in TFR and SOE that Okri's abikus are destined for more than merely bringing misery to their earthly parents. Azaro says in TFR that abikus often "returned inconsolable for . . . all the suffering they hadn't redeemed" (TFR 3).

In the sequel, Ade utters to Azaro that his destiny "was not to be an assassin, but a catalyst" (SOE 195) that has set the wheel in motion for the oppressed to rise and oppose the political tyrants. Ade further says that he was "born to love the world as [he finds] it. And to change it if [he] can" (SOE 196). Both these instances suggest that the spirit-children from another reality cross over to the conventional world with an altruistic purpose of redeeming the world. Not unlike Christ, they are sent from 'heaven' to the chaotic conventional reality that resembles the world as described in *The Book of Revelations*. Okri himself may not have intended it, but the recurrent Christian parallels - 'resurrection', the promise of a new heaven after suffering, the significance of dreams - may nevertheless be drawn from the abiku novels.

Like Saleem, Azaro's life has been spelt out and summed up for him even before his birth (MC 87-88). Comparatively, Azaro's predestination is less zany and more cryptic than his allegorical brother's. The spirit king says to the abiku: "You

have to travel many roads before you find the river of your destiny. This life of yours will be full of riddles. You will be protected and you will never be alone" (TFR 6). Madame Koto too - before she becomes bloated with corruption and without realising that she will soon become part of the evil she mentions - makes a similar prediction of Azaro's future: "The road will never swallow you. The river of your destiny will always overcome evil . . . Suffering will never destroy you" (TFR 47). True to the word, strong-willed Azaro (and the country he symbolises) has to travel many literal and metaphorical roads to understand the paradoxical nature of reality.

Azaro and Saleem are endowed with the skill of tuning in to the consciousness of others, and other magical gifts. Yet, with all the abilities that the child narrators possess, Azaro lacks the "heroic stature of the Tutuolan hero" (Quayson, "Orality") and often finds himself dwarfed by the circumstances around him. Although the main human protagonist in Tutuola's My Life In The Bush of Ghosts is shaken by his encounters with grotesque looking ghosts in the spirit world, he manages to emerge from it as a powerful and wiser figure. Azaro, on the other hand, is constantly bewildered by the sights of spirits and ghosts. The abiku is often powerless to retaliate with magic when he faces the kidnapers. Instead, he has to rely on others and his human skills to save himself from potential disasters, as when Mum rescues him from the policeman. In the same essay, Quayson writes that the abiku narrator's helplessness represents a "significant [change] in the use of the mythopoeic resource base and the attitudes towards it". Azaro as the central character in the abiku novels is important since "his condition is to see the recurrence of things within the flux of existence".

Saleem Sinai - born handcuffed to history at "precise instant of India's arrival at independence" - finds his destiny "indissolubly chained to those of [his] country" (MC 9). Azaro in the abiku novels is also, to a certain extent metaphorically linked to his ravaged country. As the country approaches Independence, it is symbolically seen as entering a new cycle of events. The people who make up the country, have to decide if their attempt at establishing a democratic nation will not be aborted for lack of will-power. To establish a new nation after Independence is similar to the process of giving birth and caring for a child. In the case of TFR and SOE, the nation is an abiku-nation, one unwilling to be born because it means the people will have to toil ceaselessly to ensure that the nation lives. When Azaro enters Dad's consciousness, he becomes aware that Dad "found that all nations are children" (TFR 494). Dad also realises in the same dream that theirs is:

a spirit-child nation, one that keeps being born and after each birth comes blood and betrayals, and the child of our will refuses to stay till we have made propitious sacrifices and displayed our serious intent to bear the weight of a unique destiny. (TFR 494)

Sacrifices will have to be made by the people to 'persuade' the nation to live, just as Azaro's parents have to perform sacrifices to persuade Azaro to live. There is "the need to regulate the childhood of the nation" (SOE 120) to ensure that it will not die a premature death as a result of the fear and unwillingness of the people to sustain their dream of a nation. The progress of the nation, to a certain degree, parallels the life of Azaro, the abiku. In TFR, Azaro makes the decision to break

from the cycle of endless rebirth, and remain in the conventional world "to make a valuable contribution to it, and to have that sublime mood of eternity in [him] as [he lives] the life to come" (TFR 5). In staying, he has "brought with [him] a new hope" (TFR 28) to his earthly parents. Mum and Dad yearn for the abiku child to stay because he gives them hope amidst what seems to be overwhelming hopelessness. Yet, Azaro is constantly enticed to return by his companions who torture him with horrific visions of events to come. Soon after his birth and on one occasion after he is beaten up by Dad, Azaro comes close to permanently departing from the conventional world.

In the scene before Dad beats Azaro, he tell the son: "if you want to return to the world of spirits, return! But if you want to stay, then be a good son" (TFR 325). Dad chides Azaro, but the ultimatum can at the same time be addressed to the nation which is young and innocent like Azaro. Furthermore, just as many 'sensitive' characters with ulterior intents (like Madame Koto and the blind old man) want to dominate and pull Azaro in different directions, various parties too try to exert control over the future of the nation. Azaro's wavering between wanting to live and wanting to die is thus symbolic of the nation's destiny; and his family is, in this respect, a microcosm of the nation.

The nation can be seen as being in the interspaces between the past and future. Azaro realises this when he says that Madame Koto too must be aware that "a new cycle has begun" (TFR 225). With the evolution of a new cycle, old ways will die and chaos will be born. The air is charged with expectations of the coming Independence. The people, including beggars, await an omen to begin their journey towards their collective destiny as

though “awaiting the word of a Messiah’s birth” (TFR 497). The future, however, is already here, intimations of which can be seen in the widespread political corruption. To the abikus, for whom all things past, present and future are linked, the future has already been mapped out. Ade, the wise and sad abiku friend of Azaro, sees the “future present” (TFR 242):

Suffering is coming. There will be wars and famine. Terrible things will happen. New diseases, hunger, the rich eating up the earth, people poisoning the sky and the waters, people going mad in the name of history, the clouds will breathe fire, the spirit of things will dry up, laughter will become strange . . . There will be changes. Coups. Soldiers everywhere. Ugliness. Blindness. (TFR 478)

Ade prophesies an apocalyptic future waiting for the people who are marching towards Independence. Visions of the future which will become a reality can be seen in advance by the abikus because to them history is seamless. Beyond the apocalypse, however, Ade sees hope:

when people least expect it a great transformation is going to take place in the world. Suffering people will know justice and beauty. And a wonderful change is coming from far away and people will realise the great meaning of struggle and hope. There will be peace. (TFR 478)

After a period of peace “people will forget. Then it will all start again, getting worse, getting better” (TFR 478). The cycle of peace and chaos is perpetual, like the coming and going of the

abiku. Ade notes that the "country is an abiku country. Like a spirit child, it keeps coming and going. One day it will decide to remain. It will become strong" (TFR 478). However, it is important to note that the cycle, though seeming perpetual, can be totally obliterated, along with everything else. The abiku that goes back to his spirit may perish travelling home through the road in the interspaces - "There are many strange things here that devour the traveller. There are many spirit-eaters and monsters of the interspaces" (TFR 327).

Apart from the spirit-conventional world split within the aesthetic framework, there is also a marked division between the traditional and the modern world. Unlike the other variations of the reality-split explored above, the boundaries between these two worlds are more clearly demarcated. The tug between traditional and modern realities which Azaro sees can be traced to the coming of Independence, along which come alien 'gods' (e.g. electricity, motorcar), "madness . . . hunger . . . confusion . . . [and] war . . . [which will cause] a whole generation to squander the riches of this earth" (TFR 167). As Independence draws closer, the shrinehouses of the world are being destroyed and "many roads and ways and philosophies" (TFR 457) die. Modernisation eats into the bushes and forests, and turns the world upside down. As the forest abodes of spirits are encroached, it is not surprising to find displaced the spectral inhabitants roaming in the spaces of the living.

In TFR, Azaro finds a mask when he wanders near the shifting boundaries. Climbing a tree and putting on the mask, he sees a different reality. He hears:

the earth trembling at the fearsome approach of a demonic being. A white wind circled my head. I was confused by the new world . . . And when I looked out through the mask, I saw before me in that new spirit world a creature ugly and magnificent like a prehistoric dragon . . . A devourer of humans, of lost souls, of spirits, of all things beautiful, this creature opened its dreadful mouth and roared. (TFR 346-347).

It is characteristic of Okri to explore the themes of sight, blindness and alternative realities. There is really more to what we see, and we do not always see what is there. Hence, in looking through 'someone else's eyes' (i.e. the mask), Azaro sees the world from a new perspective. (In SOE, Azaro gains alarming new insights of the impending apocalypse when he sees through the eyes of the Jackal-headed Masquerade). In the scene above, Azaro sees a new world devouring the old, an allegory that dramatises a tree-felling tractor of sorts uprooting or 'devouring' trees and earth. Incidentally, this is only one instance that goes to show that the apparent supernatural events are not mere embellishments to create the mythical effects. Many if not all of these phenomena can actually be explained in rational terms. In SOE, Azaro sees a girl-demon entering Dad, causing the latter to be obsessed with the blind beautiful beggar-girl. The demon can be explained as Dad's new-found passion to love everything poor in sight but which results in his blindness to the equally squalid condition of his family.

Throughout the abiku novels, there are many recurrent and interconnected motifs - including blindness, dream, vision and sight; and the abiku cycle - which point to the multi-

dimensionality of reality. Of all the repetitive symbols used by Okri, the central motif is the road. In TFR and SOE, the road motif is drawn from traditional Nigerian belief, and is used on the literal and metaphorical levels. The literal sense of a road is that it takes the traveller to a certain destination. Less superstitious people would reason that the high rate of accidents on a particular stretch of road can be attributed to the bad planning and condition of the road. However, according to superstitious beliefs, the road is 'famished' because it "was once a river [and] it was always hungry" (TFR 3). Further, the road is considered even more treacherous as it is believed to be a place where "bad things" (TFR 119) are poured onto by witches and native doctors after washing away diseases and bad destinies from their customers.

Sacrifices are also made to the road to appease its hunger. To step on the offerings which include "stewed snails, . . . kola-nuts . . . and little pins" (TFR 114) can cause road-spirits to rage in the person, as Azaro is to learn. Interestingly, Dad claims - in his story about the origin of the famished road - that his great-great-grandfather was the sole survivor from the delegation sent to poison the King of the Road. Dad also says that Azaro's grandfather - "the head-priest of our shrine, Priest of the Gods of the Roads" (TFR 70) - performs sacrifices for the people. Azaro's grandfather also appears in Dad's dream when the latter is near death. The priest saves his son by blocking the road that the seven-headed spirit uses to drag Dad along towards death. Such a recurrent motif does indeed serve to strengthen the association between Azaro's destiny and the road which is regarded with awe.

