

From Realism to Fantasy: The Poetics of Setting in Ben Okri's Narratives

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ABSTRACT

Since the emergence of *Things Fall Apart* to now, Nigerian writers have always resorted to pictorial depiction of what readers can deem as verifiable in their narratives via various realistic aids and indices. But with the appearance of Ben Okri's narratives on the modern Nigerian literary landscape, this seeming concrete and smooth running literary conditionality appears to have been ruptured. This article attempts to describe Ben Okri's poetics as regards the setting of his narratives by detailing what artistic strategies enabled him to align himself with tradition in the portrayal of realistic setting, on one hand, and enhanced his deviation from this by creating fantastical out-of-this-world scenes in works bestriding the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, on the other. It also teases out what peculiar impress characters tend to make on setting and setting on characters. Curiously, this piece discovers that as Okri's genius matures, he appears to judge conventional setting important in so far as it is artistically agreeable with and supportive of the dominant imagery figured by major characters. This article hopes to further conventional theories of setting in Nigerian narratives by declaring that for the first time in modern Nigerian narratives, the magical, the improbable, the fantastical, the visionary, the prophetic, and the realism-oriented tend to emerge in Okri's corpus, in a way tremendously at variance with what is obtainable in Nigerian myths, legends, and folktales.

Keywords: *African literature, Ben Okri, fantasy, Nigerian narratives, realism, twenty-first century Nigerian novel.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The mode Nigerian literary artists have always resorted to and the critical opinion informing the criticisms of Nigerian narratives is realism. Realism holds that literature, no matter the genre, bears verisimilar indices and pointers to the socio-political and historical milieus out of which it springs and that a contract is entered into by the writer when he writes. This is sustained by the reader, typically, a person of ethnic or racial sameness with the writer. In Ogungbesan's (1979) words, "African writers in general do not believe that they should abdicate their ethical role by eliminating themselves, and therefore the question of responsibility to their readers, from their books. They value the relation of writer to reader and take very seriously their moral obligation to their audience" (1). African writers derived and still draw their mode of thought from Western academies as informed by the utilitarian philosophy of the Victorian age, which later was ably steered

and entrenched by Benedetto Croce, Georg Lukacs, and Eric Auerbach, the “luminaries of a high European humanism” (Eagleton 1996: 93).

Little wonder then that when Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* appeared in 1958, it was studied in the Department of Anthropology in most prestigious American universities until the early 1990s when it was properly located (Gates 1992: 3, 20). Long after this work has been relocated, the thinking that once misplaced it is in operation in Africa, accounting for writers’ depiction of realistic settings, characters, and actions in narratives. Critics are not left out. For example, only last year, *Things Fall Apart* (1958) was said to depict, through a humanistic aesthetic of tragedy corresponding to those obtainable elsewhere, the pains of the African in the face of an encroaching and crushing history through a humanistic aesthetic of tragedy corresponding to those obtainable elsewhere (Adeeko 2011: 72–86; Korang 2011: 1–29). This rendering endured in Nigerian narratives until Ben Okri showed up.

2. CONTEXTUALIZING THE REALISM OF BEN OKRI’S NARRATIVES

From the moment of his appearance to when his genius matured, Okri’s narratives have been realistic, though with pockets of the fantastical embedded within them, especially in *Incidents at the Shrine* (1993) and *Stars of a new Curfew* (1988). Shortly after these works, with *The Famished Road* (1991), and, most of all, *Songs of Enchantment* (2003), *Infinite Riches* (1998), and *Astonishing the Gods* (1995) following those above, Okri did not only disrupt the smooth history of his craft and genius, he also, with a sleight of hand, undermined and deviated from the narrative tradition of realism subsisting from *Things Fall Apart*. This article describes, through the close reading critical method, what artistic strategies enabled Okri to side with tradition in depicting realistic setting, on one hand, and accentuated his deviation in creating fantastical out-of-this-world scenes in works bestriding the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, on the other. It also examines his alignment and departure by teasing out what peculiar impress characters tend to make on settings and settings on characters. This way, conventional theories of setting in Nigerian narratives, in particular, and African literature, in general, would be furthered leading this article to declare that for the first time in modern Nigerian narratives, the bizarre, the magical, the improbable, the fantastical, the visionary, the prophetic, and the realism-oriented tend to merge intricately in Okri’s corpus in a way enormously inconsistent with what obtains in the Nigerian literary tradition.

In addition to close reading, I shall make use of Lindfors’ “nationalist critics” and “individual critics” (153, 154). The first he believes “are preoccupied with mapping the geography of African literature. [...] Each nation or region is presumed capable of producing a distinctive literature of its own, a literature conveniently contained within the arbitrary territorial boundaries drawn by the

former colonial powers” (153). Concerning “himself primarily with differences, for he is interested in defining the unique genius of the individual writer” is the individual critic, who pays attention to “the full range and magnitude of his artistic achievement as measured by the fresh insights contained in his works. It is assumed that every writer has something different to say and says it in his own special way” (153, 154). In this typology, Lindfors sees both critics as mutually exclusive, but I want to see both as complementary and would combine these to analyse Okri's setting as both a nationalist and an individual critic would, thereby seeing Okri as belonging to the Nigerian literary tradition yet displaying his individual stylistic and artistic peculiarities. Robert Armstrong rightly articulated this national character of the written literature of Southern Nigeria four decades ago (1966: 117–32), though Nwakanma's analysis of Chimamanda Adichie and the written narratives of the Igbo of the Eastern part of Nigeria has recently affirmed it more theoretically (2008: 1–14).

In his formative years, Okri seemed to be affirming the contract of realism he met Nigerian writers holding with their readers. In *Flowers and Shadows* (1980), for instance, Okri presents the maturation of Jeffia Okwe. His dream was to become a teacher and to achieve this he must surmount the thrashing demands of a modern, developing, but complex Nigerian society. With an entrenched system of corruption, his father being a major participant, and lack of justice, he is helpless, falls in love, lusts, and engages in the familiar vagaries of young adults.

The above realistic setting is typical of such works as Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *A Man of the People* (1964), *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), but the inroads they make on the protagonists are not. Odili Amali, in the first work, is but a dormant onlooker at the corruption of the day, musing over the seething pile around him and taking in all until Max stirs him. Jeffia takes a step further to bemoan the corruption of the day by being diligent, as much as his youth could afford him, in remaining unsoiled. In the second work, the corollary of the corruption in the twilight of colonial disengagement is noticeable in Obi Okonkwo, who figures it. It is also indicated in the irreconcilable thoughts in the trial judge's mind concerning him. His taking bribes began one day. Before he knew it, it is not only ‘bribe money’ he was collecting but also ‘bribe sex’. As the first-time deep contrition significantly wears off, he dishes out recommendations for scholarship for the qualified but able ‘bribers’, though indications are that his conscience was yet alive. Thus, we hear that: “Obi ought to have felt happier. But he didn't. [...] People say that one gets used to these things, but he had not found it like that at all. Every incident had been a hundred times worse than the one before it.” (*No Longer at Ease* 153, 154). He becomes a mystery even to the society that capitalized on his *id* to do him in. So Obi Okonkwo, the elder Mr. Okwe of sorts, and many of the corrupt bureaucrats of Lagos are represented in the tragic aspect he cuts out for himself. At his sentencing scene, the narrator reflects:

Everybody wondered why. The learned judge, as we have seen, could not comprehend how an educated young man and so on and so forth. The

British Council man, even the men of Umuofia, did not know. And we must presume that, in spite of his certitude, Mr Green did not know either (2009: 154).

Above is the classic realism Nigerian narratives make of the corrupt situations of the historical Nigeria.

Somehow, Omovo's painting, *Sunscape*, in *The Landscape Within* (1981) seems to answer the questions in the minds of the audience and the trial Judge by bringing into visual form what usually is spoken about in hushed tones, heard of in beer parlours, but not normally seen to be confronted, the particular reality of corruption in Obi's society and, abstractly, the pressures of modernity and the rapidity with which this is quickly localized for selfish purposes in Nigerian narratives. He also appears to sketch out how corruption has permeated every aspect of the society, unbeknownst to the judge, before it smeared Obi in *No Longer at Ease*, Jeffia's father in *Flowers and Shadows*, and the political class of *The Landscape Within*. In the last work, *Sunscape* is censored and confiscated by this clique because it depicted the horrible conditions of the city's helpless poor in contrast to the city's rich. Rather than bow, he is resilient, bringing to culmination the realistic technique of Okri's artistic creation. Besides Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*, in much more modern works – Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2007), Sefi Atta's *Everything Good will Come* (2007), Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* (2006), Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* (2002), and counting, clear description of corruption as undertaken by major characters is given. This description does not only offer a major realistic index with which to ground these characters to the Nigerian tradition of narratives, but also serves to contextualize Ben Okri's earlier realistic narratives, through their settings, the actions of characters, local idioms as tribal languages, and picturesque description in what Jeyifo, in reference to Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters*' characterizations, articulated as the "show and tell" style (2004: 173). He explained further:

Each of these collective protagonists is compositely drawn and also functions as a technical device, but many Nigerian readers of the novel whose formative cultural experience goes back to the period covered in the narrative have long played a sort of 'show and tell' which identifies each 'interpreter' with the famous artists and writers of the Mbari group, with Soyinka himself – as more or less Egbo – featuring prominently in the speculations.