Okri explains that “a road has got very many meanings - and it can be the road that human beings travel and the road that spirits travel or the road that destinies travel or the road that thoughts and feelings travel” (qtd. in CA on CD-ROM). Indeed it is this road that Azaro has to travel before he finds “the river of [his] destiny” (TFR 6). Dad says that all “human beings travel the same road” (TFR 70), referring to the perilous journey in life. Azaro’s, and man’s road-river of destiny is not a straight and well-paved one. Mankind will, like Azaro, find that the tormenting roads are always multiplying and “twisting themselves into labyrinths” (TFR 114). Azaro’s pilgrimage appears to be an aimless one, and he finds “himself merely walking to discover where all the roads lead to, where they end” (TFR 115). Through his wanderings in the conventional world, Azaro realises that life is full of riddles, some of which neither the living nor the dead can answer. Life, like a riddle, is often paradoxical. Beneath life’s suffering lies the forgotten “magic substance which the great God sprinkled in us and which sings with the flow of blood through all the journeys of our lives” (SOE 51). This ‘magic substance’ which Dad re-discovers is the ability to see beauty and joy in suffering. As mystical as it sounds, the idea of beauty in suffering, and suffering before being admitted into a new world has its Christian parallels. The seemingly impossible and paradoxical task of seeing beauty amidst squalor, and transforming hunger into power is only unrealisable because humans, “all of whom are born blind” (TFR 3) fail to be “liberated into new vision” (SOE 284).

The road of life’s journey in the abiku novels and the traveller are inter-dependent. In SOE, Azaro narrates how the roads seem to conspire against human beings to drive them mad

or get them lost. Some of the roads seem to be “created by the endless desire of human beings for shortcuts that elongate journeys” (SOE 32). This quote seems to suggest that humankind does play a role in forming the road of their life’s journey. The scene in TFR where Azaro and the three-headed spirit come across the road builders in the interspaces is a more concrete example of how people do build their own roads that will take them to their intended destination. These road-builders of the interspaces are called upon to build a road that leads to another world called ‘Heaven’. (Incidentally, the passage describing this other world - which is populated by “a great people who did not know their own greatness” (TFR 329) - strongly suggests that it is the conventional world that is being referred to.) The prophet of the road builders says that his people are ‘dead’ and need a dream to make them toil and therefore ‘alive’.

Driven by this “most wonderful dream” (TFR 329) to visit Heaven, the people have been building the road for two thousand years. Yet, unknown to them, the road can never be finished because “the moment it is finished, all of them will perish” (TFR 329) because they will then have nothing to aim for. The people’s need to constantly dream and be kept occupied brings to mind Johnson’s *Rasselas*, who discovers that the meaning of life lies in the search of it. Likewise in the abiku novels, the need to dream (i.e. to have a vision and also to have REM sleep) and work towards their goal despite having to suffer for it is, in a sense, ‘heaven’ for the people, most of whom have not discovered the hidden reality of their greatness.

The three-headed monster explains to Azaro that for the people in the interspaces, the “road is their soul, the soul of their

history" (TFR 329). When the people start to grow complaisant or forget their original reason for building the road, it [the road] will go mad and destroy itself. When forgetfulness sets in, the road will also drive the workers insane and they will start wars and create chaos, wrecking "what they have built . . . [until] a new generation comes along and begins again from the wreckage" (TFR 330).

Okri says that:

Every society needs to have a sense of itself, of its own Utopia . . . It is possible that one has been travelling on one road for too long and we have forgotten why we are travelling. This is time when every nation needs to re-invent itself. (qtd. in Linton 5)

In this sense, the road is also symbolic of the abiku country's journey towards a utopian nation as envisioned by Dad. In the struggles to achieve a nationhood of capable dreamers, the country will go through the abiku cycle repeatedly because the people tend to lose sight of their quest. Paradoxically, the abiku cycle of road/nation-building, as the workers in the interspaces have not been told by their prophet, can never be finished because of the divided people's competing visions on how a nation should turn out. Here lies the 'beauty' of the cycle - the people will continue to strive for betterment because they have "an infinity of hope and an eternity of struggles" (TFR 330). In the abiku novels, we find that despite the oppression they face, many oppressed ghetto dwellers - especially the ever-optimistic Dad - do not give up their struggle to get the nation back on the

right track as they approach Independence and a new cycle of events.

Independence signals the passing of power from the colonials to the natives, promising a new era of hope, justice and prosperity hitherto denied to the people. Yet ironically, the coming of Independence in TFR and SOE brings bitter disillusionment, offering the people very little hope of realising their dreams. The kind of politics practised by the country's two political factions – the Party of the Poor and the Party of the Rich – is riddled with favouritism and terrorism. “The magician and the politician . . . have much in common: they both have to draw our attention away from what they are really doing (BOH 39).” The political parties' capacity for manufacturing reality adds another dimension to the definition of 'reality' in TFR and SOE. Bad politics terrorise the people, giving them nightmares instead of joy on the eve of Independence.

In Okri's short story 'Stars of the New Curfew', a similar mention is made of the nature of manufactured reality – “Time was to teach us that those who get on in society, those who rise high and affect events, do so by manipulating, by manufacturing reality” (SONC 117). The manufacturing, or distortion of reality by the party in power in the abiku novels is reminiscent of Orwell's 1984 where the Ministry of Truth is actually the centre of untruth. In TFR and SOE, lies constitute political mythologies that are hurled at each other to create a new distorted reality to dupe the people.

The first day that politics enters the lives of the people in Azaro's compound, they are ominously poisoned. The Party of

the Rich distributes milk powder to the poor of the compound as part of their political campaign to attract voters. It is significant that the milk, symbolic of life and nourishment, is poisonous, suggesting its literal and symbolic source (i.e. the party, politics, motherland) is itself corrupted and has the potential to further 'poison' its children. The abrupt entry of 'bad politics' marks the ending of an old cycle and the beginning of the new on Independence. Even before the land is handed over to the natives, corruption has spread like bushfire. The Party of the Rich (POR) and the Party of the Poor (POP) continuously clash and wreak havoc, with the compound people trapped in between. Dad supports POP but the carpenter claims that both parties are equally corrupt. In trying to clear their name after "the Day of the Politician's Milk" (TFR 132), the POR vows that the POP impersonated them in order to soil their reputation. Azaro however is observant enough to realise that the same party thugs who earlier distributed the milk powder are proclaiming the innocence of their party. They even make a telling Freudian slip in trying to clear their name:

WE ARE YOUR FRIENDS. WE WILL BRING YOU
ELECTRICITY AND BAD ROADS, NOT GOOD
MILK, I MEAN GOOD ROADS, NOT BAD MILK.
(TFR 153).

Failing to convince, the thugs resort to thrashing the people instead. The photographer (who later emerges as a mythic figure) takes photographs of the POR's savagery which capture the 'reality' of the political scenario. However, in later similar events when no pictures are taken,

nothing of the events appeared in the newspapers. It was as if the events were never real. They assumed the status of rumours . . . We began to think that we had collectively dreamt up the fevers of that night. (TFR 183)

Jeremiah, later known only as 'the photographer' slowly loses his individual identity to take on a mythic stature as a result of the subversive nature of his photographic representations of reality. At first only a photographer of celebrations, and of stars and constellations, the photographer later begins to produce pictures which capture the stark reality of the lives of the compound people. Even the usually observant Azaro is bewildered and somewhat astonished by the pictures of the celebration to mark his return from abduction. After the photographer's arrest and subsequent release, he begins to have an "air of myth" about him (TFR 155). Becoming more stubborn in capturing the reality of the political events, the photographer is constantly beaten up for 'mocking' the party, its power and its leaders, and thereafter often comes into sight with blood pouring from his wounds whenever he appears in the novel. He explains to Azaro that, undeterred, he has been busy taking photographs of "reality and corruption" (TFR 233).

Myth can distort or change reality, making certain characters like the photographer appear larger than life. Madame Koto too becomes a myth. She becomes progressively bigger and more grotesque and fearsome as her involvement with the POR becomes more entrenched. The more the compound people gossip about her, the more inflated Madame Koto's reality becomes:

Her legend, which would sprout a thousand hallucinations, had been born in our midst - born of stories and rumours which, in time, would become some of the most extravagant realities of our lives. (TFR 37)

No doubt Madame Koto has an acute sensitivity to her surroundings and is even somewhat mystical in Azaro's eyes. However, because of the people's perception of her reality as mythical in stature, she eventually becomes what others think of her and more: "She incarnated all her legends into her new spirit, joined with her myths. She became all the things we whispered she was and she became more" (TFR 495). On the other hand, it may be argued that the poor have an almost prophetic intuition (even if they are uttered in superstitious terms) or vision of Madame Koto's progressive corruption.

Dad too begins to take on the air of myth when his 'Black Tyger' reputation becomes widespread. Like the photographer and Madame Koto, he feeds on the people's perception of his growing reality to become even larger than life. Dad's legend increases with each boxing match he wins. When he floors the Green Leopard, Azaro says that he wins "like a dream" (TFR 401), not because it is an easy fight, but because the whole thing appears unreal. The fight has, according to Mum, knocked "new lights" (TFR 410) into Dad's head, causing him to see the larger realities of the nation. He begins to call for the transformation of hunger into power. Thence, guided by this vision or insight, Dad's hazardous journey towards his destiny begins.

Dad's struggles against political oppression in the abiku novels take on a certain heroic dimension despite his poverty.

Quayson notes that the characterisation of Black Tyger has "something of the Yoruba gods Shango and Ogun as subtexts, because his struggles against the threatening extinction that poverty and injustice pose recalls the two gods of Yoruba mythology" (Quayson, "Orality"). Dad is portrayed in the abiku novels as a poor man who is nevertheless a 'giant' because of the load of the world he carries on his shoulder. Azaro, on numerous occasions calls Dad "a giant who was lost" (TFR 58), "a giant destroyed by the sun" (SOE 34), and "a fabled being" (TFR 50). A man like Dad may be small because he is poor, yet he has to, literally and metaphorically, shoulder the weight of the world like the mythic Greek god Atlas. After a long hard day at work, Dad says: "I carried loads today till I thought my neck and my back and my soul would break" (TFR 96). Metaphorically, Dad takes on the burden of fighting against political oppression. Dad - the "champion of the world (TFR 413) - who is on a crusade against the corrupt political parties, cries out in agony that "the weight [of Madame Koto] on his head had multiplied" (SOE 229).

Okri says that an "old way of seeing things has to be destroyed for the new to be born" (qtd. in Wilkinson 81). The abiku cycle of death and rebirth which Azaro literally undergoes is also significant where Dad is concerned as it points to the latter's multiple reincarnations, each bringing its new and clearer vision. The different stages of Dad's and Azaro's lives as distinguished by their rebirths are not so much divisions but a flow. Although the stages of Dad's and Azaro's rebirths are observably more clearly marked than the conventional-spirit world and reality-dream boundaries, Okri regards the abiku multiplicity as "a constant flow, forming and reforming" (84). Dad, like Azaro, can be likened to the biblical character Lazarus

for his multiple rebirths. The comparison is also made by Azaro in TFR when he and Mum see Dad “sitting up on the bed like Lazarus” (TFR 484).

The first time Dad undergoes a rebirth is after the fight with the spirit of the Yellow Jaguar, a rebirth which Azaro is able to “smell” in advance (TFR 358). As a result of the injuries he sustains from the boxing match, Dad has to be fed pap “as if he were the biggest newborn baby in the world” (TFR 359). He drools and sleeps “like a baby” (TFR 359), but on “the seventh day Dad [rises] miraculously”. Although Dad’s first rebirth gives him only fresh energies to resume training, his second rebirth - undergone after the fight with Green Leopard, the seven spirits, and the seven-headed spirit in his near-death dream - provides him with “a new idealism” (TFR 408). When he awakes into the second rebirth, Dad begins to talk “of becoming a politician and bringing freedom and prosperity to the world and free education to the poor” (TFR 408). However, it is with the third rebirth that Dad truly arrives at a new and prophetic vision that puts him on a new road towards his destiny. When Dad wakes up near the closing of TFR, he begins to realise how a “single thought of ours could change the universe” (TFR 497) (an idea reminiscent of the popular self-help theory which says that we necessarily gravitate towards what our mind is thinking about). With a new wisdom, Dad exhorts Mum and Azaro to “look at the world with new eyes . . . [and] redream this world and make the dream real . . . [since the] world that we see and the world that is there are two different things” (TFR 498).

TFR closes with Dad’s awakening to the realisation of a transcendent reality that can be actualised when man dares to

dream and see with a new sight. However, the tone set at the closing of TFR is one of foreboding - an eerie quietude before the approaching storm unleashes its chaos. Although there are some unfinished business at the end of TFR, a sequel was not overtly hinted, nor was it expected by many of Okri's readers. Still, SOE appeared approximately two years after. While the sequel took many by surprise, it more importantly underscores Okri's certain 'unfinished business' with TFR in terms of thematic exploration. It appears as if Okri feels compelled to take the abiku's tale a step further in order to exorcise the demons that haunt him and his country. (It is interesting to note that he recently put out *Dangerous Love*, a new book based on the reworked version of TLW). Okri's evident compulsion to repeatedly revisit his narrative worlds and themes is reflective of his philosophical ardour and his need to clarify and refine certain key ideas. Simultaneously, it points to one of his basic tenets that "nothing is ever finished" (SOE 3).

As it stands, TFR is one of Okri's most important novels, (technically and thematically speaking) distinct for its exploration of multi-dimensional realism. Due to the book's radical departure from the ones before it, TFR will set the standard by which all of his previous and future works will be measured. Yet despite the achievements of TFR and despite Okri's frequent return to the core themes, his works cannot be said to have stagnated. As this thesis attempts to show, Okri displays a noteworthy capability of rendering the same themes in progressive degrees of maturation, as if in keeping with his own personal and artistic development.

Although SOE is a continuation of TFR in terms of plot, there is a subtle shift in focus in the former. In the first novel, we

find the main characters being defined, with the socio-political background shedding light on their condition. In SOE, there is a kind of a reverse treatment. Having developed his characters in TFR, Okri now attempts to intensify the clear-cut duel between the two opposing forces of good and evil while further developing the increasingly isolated characters, especially Dad. As a result, the multi-dimensional worlds in which the characters live in become more chaotic, causing the boundaries to blur and fluctuate even more frenziedly as the abiku cycle turns.

ii. SONGS OF ENCHANTMENT

If readers are enchanted by the surreal beauty of TFR, they will be disturbed by the numerous enchanting-turned-grotesque imagery in SOE. As the narrative time approaches the climax of Independence, Okri's representation of his land and people begins to develop a hard edge. They are no longer seen in a romantic light living in a once-idyllic period of time before the entry of politics. Conveying a sense of desperate urgency as the nation verges upon the climax of its history, Okri mutates the narrative world of SOE into one resembling Judgement Day in the Book of Revelations. This departure from TFR is a significant illustration of Okri's overall vision of redreaming the world as the sequel demonstrates through action how the abiku cycle evolves from the state of joy to suffering, and from order to chaos. This instance of Okri's focal departure stems from his basic intent of subverting everyday reality while simultaneously exposing the treachery endured by his country in hope that the people will dare to redream the world.

The need for the oppressed characters to redream the world grows more urgent as events whip themselves up into frenzy. The sequel SOE opens with the sense of impending chaos set in the earlier novel. Azaro warns that things are far from over and that because the people do not realise there are more roads to travel, they are similarly blind to future cataclysm that comes with the start of a new cycle of events. As Independence approaches in SOE, politically generated chaos and violence become more widespread and intense. In the 'Battle of the Mythologies' [title of Chapter 2, Book 3], dissension and clashes between the two political parties, and between everybody else

grow monstrous in proportion. Any sense of communal cohesion is destroyed by “a weird anti-magnetism” (SOE 44) that pulls everything apart. With the arrival of the “Dark New Age of Enchantments” (SOE 108), “there were no longer any boundaries between the world outside and . . . private lives” (SOE 109). So disorientated are they by the chaos in their lives that the people begin to find it difficult to differentiate between “the actual devastations from the strange effects they had on [their] minds” (Book 2 Chapter 18: ‘The Invention of Chaos’ SOE 151).

‘Reality’, as perceived by the people in SOE, becomes more complex when the political parties unleash their brand of chaos. On top of their manufactured reality, anarchy is systematically introduced into the lives of the ghetto-dwellers to intimidate them into voting for the corrupt politicians. Yet, true to the spirit of chaos theory, a certain pattern or structure can be found hidden within the chaos generated. Chaotic systems may appear to be disorderly and random, but in fact, they are not. Azaro discovers this when he enters the Masquerade’s mind which is the “universal mind of evil things” (SOE 114). In the world contained in the Masquerade’s mind, Azaro is shocked by the “uncanny sense of order in the kingdom. There was no chaos, no confusion, no alternatives, no dialectic, no disturbance” (SOE 115). The world that Azaro observes represents the POR’s “strange kind of utopia” (SOE 115) which feeds on the people’s fears, and where reality is manufactured, and memory and history are created.

The utopia that Azaro witnesses in the Masquerade’s mind is the political oppressor’s blueprint or vision of their ideal world. Apart from deriving power from the people’s fear, the

reality manufacturers also suck the people's dreams dry. Although there are no tension, poverty and hunger in their utopia, there is a significant absence of dreams in it. Opposing this sterile utopia are the dreams and visions of the people. Okri believes that it is "crucial for the great good dreamers and the slow secret realisers of great dreams to be stronger . . . [in order to] transform the destiny of peoples and nations for the better" (SOE 113). To the oppressed, the political parties' ideal world is their dystopia, or anti-utopia, and vice versa. Okri's clear-cut demarcation between the people's utopia and dystopia (as with his partition of good and evil) is interesting as it starkly contrasts with the indeterminate boundary between dreaming and waking consciousness. While Okri asserts that reality is, in effect, multi-dimensional, he does believe that there are certain truths which are perennial and deconstruction-proof (other such truths include Okri's belief that suffering can lead towards joy, to mention one ironic example).

If the values of the world were divided into black and white, then the oppressor's utopia is unmistakably opposed by Okri - personally as apparent in many of his essays and speeches, and artistically through Dad's subversive vision in the abiku novels. Dad's utopia or vision of a better nation is based on justice. His vision of "an African utopia" (SOE 124) can be seen as a poor man's paradise in which the oppressed "would pool all [their] secret wisdom, distil [their] philosophies, conquer [their] bad history, and make [their] people glorious in the world of continents" (SOE 124). Dad's utopia transcends suffering, and is a mystical world of wonders where beauty resides - a glimpse of which is narrated by Azaro as he follows Dad on his journey in

redreaming the world in the chapter "The Secret Agonies of Tygers".

The period when the air crackles with colossal dissension is also the time when dreams take on an added significance. Occurrences of lucid dreams, visionary dreams, REM dreams, hallucinations and nightmares become more frequent and chaotic in SOE as compared to TFR. These occurrences are partially caused by the Fast-approaching climax in the history of the country, and to the increased oppression by the two parties. Seen through Okri's aesthetic framework, they are meant to be accepted by the reader as actual incidents. Yet, there may actually be a simpler explanation to the compound people's 'magical' experience. "Whatever the poor do in other lands, in Nigeria they tend to explain their situation by incredible fantasies, improbable causes and rationalisations", Omotoso writes (8). This (as well as other such instances) may explain the supernatural tinge of the people's experiences, and Okri chooses to render them precisely in that magical colouring.

Indeed, Okri's qualification of the characters' reality is consistent with his intention of writing from within, rather than from without the Nigerian worldview. And because the novel is narrated from that angle and by an African spirit-child, the reader will find that all boundaries including those between dream/nightmare and waking consciousness, and conventional-spirit world become progressively less determinate. Women begin to disappear into the forests, Azaro is caught "in the middle space between the living and the dead" (SOE 258) and someone swears that she can see many worlds simultaneously. These are only a handful of instances showing how events are working themselves

into a climax. As the people approach the new 'millennium', and as a new cycle of events is about to begin, the world is turned upside down because the future is impatient to burst into the present.

Throughout the turbulent period, many of the compound people still feel eschatological hope. They still dream of the possibility of having a utopian life purged of injustice. Dad - the prime mover of this utopian vision - refuses to give up the act of redreaming the world. Dad says that the nation is a collective invention of the people (SOE 113). But because many have been influenced into becoming soldiers of the people's dystopia, they have been led to shoot "down all the living dreams of the nation" (SOE 43). Azaro, who receives this doomsday vision, is later informed by Dad that the "secret of strength is in the spirit" (SOE 44). As the rewards seem to be greater if one takes the easy road out of misery, many who are weak-spirited have sold out their dreams and have accepted Madame Koto's invisible patronage. The consequences are dire, as Azaro discovers from the blind old man's prophecy:

in the old man's dream of a dying country that had not yet been born, a nation born and dying from a lack of vision, too much greed and corruption, not enough love, too many divisions. (SOE 91)

Widespread disillusionment replaces the constructive and collective vision of the people. The chaos that engulfs the compound people make them "brainshocked . . . [and] hallucinate" (SOE 151). The POR has even gone to the extent of perverting the traditional Masquerade into a weapon of

oppression. After seeing the world through the eyes of the political Jackal-headed Masquerade, Azaro comes to realise that there will always be:

a battle between those who become more powerful because of the millions who refuse to be born, refuse to be, and those who *are*, who have been born, who carry on becoming, and who bring the dreams of a possible paradise and an incremental light to the earth. (SOE 113)

Azaro's realisation highlights one of Okri's unwavering observations - that although his (Okri's) homeland is made up of "about three hundred different groupings of people" (qtd. in CA on CD-ROM), there are basically two kinds of people - the perpetual conflict between the proverbial born and the unborn. For instance, the Masquerade, representing the POR and other "political sorcerers" (SOE 138), is constantly at war with the elements that stand in the way of the realisation of its corrupt utopia. The POR, also through the invisible presence of Madame Koto, incessantly haunts the people and saps them of their REM dreams and vitality. Deprived of both their REM dreams and a utopian vision for the country, the people start to doubt their sanity, fall sick and hallucinate while sleeping and while awake. Since "dreaming is a necessary part of consciousness that enables the individual to develop a higher self-awareness" (Wolf 17), to be deprived of REM sleep that enables one to dream will cause disorientation: "We began to see holes in reality . . . The world started to succumb to strange distortions" (SOE 157). It is only when the great spirits bring back "Fragments of the Original Way" (title of Chapter 20 Book 2) that the compound people are

able to dream again and emerge from their stupor. As hope returns, the people begin anew to collectively dream "of a new paradise on earth where human beings could live without fear" (SOE 166).