The Interpreters is thus also very much a novel of place, of a specific milieu (173).

Okri's earlier novels can in like manner be classed as narratives of place, of specific milieus.

3. PECULIARITIES OF BEN OKRI'S REALISM: SETTING

The above setting, the specific social milieu in which characterization of characters is enacted is the general sort because each character is linked to extra-literary concepts and persons. However, there is a consistent feature of setting in modern Nigerian narrative, from Soyinka's *The Interpreters* (1972) to contemporary ones – the presence of public places such as the bar and night club. The bar is to the poor what the night club is to the middle class. In *The Interpreters*, the 'interpreters' and some major characters frequent night clubs to 'cool off' as in most of Okri's narratives. Particularly, the bar is partly instrumental for adherence of Okri's narratives to the realist tradition. But more than that, in Okri, the bar defeats the expectations of frequenters. No other place in the society exists like it where a low class person escapes to from his sordid dwelling to ease off his discontent; yet it fails to achieve this end in him. It is the case with *The Famished Road*, *Songs of Enchantment*, *Infinite Riches*, the short stories of *Incidents at the Shrine* and *Stars of the New Curfew*. Moreover, the bar in his corpus also partly aids Okri's deviation from realism to fantasy as demonstrated in *The Famished Road* series with the presence of fantastical and other sundry elements. I shall return to this.

Following the realist strain, once and again, Emokhai and Marjomi, both friends, out of job, depressed, and exchanging lovers, return to a bar to ruminate on their sorrows and strategies on how to go sell one more pint of blood to survive in "In the City of the Red Dust" in *Stars of a New Curfew*. It was on one such occasion that Marjomi becomes so bleary-eyed with drink that he resorts to breathing curses on the governor, the people, and the entire society, even slapping his former girl-friend, Dede. In swift response, "The crowd grew angry. They pressed towards Marjomi, who seemed to relish the idea of being beaten" (Okri, "In the City of Red Dust" 68). Marjomi is beaten by fellow drinkers whose warnings he undermined. The fracas associated with the bar in Okri seems to update its earlier representation in such texts as *The Interpreters*, an upward review that appropriates realism and posits pain and suffering arising from uncaring leadership in many ways. For example, just as there was combat in "In The City of the Red Dust," in a night club in "Stars of a New Curfew," there was also combat, though a different sort. In the latter, a display of wealth between Odeh's father and Assi's is the 'combat.' Theirs is a "financial contest," where "if you attend, there's no way you won't leave with hundreds of naira in your pocket" ("Stars of a New Curfew" 122). Later, what begins as mere bragging of who is richer, spills over to the street of W. as the cults of both men clash. They remind us of the political thugs that fought in *The Famished Road* series, Achebe's *A Man of the People*. The thugs in the latter work killed Max. Nevertheless, the realist orientation of the bar thus far is also challenged, forhints of fantastical elements abound. In a hotel without electricity-generating plant, power is cut and a young man entertaining others on stage with singing hallucinates as he sees his dead lover, Maria, come back to him. The rest of the story is about the deep reflective

intercourse they had. Peculiarly, this same episode and the nightmare had by the nameless narrator of “Stars of a New Curfew,” where parts of his body are auctioned, undermines the realistic technique and inaugurates the buildup of the presence of the fantastical element in the collections of short stories that culminates in “What the Tapster Saw,” *The Famished Road*, *Songs of Enchantment*, and *Infinite Riches*, the sort never before represented in the Nigerian literary tradition.

The first and second attempts to ‘steal’ Azaro by his spirit mates take place in *The Famished Road* in Madame Koto’s bar, a seemingly physical, but very fluid place, in terms of description, where unearthly creatures, as perceived by Azaro, and humans meet to relish palm wine and peppersoup, to talk politics, and to engage in brawls when occasion offers. Before Koto joins the Party of the Rich, her bar was a place for the poor of the ghetto, including Dad, but after that, it becomes a habitu  for strange spirits, demons, weird midgets, and, above all, Azaro’s spirit friends. The bar complicates itself here as the material sub-scene where Okri’s fantastical proclivities would show forth. Much as it accommodates people through whom we see the impact of a hostile setting, it also serves as the harbour for elements necessary for tilting Okri’s narratives away from the trajectory of realism to that of fantasy. In *The Famished Road*, Azaro narrates:

The next time I went to Madame Koto’s bar the place was full of big blue flies. [...] All of them looked as freakish as the people who were there the last time. [...] There was an albino, but he was tall and had a head like a tuber of yam. The man who was bulbous in one eye was white and blank like a polished moonstone in the other. The two men who were sinister in dark glasses now had white hair and curious hip deformations. The youth who had no teeth was now woman. I recognized them all beneath their transformed appearances. [...] One of them looked like a lizard with small, fixed green eyes. Amongst these strange people were others who seemed normal, who had stopped off on their way home from their jobs for an evening’s drink. The place was so crowded that I had to struggle through the tight-jammed bodies, all of them raucous, all of them singing, passing abuses and bad jokes across the bar. I heard voices that were unearthly (133).