The collective utopian dreams and visions of the people will determine the destiny of the country. Yet cycles of hope can turn into cycles of despair when the people lose sight of their dreams after travelling too long on their road of destiny. "[None] of us ever learned our lesson, or loved enough to learn from our pain, or took the great scream of history seriously enough", Okri explains ("A Prayer" 6). As a result, history keeps repeating itself in cycles after "maybe a century" (6). Yet, however impossibly daunting the situation may appear, Okri, like Dad in TFR and SOE, wants the nation's abiku cycle of hope and despair to be broken, and end the "battle raging in the country's soul; between the need to grow, and the urge to die; the need to go forward, or the desire to keep things as they are, which is to regress" (6). The cyclic nature of history is reminiscent of the road being built by the workers in the interspaces in TFR. If the road can never be finished, and the cycle is perpetual, why then bother to build the former and break the latter, one may ask. Okri replies that it is the means, rather than the end that is important. The struggle and the suffering is what makes "the world just and more beautiful" ("Redreaming" 21).

Like the Buddhist concept of rebirth and nirvana, Okri sees that the cycle of order and chaos will keep evolving until it is broken through the conscious act of regeneration guided by a vision such as Dad's. To break the nation's abiku cycle and start a new cycle of order and democracy, the people need to redream

their world. Dad believes that they can “redream this world and make the dream real” (TFR 498). Dad’s idea is subversive because ‘thought’ is the seed that can develop into reality. Dad says, “[A] single thought of ours could change the universe. We human beings are small things. Life is a great thing” (TFR 497). He is filled with grand schemes to help the poor, to end oppression: “He conjured an image of a country in which he was an invisible ruler . . . in which every citizen must be completely aware of what is going on in the world . . .” (TFR 409). His imagination and dreams are subversive because they offer alternative realities, similar to Saleem Sinai’s (in Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children) subversive rewriting of history.

The aim of redreaming the world in the abiku novels is also to achieve a higher reality and to be cured of ‘blindness’ to the potential of life. Such an ideal constitutes Okri’s utopian vision, one born as a result of his country’s failure to give birth to “a beautiful and gifted nation crying to be born”, a nation that could “astonish the world with its will and capacities” (Okri, “The Catastrophe” 18). The ‘blindness and sight’ motif is given a marked emphasis in TFR and especially in SOE. Azaro is acutely aware that all human beings “are born blind . . . [and] few ever learn to see” (TFR 3). Many characters in SOE are literally struck blind, and are also symbolically ‘blind’ because they choose not to see and confront the reality of their situation, and because they lack good dreams and visions. Okri believes that a transcendental sight is vital because it enables the individual to see beyond distorted reality and perceive the hidden ‘truth’. Also, by breaking “the seven chains” (SOE 276) that tie dreams down, he would then be able to ‘see’ his destiny.

By looking at the world through different eyes, Azaro is able to apprehend the true nature of things that he confronts. Just as there are many layers to reality, there is also a necessity to widen one's visual perspective in order to see the multi-dimensional reality before him. For instance, by entering the minds of others and by looking at the world through masks, Azaro is often shocked to discover how differently things appear. In TFR, Azaro is able to see a monstrous devourer of souls and beauty after putting on the mask he found. A related incident also occurs in SOE when Azaro enters the mind of the Jackal-headed Masquerade and sees "the world through its eyes" (SOE 112). The abiku-narrator later finds himself trapped in the Masquerade's mind, just as he is unable to remove the mask in TFR. (The mask can also be seen, in its usual sense, as a veil that hides reality, or gives reality many dimensions: "the face of the world seemed an endless series of masks, and we did not know what to believe" (SOE 171).)

Azaro's difficulty in taking off the mask and exiting from the Masquerade's mind is perhaps indicative of the difficulty in realigning one's worldview. More significantly, it may also be indicative of the wearer being overwhelmed by the masks' worldview and persona. In SOE, the blind old man's followers become "possessed . . . with the images of menace carved on their dread-manufacturing features" (SOE 145) when they don the masks. Being trapped in one (or a foreign) visual perspective is dangerous as it can limit one's creativity in seeing beyond the immediate reality. For instance, if a suffering man views his wretched condition through a single mundane worldview, he will more likely be driven mad. Without developing a multi-perspective vision to apprehend his multi-dimensional reality, he

would not be able to see hope and the joy that can be drawn from suffering. Similarly, Azaro is temporarily blinded to the possible order that can be moulded from the vision of coming chaos that he sees.

One of the villains in the abiku novels is the blind old man. Considered by Azaro as "a demonic spirit-child of the worst kind" (SOE 146), the blind old man is a great chief of destruction who persistently wants to see through the eyes of the abiku children, Azaro and Ade. Possibly also wanting to invade others' consciousness, the blind old man shares a few striking similarities with Madame Koto. Both have magnetic personalities and they thoroughly invade the nightspaces and nightmares of the oppressed people. The terrifying duo become larger than life as the people's fear of them increases. Fear in turn feeds the myth of these mind-terrorists and the political parties, distorting the reality of the people's perception.

While the POR is consistently attacked for being corrupt, the POP is indeed not better off either. After Ade's rampaging father is murdered by Madame Koto's thugs, the POP forbids the people from burying his body which has been dumped near the bushes. In doing so, the POP has betrayed Ade's father - its supporter - by using his body as a political tool against the POR. For fear of recrimination, the compound people are driven to avoid seeing and acknowledging the body of Ade's father left unburied. By refusing to see the corpse of Ade's father, the people have in a way killed him for the second time. They have also condemned Ade's father to become a lost soul because Africans generally believe that:

a person whose dead body is not buried, that is, with due and correct rites, will not be admitted to the abode of the blessed departed ones, and therefore will become a wanderer, living an aimless, haunting existence. (Idowu 174)

The corpse of Ade's father is also representative of all the corpses in the people's consciousness which they refuse to acknowledge and which are preventing them from growing. Consequently, they wake up "one morning to find that a mysterious plague of blindness" (SOE 230-231) has struck the community. The people's blindness is both literal and symbolic. For not using their eyes to acknowledge that action needs to be taken, the people have become metaphorically blinded. Ade tells Azaro that to 'see', one should not use the head first, but should instead use "the light in the eyes . . . that makes everything alive" (SOE 261-262). It is only after Dad starts naming all that he sees, acknowledges and gives the corpse a proper burial that "the spirit of the community" (SOE 276) becomes unblocked, paving the way for deliverance.

The title of Chapter 8 Book 3 - "A Good Man Has To Be Blind Before He Can See" - neatly encapsulates Okri's kernel-idea on blindness and sight. Like the road that needs to be constantly built and rebuilt because the builders tend to forget the reason for their task, the individual too, has to learn and relearn how to see by going through the cycle of blindness and sight. "Drunk on the wine of his new unblinded mythology" (SOE 279) after regaining his 'sight', Dad also regains the utopian visions. He calls for the people to "KEEP REDREAMING THE WORLD WITH MORE LIGHT" (SOE 280) because it is "always passing

away" (SOE 281). In the parallel world where astonishing lives are lived, Dad sees how "our thoughts created our realities" (SOE 290), and acknowledges with new eyes the wretched conditions they live in. At the same time, as the title of Chapter 4 Book 4 suggests, "To See Anew Is Not Enough - We Must Also Create". One also needs to "create . . . new lives, everyday, with will and light and love". In other words, there must be a continuous effort to resist the blight of forgetfulness, and not be cowed by the oppressors into submission. Dreaming, coupled with the act of sustaining that dream, will take the people on their journey towards a utopian nation. Such is the poignant 'song' of the people.

If the chief motif in TFR is the road, in the sequel SOE, it is the song. Azaro says that his tale in SOE is "the song of a circling spirit" (SOE 3). The song, is like the story, about the people who are blind to their destiny, and the higher reality that can be achieved when they travel beyond the chaos. E. Bolaji Idowu writes that songs "constitute a rich heritage of all Africa" (85). Further, he explains that Africans sing:

to express themselves: all the joys and sorrows of their heart, and their hopes and fears about the future . . . Singing is always a vehicle conveying certain sentiments or truths. (85)

Like myths, songs reflect the people's experiences, and they capture the rhythm of their lives. Hence, the title of the sequel Songs of Enchantment symbolises the people's struggles in life, a life that can be full of enchantment when they redream their lives. The 'song' motif - like the 'road' and multi-dimensional

reality - takes on multiple variations in SOE. It is presented as "the political songs that spoke of the new era of money and power" (SOE 38), sung by Madame Koto's women in heated trance. The 'song' motif is also heard in its corrupted form, as the "deep chanting of mask-heads" (SOE 144) which disorients the people with fear. Ugly and jarring music is played by the POR's blind old man, but he suddenly changes his tune and plays beautiful funereal music that hides "something quite disturbing beneath his new guise" (SOE 170). Interestingly, the blind old man's 'music' (symbolic of the POR's oppressive philosophy of lies and corruption) is rejected by the people, but becomes somewhat convincing when it changes to match "The Kindness of [the] Curfew-makers" (title of Chapter 23 Book 2).

Opposing the parties' tune are the cries and "voices of the incandescent women of the forest, whose songs burned brightest with the funereal accents of a dying moon" (SOE 136). These compound women who disappear into the forest (possibly to become rebel-fighters) sing the songs of their lives. The 'songs' are a constant reminder to the people of their struggles for a better life. They also disturb and stir the compound people into a kind of rebellion. When these songs from the forest are silenced after the Masquerade unleashes a storm of violence in the compound, "there were no heroic acts of resistance to give [them] the hope of ever sleeping peacefully again at night" (SOE 109).

After a period of disillusionment in another scene, the people stop singing: "there were no music in our lives, and the forest was silent" (SOE 176). Silence begins to invade the minds, causing the people to doubt their memory and forget: "And

because we doubted, we forgot. And because we forgot, we were ready for the turning of a new cycle" (SOE 176). This quote is significant because it shows how songs of the people are, like dreams, important to keep their spirits from falling into a politically-induced stupor. Ultimately, the song is the story of Azaro, a spirit child who is condemned to perpetually circle from birth and death, and between worlds.

If SOE is "the song of a circling spirit", the spirit is many things. The 'spirit' may refer to the non-corporeal beings - the spirits and ghosts which circle from one level of reality to another. As discussed previously, spirits "according to African belief, are ubiquitous; there is no area of the earth, no object or creature, which has not a spirit of its own or which cannot be inhabited by a spirit" (Idowu 174). It can, at the same time, be taken as man's inner strength, or 'other form'. When Azaro follows "dad's spirit as he worked to earn mum's forgiveness" (SOE 49), the abiku sees Dad's "other form" (SOE 49) becoming vast and powerful as the latter is in his determined phase.

Another possible definition of 'spirit' is the prevailing mood of the times: "A new spirit entered our lives . . . It made us transfer our fears to one another" (SOE 206). Because such a spirit is infectious in nature, people become more fearful, and they inadvertently feed to the growing myth of the origin of the spirit. Illnesses, nightmares, fates, blindness and death become transferable. Madame Koto's driver is suspected to have died in the place of his employer because powerful figures are believed to have the magical power to transfer their death to others. In this instance, Madame Koto, in possession of a magnetic personality

appears to have *àse* - the Yoruba concept of the personality force "by which one impresses one's authority or will effectively upon another, or upon a situation" (Idowu 176). There is also mention of "the great spirits of Africa" (SOE 26) in migration. The great spirits are again referred to as innumerable, and are followed by a procession of other representatives of the spirit world. Bringing to the people "fragments of the Original [African] Way" (SOE 160), the spirits can be seen as the forgotten essence of utopian dreams:

The African Way - The Way of compassion . . . of freedom and power and imaginative life; The Way that keeps the mind open to the existences beyond our earthly sphere . . . (SOE 160)

Linked to 'the African Way' is Okri's call for the people to embrace life with all its layers of reality, and to passionately recreate their lives which are so full of transcendent potentials. Like Orwell's proles in 1984, the power to create a just society seems to be in the hands of the marginalised majority and the poor in the *abiku* novels. Decades after Independence, Okri writes that "Nigeria cannot even afford to think of another civil war" ("The Catastrophe" 18), pointing to the risk of the complete annihilation of his country.

Although the political upheavals in TFR and SOE are set near Independence, the same discord still plagues Nigeria long after it. Far from writing TFR and SOE solely for "aesthetic" purposes (Hawley 32), Okri is evidently very much politically-minded when he makes such comments on the political situation

in Nigeria. Okri could have opted for the realist mode of setting his ideas to paper, but to do so may well undermine his purpose of exploring the African worldview that admits multiple reality, as well as annul his thesis that reality is not a single monolithic entity. In other words, the form must agree with the subject.

At the point of writing this dissertation, another major political turmoil has been brewing up in Nigeria. The country has received tremendous worldwide condemnation for the militia's execution of nine political activists, including Ken Saro-Wiwa, writer and leader of the Ogoni minority (Lim, "Nigeria" 1). For the Nigerian government's violation of the principles of the Harare Declaration, the country has been suspended from the Commonwealth. "The country is in rack and ruin. What you have is a terrorist clique at the head which has apparent power, but in reality there is no government", says Wole Soyinka in an interview (Wanene 3). The article in which the interview appears also contains a significant quotation from Soyinka's prison memoirs, The Man Died, published 23 years ago. Uncannily, Soyinka expresses the same sentiment as Okri does in many of his writings:

The man dies in all who keep silent in the face of tyranny
. . . A war, with its attendant human suffering must,
when that evil is unavoidable, be made to fragment more
than buildings; it must shatter the foundations of thought
and recreate. (my emphases) (3)

Suffering drives man to dream of "the continents of [his] hidden possibilities" (SOE 289). To recreate his world by daring to have a good dream or vision, man must first overcome the

blindness he inherits from birth. "Thought creates action . . . And action creates a life" (SOE 296), so say the voices that Azaro hears. At the end of life's harsh journey on the road of destiny, and beyond the chaos, lies "a new sunlight, and serenity" (SOE 297) - a utopia waiting to be realised through blood, sweat, tears, and dreams.

From peace to chaos, joy to suffering, and innocence to maturity in the abiku novels, and finally to utopian transcendence in ATG, Okri charts his vision of the cycle that man needs to retain and, paradoxically, escape from in his pursuit to redream the world. As will be explored in the next chapter, Okri would have come to his own full circle in ATG - in presenting to his readers, not through arid theories, but through narration - his vision of man's existential abiku cycle.

CHAPTER 3

THE UTOPIAN NOVEL: *ASTONISHING THE GODS*

The mythic framework that Okri employs in the shaping of his narratives is mainly drawn from his African background. In the abiku novels, the framework, being part of the African aesthetics, is used by Okri to explore the theme of multi-dimensional reality within a specific context. For instance, although the setting of *TFR* and *SOE* is not overtly stated, there are certain indications to suggest that the events described take place near Independence in Nigeria (or at least in an African country). However, in *ATG*, the setting becomes more universal, leaving Okri with a broader framework to refine his vision of a multi-dimensional reality. The novel is set on an unrecognisable, mythical and enchanted island far removed from reality. And, instead of having an abiku from the spirit world as narrator, Okri employs an equally fantastic protagonist - an unnamed, invisible universal hero in search of visibility.

Astonishing The Gods (ATG) is a radical departure from Okri's abiku novels in terms of setting and mode of thematic exposition. Nevertheless, the mythic framework that outlines and defines Okri's narrative (as explored in the preceding chapters) is retained, although broadened to allow for a more universal (re) contextualisation. *ATG* is Okri's first major work of fiction that is set outside the immediate African cosmos. The contextual shift is significant, and appears to be a logical progression of Okri's thematic concerns. In the abiku novels, the Nigerian and African

backdrop befits Okri's specific socio-political agenda. His primary concern is to seek the transformation of his homeland into an African utopia sustained with perpetual toil. In ATG, however, he is advocating the creation of "THE FIRST UNIVERSAL CIVILISATION OF JUSTICE AND LOVE" (ATG 155). For Okri to have used the Nigerian milieu in exploring ideas of a catholic utopia may not have been as effective as having a mythical setting, especially since the ATG calls for the transcending of all boundaries.

Despite the divergent treatment of the abiku novels and ATG, the central themes remain the same, although many are developed to greater clarity in the latter. The cosmos of ATG, like the abiku novels, can be re-dreamed - reality, being multi-dimensional, can be shaped by dreams and visions. Sublime truth can be glimpsed when a new perception is gained; and suffering is a cyclic road that can lead one closer to the realisation of his full potential and utopia. It would not be totally wrong to regard ATG as Okri's manifesto. Indeed, many of his thematic concerns are more clearly stated in this novel. Whereas the themes in the abiku novels revolve around the transformation of dreams into a seemingly far-off utopia, ATG shows us the direct pursuit, realisation and nature of a level of utopia in its purest form. This reason alone should qualify ATG as an independent novel.

The abiku novels are suffused with a dream-like quality, yet they remain realistic enough for the reader to regard the events as plausible. Balancing fantasy and reality, Okri has to develop his vision within the framework of this plausible world of the abiku novels. However, with ATG - being an allegorical tale, or "an adult's fairy tale with a mythical backdrop" (Lim,

"Far" 16) - Okri has more latitude to flesh out his often paradoxical vision. Since an allegory is by nature fantastic, Okri can afford to create an extreme context for ATG, a medium through which the same themes explored in the abiku novels can be given a more wholesome treatment.

However illuminating the abiku novels and ATG are on one another, they are, first and foremost, independent novels. Yet, it would not be an easy task for those familiar with Okri's works to make meaning of ATG without drawing parallels with the earlier works. Undoubtedly, not a few first-time readers who become acquainted with Okri through ATG will find it drearily inaccessible. It would be pertinent to ponder if ATG is a genuine novel, or Okri's veiled philosophical manifesto and guidebook to help unlock meaning from his previous works of fiction, especially the abiku novels. On its own, ATG appears as a failure to some critics. The novel has been described in a review by Alev Adil as "a pompous and obscurantist expedition which continually assures us that hidden behind each elliptical fog of hyperbole there lies the most perfectly constructed vision of harmony" (23). In the same review, Adil, finding fault with Okri's vision, suspects that the message - "perfection can only be found through pain" - is "more likely to depress, than astonish". Another reviewer, David Buckley, writes that "Ben Okri goes full diddly for magic and myth . . . and comes badly unstuck" (19). Buckley further writes in his review of ATG that "Okri gushes with dead vocabulary". He ends with a spoof on a line from the novel - "You have to find things first before you look for them" (ATG 103), saying, "No-one can read what you haven't written."

Admittedly, ATG has its faults. It is, arguably and by far, Okri's most illuminating, and ironically, the most complex and impenetrable work (if these qualities be flaws). The setting is so far departed from realism that even meaning on the surface level becomes surreally obscure. Seemingly intelligible ideas expressed in one part tend to turn complicated and become contradicted later. Furthermore, as Adil notes, those "seeking to read [the protagonist's] invisibility as a metaphor for textual (and therefore political) absence from literate culture will not be rewarded by any insights on the subject", since he is "distracted from his quest for visibility . . . into a spiritual journey towards perfect invisibility" (23) Indeed, such a development in ATG is likely to frustrate scholars keen on giving the novel the standard post-colonial reading. Okri may not have spared any expense and adjectives in constructing the mystical city of ATG, but it would be wrong not to credit him for being a master in evoking sensuous, colourful and often enchanting imagery.

Deconstructing notions of 'reality' is useful in understanding the concept of multi-dimensional reality. However, to deconstruct Okri's selected novels (within the context of this thesis) for meaning would be an endless farcical task since 'meaning' will be perpetually deferred. Yet, the deconstructionist's meaning is, to some degree, disturbingly similar to Okri's idea of man's ceaseless toil in redreaming the world. In both cases, there is no point of arrival, only a long and endless journey that extends into eternity. Thankfully, unlike the literary theory of Deconstruction, there can be a gradual movement towards perfection even as man is trapped in the abiku cycle. In any case, basic meaning or truth is not as elusive as Okri's 'perfection'. The African aesthetic may admit a multi-

dimensional reality but there is nonetheless, as Okri believes, some truth behind the layers of manufactured or distorted reality. In short, certain meanings (or truths) are immutable, and can be made of Okri's narratives. But perhaps the best validation of any reasonable method of making meaning from Okri's works, including the cross-referencing between the author's individual novels, is the author's own dictum, and the first law of the city in ATG: "that what you think is what becomes real" (ATG 46).

Because there is a thematic connection and continuity between Okri's works prior to ATG (especially the abiku novels) and the latter, it would be more fruitful to draw parallels between these works than to ignore them. After all, the novels are by the same author, even if they be individual works. As noted in the previous chapters, Okri's vision has been consistent, whether in his fiction, essays or addresses. Man is perpetually trapped in the abiku cycle (of hope and despair and of order and chaos) because in his pursuit to redream the world, he will lose sight of the goal for transcendence. In forgetting his previous sufferings, all past efforts will be annihilated, and chaos and anguish will return. Learning from his errors, man will again strive to transform his reality with dreams and visions. Although the cycle is perpetual, it is the endless hope that man retains that gives meaning and beauty to his struggles.

Okri's vision (outlined above) as seen in the abiku novels can also be traced in ATG. The protagonist, invisible and nameless, is himself born to an invisible mother. After learning in the schoolbook of his invisibility and non-existence, he leaves home on a quest "for the secret of visibility" (ATG 4). Like Azaro who has to travel the roads to discover his destiny, the

invisible protagonist too has his share of travelling to do. However, the 'travel' motif (found in TFR and SOE) takes on a slight variation in ATG. Instead of travelling the famished road, the protagonist in ATG journeys through many seas and the roads into the city to unravel the mysteries of the island-utopia, and to find the answer to his quest.

The 'travel' motif is a prominent feature in many utopian fictions. Thomas More's Utopia, for example, was "influenced by the 'traveller's tale' literature flooding Europe in the wake of the Portuguese and Spanish voyages of discovery" (Kumar 23). Science fiction, on the other hand, uses time and space travel to present ideal societies of another time, and of distant planets. In ATG, the protagonist too is involved in a journey to an unfamiliar place vastly different from his place of origin. On the island, he (and the reader) learns the truth about 'reality' and transcendence as encapsulated in Okri's vision. Like Utopia, ATG too can be seen as, in Thomas More's words, "a fiction whereby the truth, as if smeared with honey, might a little more pleasantly slide into men's minds" (qtd. in Kumar 251).

Okri's utopia has a long line of predecessors. Writers and philosophers have written at length about their own brand of ideal societies as contained in works like Plato's Timaeus and Critias, Thomas More's Utopia, H.G. Well's Men Like Gods, James Hilton's Lost Horizon and Ayi Kwei Armah's The Healers. It should be noted, however, that although literary utopia has its European roots, the concept of utopia itself is a universal phenomenon. Okri's concern with utopia stems from his belief that "[unhappy] lands prefer utopian stories" while "[happy] lands prefer unhappy stories" (BOH 28). His view that the

“happiness of Africa is in its nostalgia for the future, and its dreams of a golden age” (BOH 29) also appears to have influenced his philosophy.

Krishnan Kumar says that utopia is:

to be promoted by the telling of a story. It will be a tale of a strange and wondrous land, which will allow the narrator all the artful resources of vivid scenes and extraordinary doings, feigned incomprehension and telling comparison. (24)

Indeed ATG fits the above description of how utopia is to be promoted - not as an elaboration of arid theory but by showing through fiction how such an ideal society operates - however much it may appear as a philosophical tract disguised as fiction. For instance, rather than writing a philosophical tract on his utopia, Okri presents to the reader the ways of the “rigorous land” (ATG 107), a place inhabited by the Invisibles who are constantly striving for perfection and transcendence. And through the nameless protagonist, Okri gradually reveals the socio-political system that governs this ideal society.

Most social theories assume that chaos and suffering occur because humans are, by nature, defective since men “are naturally aggressive or acquisitive” (Kumar 28). Alternatively, although utopian social theories do not posit that man is all goodness, they believe in his “more or less indefinite malleability” (29). In other words, humanity can be perfected, and with constant striving, man can approach perfection, or “become gods (if not God)” (29). Okri himself appears to believe

that man is capable of transcending the apparent limitations of his condition, and "to go beyond illusion that is behind illusion" (ATG 148). His argument on the power of human transcendence is also found in 'Beyond Words: A Secular Sermon', the first essay in BOH. He cites the example of a flamenco dancer who knows "she has to dance her way past her limitations, and that this may destroy her forever". In "dissolving the boundaries of her body . . . she is like one who has survived the most dangerous journey of all" (BOH 9 - 10). That, to Okri, "represents the courage to go beyond ourselves" (BOH 11).

However, Okri writes that:

rarely do we love our tasks and our lives enough to die and thus be reborn into the divine gift of our hidden genius. We seldom try for that beautiful greatness brooding in the mystery of our blood. (BOH 11)

As a result of man's reluctance to perform 'sacrifices' and be fully committed to his cause, he is condemned to live a cyclic existence of suffering and gradual enlightenment until he is able to "create a world justice and a new light on this earth that would inspire a ten-second silence of wonder - even in heaven." (BOH 14)

There are, however, some people like Dad, in TFR and SOE, who are willing to become "the dream of the freest and most creative people we had always wanted to be" (BOH 11). Representing the oppressed but hopeful people, Dad is seen to truly make an effort to transcend the wretchedness of his condition. Yet, while Dad is shown to be struggling to redream

his world, the protagonist in ATG appears to have achieved a greater success in approaching that yearned-for 'perfection' when he finds "a higher invisibility, the invisibility of the blessed" (ATG 158), after going through a series of tests. In his becoming one of the Invisibles, the protagonist joins the enlightened group of people who strive to "transcend so many boundaries, and enter so many realms that [they] occasionally astonish even the gods" (ATG 148).

In the three selected novels, Okri appears to believe that man's potential for greatness is almost boundless. To achieve this greatness, one's thought and vision are of utmost importance. In TFR, Dad says that a "single thought of ours could change the universe" (TFR 497). Further, one of the invisible guides tells the protagonist that "things . . . are all . . . we think they are", and that "what you see is what you are, or what you will become" (ATG 11). Indeed one's vision is one's "personal wealth" (ATG 11), as the guide continues to inform the protagonist. The latter is lucky to be able to see wonderful things on the island since some people who have been there "see only infernal things" (ATG 11). This again points to how reality is shaped by the mind.

In Plato's philosophy, reason permits the "penetration of reality, the apprehension of the eternal and perfect forms that lay behind the world of appearances" (Kumar 37). In the selected novels, however, reason appears to play a less significant role in penetrating reality. In TFR, SOE and ATG, vision and suffering, when coupled with reason, are what fuel man to see through distorted reality and dream for a utopian reality. The invisible inhabitants of the island are, as the protagonist discovers,

“masters of the art of transcendence” and “masters of suffering”. ‘Happiness’ is, ironically enough, a taboo word for the inhabitants because it is usually a prelude to forgetfulness.

The ‘suffering - hope - effort - happiness - forgetfulness’ cycle as explained by the guide reminds one of the abiku cycle in TFR and SOE. Like the road builders of the interspaces, and the people inhabiting the conventional reality sphere (in the abiku novels) who are driven to build and rebuild the roads of their destiny, the inhabitants of the island in ATG are also subject to the rule of the abiku cycle. While crossing the “bridge of self discovery” (ATG 30), the protagonist sees visions of “whole peoples rising from the depth of a great ocean, rising from the forgetful waters [to build] . . . a great new future in an invisible space” (ATG 27). For a thousand years, these people built their city-sanctuary of enduring beauty. The city, as the protagonist discovers, is “the fruit of what they had learned during those long years of suffering and oblivion” (ATG 28). Among the fabulous creations of the people is the educational system in which:

the most ordinary goal was living the fullest life, in which creativity in all spheres of endeavour was the basic alphabet, and in which the most sublime lessons possible were always learned and relearned from the unforgettable suffering which was the bedrock of their great new civilisation. (ATG 28)

The millennium-long nation building is precisely what Okri aims for in the abiku novels and ATG. To him, the suffering that the people endure should not make them despair. Suffering - the ‘bedrock’ of transcendence - will remind the

people of the journey ahead, and make them toil to realise their sublime future. But the condition of man is such that after achieving a degree of progress towards their destiny, complacency and forgetfulness will inevitably set in. And thus begins a new cycle of having to relearn the art of transcendence.

Just as the “great law guides the rise and fall of things” (ATG 53), the Invisibles’ struggle for transcendence is also an eternal cycle of progress and degeneration. The guide tells the protagonist that their condition of invisibility is attained through much repetition of suffering and mistakes. He then prophesies the evolution of the city into chaos. Although the city is doomed, and the changes may be cataclysmic, they would only be “an illusion, an excuse for the invisible powers to continue on higher and hidden levels” (ATG 53). The endless cycle may seem rigorous and daunting, but what is important is that life does not stagnate. With each cycle, the people will inch towards a higher invisibility.

To Okri, man’s failure in attempting to rise to the challenge of realising his potential will result in extinction, especially so where nations are concerned. In the abiku novels, the new independent country has to undergo the cycle of living and dying like the abiku. The people have to coax it into living by offering sacrifices of their blood, sweat and tears. Whether or not the cycle is broken depends on how much the people have learnt from their experience. However, in the country’s coming and going, it risks extinction, as detailed in the previous chapters. Failure in attempts to realise the country and the people’s potential, however, is better than failure to rise to the challenge.

In ATG, the protagonist risks effacement when he hesitates in crossing the “bridge of self-discovery” (ATG 30). The bridge is one in the series of tests necessary to determine the true quality of a person. Refusing to even try to cross the bridge will betray the person’s want of commitment to his cause. The price one pays is to “become the image of what [one] essentially [is]” (ATG 17). Further, as the guide tells the protagonist, he will:

become the statue of [his] worst and weakest self . . . and [be] set up in the negative spaces of the city as another reminder to the inhabitants of the perils of failing to become what they can become. (ATG 17/18)

The theme of ‘self-discovery’ is very much related to Okri’s main ideas of reality, truth, and utopia. One who does not discover and see the truth of his reality and potential is condemned to live with illusions. The journey that leads to the realisation of one’s utopian potential is not only treacherous as seen in the *abiku* novels, it is also composed of paradoxes. The protagonist in ATG discovers this when he defies logic. For instance, he finds out that to cover a greater distance, one has to walk at a slower pace, and vice versa.

Indeed such ‘logic’ is found throughout the novel. For instance, suffering, to Okri, is not something to be shunned. Rather, suffering is, in a way, joy, because it drives one to strive and change his reality. Another example of Okri’s paradox is seen in the opening chapter where he describes how the protagonist is visible to his invisible mother because he is invisible. Okri’s ‘reversed logic’ shows that truth or reality is

trickier than one usually believes. And because reality is shown to be, in some cases, relative, Okri is in effect, challenging our basic beliefs and perception concerning our reality which may well turn out to be mere illusions.

“Everything is what it seems . . . It’s only you who are not what you seem” (ATG 41), one of the guides tells the protagonist when the latter asks why “nothing is what it seems” (ATG 41). ‘Reality’ is shown to be relative to those who do not yet understand the kind of logic that rules in the island-utopia. “An ordinary man in a strange place” could easily be “a strange man in an ordinary place” (ATG 41). The guide continues to inform the protagonist that the only oddness that the latter feels about the place is what he chooses to feel about it. This affirms Okri’s contention that things are what we think they are.

Adding another dimension to the idea of alternative or relative reality is the guide’s explanation that on the island, the “most important things are the things you don’t see” (ATG 53). Such a statement might appear to be an endeavour in obscurantism, but when it is generalised, the logic behind it begins to appear. “The most important things are the things you don’t see. The best things here are in the invisible realm”, says the guide in ATG. Indeed, it is these invisible qualities that the islanders strive to attain. Visions, dreams, and sight are all abstract matters, but they are nonetheless the most important things in Okri’s vision. The invisible people of the city will fall ill, only to “regenerate their dreams and visions” (ATG 70). The thoughts of the islanders, invisible as they are, collectively make up the city (described as “a vast network of thought” (ATG 66)), and the city itself is subject to the abiku cycle. To the island-

inhabitants, wealth is not measured with paper and metal currency, but with the “quality of thoughts, ideas, and possibilities” (ATG 71). “[Useful] new ways of seeing things” (ATG 71) is, for instance, worth acres of land.

The city’s hunger is for a “sublime future” (ATG 71). However, to attain the sublime, suffering is a prerequisite. Lessons, however painful, have to be learned and relearned, because “too much forgetting [leads to] . . . great suffering” (ATG 17). The protagonist also finds that he too has to learn the “sublime lesson” (ATG 28) to attain a higher invisibility and to “see things as they really are” (ATG 49). Ironically, while suffering is to be avoided through ‘remembering’, it is also yearned for, and is necessary to attain transcendence. The pattern is thus that the abiku cycle of ‘suffering and remembering’ becomes inevitable.

In TFR, the happier an abiku feels in the spirit world, the nearer it approaches its rebirth into suffering. Likewise, in ATG, the more beautiful the city becomes, the closer it is to a “new cycle of the Invisibles” (ATG 12). The scene where the protagonist meets the angelic woman is revealing in this point. About to flee from the island, the woman informs the protagonist that she is “going to where there is some illusion” because too “much beauty is bad for the soul” (ATG 77). The woman’s yearning for some suffering, ugliness and visibility could be taken as indicative of the onset of stagnation on the island. The episode also points to the rigorous life of the Invisibles.

Efforts at transcending illusions to attain truth and to see things as they really are through suffering is a rigorous process

for the islanders, as one of the guides himself admits. Indeed, Okri's 'perfection through pain' contention appears to have its parallel in Buddhist and Christian doctrines. According to Buddhist belief, man is reborn for as many times as it is necessary to purify himself until he transcends all earthly trappings and enters nirvana, and is thus set free from the cycle of rebirth. (The nirvana concept, however, somewhat differs from Okri's abiku cycle. Okri's cycle is perpetual, and with each cycle man can elevate himself higher into transcendence, whereas the nirvana concept is a point of arrival.) In the Christian Gospel of Matthew, it is written that "Happy are those who mourn; God will comfort them . . . Happy are those who are persecuted because they do what God requires; the Kingdom of heaven belongs to them!" (Mat. 5.3, 10).

Despite these religious precedents, some critics still question Okri's insistence on such a relentless pursuit. Adil, for example, questions Okri's declaration that "perfection can only be found through pain (23)" He further states that the message - "[beatitude] is won through passive acceptance rather than active understanding" - is "more likely to depress than astonish". The critic's scepticism is somewhat reminiscent of the dwarf-like figure's advice to the protagonist in ATG. The former explains that the island-utopia is different from the commonly perceived paradisiacal utopia where:

the people know true peace. They know contentment. They never seek, never search. They have all that they want. They are visible, and their lands ring with happiness. (ATG 107)

The dwarf-like figure then proceeds to warn the protagonist to be:

free from this impossible place, this rigorous land, where everything is guided by the wisdom of suffering, and where the journey towards perfection is continued without any hope of ever arriving. (ATG 109)

The above passages are quoted at length because they highlight and contrast the different kinds of utopia that are presented by Okri in ATG. These passages are also significant because they seem to undermine the attractiveness of Okri's utopia. In truth, the dwarf-like figure's exhortation sounds very convincing indeed. Why should one strive to live in a "hell made out of beauty" (ATG 108), the dwarf asks. Would it not be better to seek joy?

To answer these questions, it would be pertinent to look at the protagonist's subsequent encounter with the seductive poet-princess. The latter praises the protagonist for his ability to transform the obstacles of his quest into "the flowers of discovery" (ATG 115), and proceeds to offer him "the secrets of life" (ATG 117). Although nearly succumbing to the poet-princess' charms, the protagonist manages to refuse her offers. The latter explains that he already has the secret of things waiting for him somewhere, and all he needs to do is to learn to find it. For refusing "to love an illusion, [the protagonist] will have to love without illusion" (ATG 121).

A superficial reading of the scenes above-mentioned would cause one to be swayed by the argument that illusion,

visibility and happiness would be a better alternative to transcendent reality, invisibility and suffering. However, an incident that takes place while the poet-princess is seducing the protagonist is worth pointing out to prove such an argument false. The closer the protagonist is about to succumb to temptation, the more the bronze equestrian rider is obscured by the fog; but when the poet-princess' offer of illusion is finally rejected, the fog lifts. The equestrian rider is significant because the direction that it points to also represents the bearing of the protagonist's quest. The rider is pointing to:

a great destiny and destination, never to be reached, because if reached the people and their journey would perish. He [is] pointing to an ever-moving destination, unspecified except in myth, the place of absolute self-realisation and contentment which must always be just beyond the reach of the brave land, but not so much beyond reach that the people would give up in perfection's despair (ATG 87)

The above section is quoted in full for a few reasons. Firstly, it represents the kind of discourse that leads some critics to label ATG as Okri's manifesto on his vision. More than in any of Okri's works of fiction before ATG, the passage explicitly spells out the author's guiding philosophy in his recent writings. It also serves to explain conflicting notions of what a utopia should be. Okri contends that real happiness is not brought about through a decadent lifestyle of material abundance and easy living, but through "the cultivation of the mind and spirit" (Kumar 53). Okri's utopia is one of ceaseless toil; and it is through this that one can reach a higher level of self-awareness

and find "the unknown happiness of the universe" (ATG 159). For the protagonist to be seduced by the Satan-like dwarf and the poet-princess' alternative world would mean that he would perish for lack of a goal in life.

The rigorous utopia in Okri's selected novels will undoubtedly appear unpalatable to many, including Adil, the critic, who finds it depressing. But this line of thinking is exactly what Okri seeks to subvert. Especially apparent in the abiku novels, Okri has shown, through his mythic frame, that the commonly accepted reality is only one dimension of a larger dream-like reality. With a new perception, one will be able to perceive more than what is usually seen. In ATG, Okri offers us an alternative utopia (based on mental cultivation) to the one customarily perceived. Again, we find our notion of reality subverted. Okri's utopian vision is an extension of his multi-dimensional reality. To comprehend the former, it is necessary to learn to see and accept the often-paradoxical nature of multi-dimensional reality. Many would want to avoid suffering rather than embrace it. Yet, suffering is indispensable to progress as it drives one to surmount it. As man struggles to close the gap between his suffering and the perceived state of happiness, he begins to realise his potential to redream his reality. In other words, reality can be altered if man has the sight to realise this.

Yet, after comprehending this aspect of Okri's vision, ATG confounds the reader further with its paradoxical logic. On the one hand, reality is fluid, and is shaped by the perceiver since, as the first law of the city states, what you think (i.e. invent, dream of) is what becomes real. But, on the other (as the guide informs the protagonist when the latter realises that he has

been walking through the many realms and dimensions of the city), only when one stops “inventing reality . . . [that one will] see things as they really are” (ATG 49). A contextual analysis should, however, clear up the apparent conflict of ideas. The guide further explains that there “is a time for inventing reality, and there is a time for being still” (ATG 50). This line is crucial to explain whether reality is fixed or fluid. Okri appears to contend that while thought shapes reality, one must also be able to ‘see’ beyond the visible surface, since blindness to the larger reality is, in a way, like inventing reality through an inaccurate rationalisation to what reality, with its multi dimensions, really is. A related passage from BOH also clarifies Okri’s stand - “We should sit still in our deep selves and dream good new things for humanity” (BOH 14). In other words, ‘being still’ allows for one to reflect on one’s reality - past, present, and future.

The ‘invisibility and visibility’ motif in ATG is a variation of the ‘sight and blindness’ design found in the abiku novels. These binary oppositions are devices which Okri uses to highlight the relativity of matter, and to subvert notions of a singular reality. The invisible protagonist in ATG goes on a quest to find the secret of visibility but ends up finding something better - a higher invisibility. Visibility, initially (and commonly) considered desirable, turns out to be symbolic for something less than perfect. The purpose of invisibility is perfection, as the protagonist finds out at the end of his quest. The more invisible one becomes in terms of deeper self-realisation and sight, the more boundaries he can transcend - a concept similar to the Buddhist method of meditation that allows one to apprehend deeper realities or transcendental truth.

Okri's utopia, like reality, is multi-dimensional. The degree of perfection it can become is limitless. It stretches into a "terrifying infinity" (ATG 9); and it is terrifying because man's toil to achieve the highest possible level of perfection is cyclic and perpetual. The protagonist discovers that there is more to the city-utopia than meets the eye. Like the abiku in TFR and SOE, the protagonist in ATG shifts from one dimension and realm of reality to the next, at times even without willing it: "One moment he was in the middle of a shimmering chessboard, and the next moment he found himself wandering over streets..." (ATG 8). He has even found himself "in two places at the same time" (ATG 154). Boundaries begin to fade when the Invisibles achieve a higher state of transcendence.

By the end of the novel, the protagonist manages to gain a new sight, and can "therefore begin his true quest" (ATG 143). As one of the Invisibles, he will join the others to "initiate on earth the first universal civilisation where love and wisdom would be as food and air" (ATG 131). In theory, Okri's utopian vision as explored in the selected novels may appear too mystical to comprehend, much less achieve. It would therefore be necessary to consider if utopian thought necessarily equates utopian practice. Some theorists posit that utopias "are not written to be realized, not at any rate in any direct, literal sense" (Kumar 72). Goodwin and Taylor, for example, note that utopias "may be realized 'in principle or in spirit' rather than in detail *or in toto*" (Kumar 71). In any case, Okri's basic contention in many of his fiction and non-fiction - that man can change his reality when he redreams his world - is subversive. Okri's utopia can be said to confront:

reality not with a measured assessment of the possibilities of change but with the demand for change . . . It refuses to accept current definitions of the possible because it knows these to be part of the reality that it seeks to change. In its guise as utopia, by the very force of its imaginative presentation, it energizes reality, infusing it, . . . with 'the power of the new'. (Kumar 107)

The above description aptly describes what Okri, through the selected novels, has succeeded in achieving. Through his mythic frame, Okri subverts the commonly accepted reality by offering his multi-dimensional reality. Having deconstructed the reality that inhibits man from realising his true potential, Okri seeks to reconstruct, at least ideologically, a new world based on justice, wisdom and creativity.

The protagonist in ATG (as Dad in the abiku novels) may have progressed much from his initial stage of despair, but he has not 'arrived'. Despite the invisible protagonist having found "the invisibility of the blessed" (ATG 159), he knows that he is still bound to the abiku cycle. To have found this form of invisibility entails seeing the reality that there are more mountains to surmount, and more roads to travel. The protagonist is, in this sense, 'blessed' since he will be perpetually building roads towards his most perfect form of utopia. Such a progress is - in a way and in the words of Oscar Wilde - "the realisation of Utopias" (qtd. in Kumar 95).

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

With each new novel put out by Okri after TFR, his reputation as a progressively unpredictable writer has become more entrenched. While the narrative technique of TFR is vastly different from his works before it, there is at least an indication of that direction in a few of the short stories contained in SONC. But when SOE was first published, it must have taken many by surprise as few expected a sequel to the book that had won the Booker Prize. Then came another unexpected, ATG - 'fairy-tale' novel - which some have criticised for being too much of a manifesto to be a 'real' novel. Just when the literary world thought Okri would thereafter come up with a 'proper' new novel, the unpredictable writer produces Dangerous Love (DL), a reworked and jazzed-up version of his second novel, TLW.

In view of Okri's apparent unpredictability, any attempt to chart his development as a writer would seem to be almost impossible, if not for the core issues that continue to appear in TFR through to DL. Okri acknowledges his constant revisiting of the key issues, and explains in an interview that:

Each book leads you deeper into an exploration of the things that magnetize you. Each book is a continued journey. Running all through my books, I think, is a quite logical progression. I've been exploring a set of questions, and they're quite apparent; I've gone deeper and deeper because the older you get, the more you see and the more

difficult it is to transform that seeing into fiction. (qtd. in CA on CD-ROM)

Vision, dreams, suffering, creativity - these are some of the constantly revisited issues, or "things that magnetize" him. Okri basically says the same thing in all of his later works, and much of this can be attributed to his intense dissatisfaction with the political situation of his country, Nigeria. Yet, as much as Okri disapproves of the way his country is being run, and is saddened by the suffering his people endure, he is not consumed nor defeated by it. Instead, he offers us his vision - an alternative, a way out of chaos - not only for Africans, but also for people everywhere who are shackled by their blindness to the potential that is in them. In his speeches, essays, and works of fiction, Okri has been relentless in exhorting people to pursue their utopia. Yet, it would be pertinent to question how far he has been effective in initiating change, at least through the multi-dimensional mode of the selected novels. Also, it would be interesting to briefly consider other possible parallels between his beliefs and established philosophies.

From newspaper reporting (or rather the lack of them at the point of writing this thesis) on the political situation in Nigeria, it appears that the furore over the slaying of Ken Saro-Wiwa has quietened down. Nevertheless, Nigeria remains a country besieged by political instability, and has clearly not achieved the utopia envisioned by Okri. Through his art, Okri may not have achieved tremendous success in his call for the redreaming of the world *in toto*. But he has, at least, managed to guide many of his readers to a more flexible way of viewing the

commonly accepted reality. Despite his modest success, Okri does not appear to have succumbed to the abiku syndrome by giving up on his vision. Five years may have passed since the publication of TFR, but Okri still pursues his vision through writing, as seen in the recently published DL.

In DL, he exposes the corruption of the Nigerian government yet again, and highlights the agonising struggle of his countrymen. Somewhat reminiscent of Ayi Kwei Armah's The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born, DL is relentless in its cataloguing of dirt, grime, and filth that many of the characters have to live with. Although the scenario may be familiar, Okri's narrative technique has changed radically. Instead of sticking with the multi-dimensional realism found in the selected novels, he now opts for a more conciliatory approach that accommodates both the multi-dimensional as well as the conventional realism mode. Because DL is a reworking of TLW, Okri may not have had much latitude to infuse it with his brand of 'magic realism'. To have done so would perhaps have altered the scope and spirit of the original work. At any rate, DL is an interesting development in Okri's art as it puts in perspective his multi-dimensional reality phase.

Okri justifies the fantastic elements in the selected novels by asserting that he writes from inside the African worldview which admits the supernatural in everyday life. Yet, in DL, he returns to a more conventional mode. Assuming that the technique in DL is indicative of his future direction, how should the reader interpret this change of direction? If Okri no longer writes from within the African worldview, from which perspective is he looking at events in Nigeria? Perhaps it would

be fair to say that the narrative world of DL is devoid of spirits and ghosts because Okri does not want to detract the reader's attention from the stark surroundings that he paints. Evidently, little beauty is present in Omovo's (the painter-protagonist in DL) ghetto. Furthermore, the absence of the supernatural might also point to the characters being severed from their traditional past, hence their inability to see creatively. Alternatively, it underscores the lack of good dreams in the characters' nightmarish existence. The few instances when fantastic dreams and a fleeting epiphany enter Omovo's life, hope and vision return. By interspersing such moments far between long periods of woe, Okri has, in fact, managed to lead the reader's attention to the importance of sight, vision and responsibility. In doing so, he is, in a way, writing from within his socio-cultural frame.

In the selected novels, the characters' suffering bears a certain lyrical and epic quality that emphasises the paradoxical beauty of toil and ache. In DL, however, Okri focuses - with an unflinching sight - on the unheroic suffering of the characters and the overwhelming responsibility to redream the world one shoulders upon gaining 'sight'. Thus, although the technique and focus that Okri employs in the selected novels and DL differ, he invariably aims to impress upon the reader the same issues which he has often been concerned with.

Okri has been rather explicit (even if indirect) about what his works might signify. In his comments through interviews, and in his essays and speeches, Okri has constantly highlighted certain key issues that interest him - much of which is helpful in the interpretation of his works. Not surprisingly, most of his comments are on the African continent. On Africa, Okri writes

that it is "a land bristling with too many stories and moods" (BOH 27). But a "land of too many stories is a land that doesn't necessarily learn from its stories. He believes that:

it should trade some of its stories for clarity . . . A land beginning to define itself, to create beauty and order from its own chaos, moves from having too many moods and stories in the air to having clear structures. (BOH 27)

Indeed, Okri is doing what he advocates - giving some form of structure to the chaos that he sees in his homeland - at least in his art. He is able to do so by placing an aesthetic framework around the narratives of his selected novels. Within that framework are stories - an art-form - that "wants to enchant, to transform, to make life more meaningful or bearable in its own small and mysterious ways" (BOH 6). With the recontextualisation of the abiku myth, and the infusion of his personal philosophy, Okri manages to drive home the point that we can go beyond ourselves, transcend our "primary condition", and become "something higher" (BOH 5).

Okri also believes that "the true story-teller should be: a great guide, a clear mind, who can walk a silver line in hell or madness. Further, only "a profound story-teller would say something like: 'Suffer the little children to come unto me'" (BOH 37). This statement is distinctly related to and evinced in the selected novels. Like his predecessors, Okri as an African writer feels compelled to fulfil his social responsibility as the people's guide when he exposes the politicians' manufactured reality for what it is. But while Okri may be writing about Nigeria, he says that "that terrain may be the place in which one

can best see very strong universal concerns” (qtd. in CA on CD-ROM). Hence, we find the universal applicability of the philosophy Okri propounds in the African context of the abiku novels.

It is often difficult for scholars from a non-African background to attempt a critical analysis of an African text, especially the ones as deeply rooted in the culture as the abiku novels. The local symbolism of the butterflies in SOE, for instance, may be common knowledge to Nigerians but will probably be lost to others. Nevertheless, because those from the latter group come from a different background, they may have the advantage of deriving fresh connections which are unique to their socio-cultural milieu. For instance, a reader from the Asian region will probably be quick to see certain similarities between Okri’s philosophy, and the spiritual teachings of Gautama Buddha.

Although it may be inaccurate to draw direct parallels on all aspects of Okri’s and Buddhist beliefs, there are, nonetheless, many fundamental correspondences between the two. A quick comparison between these quotations should illustrate how inseparable the two beliefs can be: “Suffering is a centre” and “Suffering is an essential component of individual existence”. The first quotation is Okri’s (“Redreaming” 21) while the other is actually one of the Four Truths of Buddhism (Wickramasinghe, Foreword x). Suffering can bring unhappiness, but:

Buddhism teaches that all individuals innately possess infinite power and wisdom, and reveals the process whereby these qualities can be developed. In addressing

the problem of happiness, Buddhism focuses not so much on eliminating suffering and difficulties, which are understood to be inherent in life, as on how we should cultivate the potentials that exist within our own lives. (Ikeda 1)

Buddhism upholds, as Okri does, the belief that man is capable of transforming his suffering into joy. Suffering - being the first of the four noble truths according to Buddhism - is not only an inevitable part of human existence, but is also necessary as it makes man strive to attain nirvana, or utopia. Some experts, however, believe that nirvana, or "a pure land far away from this world" (Ikeda 5), is only a metaphorical device used by Buddha in his teachings. Its ultimate function is "directed towards personal emancipation through the realisation of ultimate truth" (Ikeda 5).

Similarly, Okri's utopia found in the selected novels is not some distant place where suffering does not exist, but a goal that offers man hope and drive to perfect himself and his condition. However, critics have charged that Buddhism advocates pessimism and fatalism - two qualities not synonymous with what Okri believes in - because followers are believed to resign themselves to sitting down and letting whatever must happen, happen. In actual fact, even if life is an unavoidable series of suffering, a Buddhist (like Okri's protagonists) is not expected to simply accept the fact, but to learn to see the true nature of suffering with a different sight, and make efforts to simultaneously transcend it mentally, as well as to change the external conditions with his available free will and skill, even if they be limited by his 'karma' (as Ade in SOE discovers).

Okri's idea of multi-dimensional realism and redreaming the world has a certain spiritual or religious quality to it. Hence, for the same reason that there have only been a few Buddhists who have attained total enlightenment, only a limited success has been achieved by Okri in the realisation of his vision. Admittedly, it is difficult to convince people that their suffering can be beneficial, nor is it easy for them to change their mindset to admit different realities. Okri may not live to see the world redreamed according to his vision, but he knows that - from the beginning of time, when a river became a road which then branched out to the world - man's hope will spring eternal. Just as sure as the abiku cycle will revolve, man will dare to dream. And Okri knows that a single thought can, in time, change the universe.

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