Azaro was to get accustomed to this scene in two other works.

But how did the bar get this far? While Azaro’s familiarity augments, the magical feature of the bar also does. In *Songs of Enchantment*, the diabolic nature and political influence of Koto flower, too, making her so unwieldy that the bar, together with the drinking raucousness, becomes inadequate for her. Something has got to be done; she brings a white horse into the yard of the bar and erects a Jackal-headed Masquerade before it, at the very entrance to the bar. Along with her new status following her joining the Party of the Rich is the new spiritual powers she acquires. Besides, “the new powers were winning converts. People who had opposed them – those whose lives had been shrivelled by their night

fears, women who had borne too many children, men who had no money and no hopes left, whose children died of under-nourishment – had all joined the Party, had all accepted Madame Koto's invisible patronage" (*Songs of Enchantment*, 111).

The Masquerade and the horse censor political talks, hushing people and cutting short the life of anyone portraying the Party of the Rich as oppressors. Their victims are "those who opposed the party, or who spoke ill of it, and suffered inexplicable pains, whose children fell to vomiting; who became temporally blind" (180), with the Masquerade engineering the most heinous of these atrocities. So in a way, the Masquerade and the horse are serving as the secret police of the day, the agents of the Big Brother of George Orwell's *1984*. From Koto's bar, therefore, an inexplicable cautionary force ripples to the wider society; it serves as a great cruel conformational place, politically, as it does to its drinkers in quenching their thirst for alcohol without letting go of that habit. The bar is ordinary and typical a place, especially in a third world country like Nigeria, but also, so strange and far away from it going by the constitution of the drinkers and the inimical influences they have on the ghetto community. Okri thus narrates his stories using the traditionally familiar bar that is at once a deformation of the conventional scene of relaxation realism hitherto has supplied us in Nigerian narratives.

Another distinguishing feature of this bar can be spotted. Atrocities such as the killing of Ade by Koto's driver and her sending thugs to pounce on Ade's father, leading to his death, all take place within the vicinity of the bar. Again, the spell of Koto's bar shows up once more as two men in jackal-like voices rave confessions: "they shouted in a horrific confession of why and when they stabbed him in the nape and throat and forehead and dumped his body on a patch of weeds" (*Infinite Riches*, 61). And the bar, "for the sake of two weeks drinking at Madame Koto's bar," is responsible for this and other horrible crimes. The bar, notorious for spurring people into mischiefs and other social ills, has suddenly in Okri's narratives become a place where a regime of oppressive brutalisation are hatched and distributed across the social space of the ghetto.

In addition, it is in front of this bar that "someone had dumped a bucket of something disgusting" (*Infinite Riches*, 15), reminding us of the question a prostitute pesters a nameless night soil man with in another bar in "Masquerades" in *Incidents at the Shrine*:

'So tell me, what kind of business are you in?'

He glared at her. He waved his hands.

He said: 'You want to know my business?' He laughed. Sweat poured down his forehead. He said: 'One day a man came to me. He said I should dump such and such in front of such and such a man's house. Why should I? Because of money, that's why. So I took the money and then I went and forgot the address and I had to dump the thing in front of the house of the man who paid me. What could I do? You want to know my business?'

Money business. Just like you. Everything na shit unless you get money. Dat's what I think.' (79–80).

Craftily, through anecdote, he tells her it is shit business, and she does not get it. Artistically, from the above and most short stories in *Incidents at the Shrine*, Okri appears to have weaned the bar scene in “Masquerades” from the intrusion of fantastical elements and placed it in a realistic context where he explores the misery of the individual through his interactions with others. But the implications of the bar scene in Okri's narratives remain – that in an attempt to represent the bar or night club with familiar denotation, he stretches the denotation to include other meanings, thus making room for the fantastical to emerge. What the night soil man means is that everything a poor man/woman does is slavery, something no one in her/his right senses, if given the freedom to choose, would like to do – say, prostitution. Thus, a commoner is forced by poverty to do shit business, even at the bar. Relationships are struck here, in the bar, and what's more, relaxation from the painful twists of life is got here, too. It is a place where Sarah, the Ghanaian exchangeable lady mistress to Cata-cata takes refuge in “The Dream-Vendor's August” and where Ajegunle Joe finds her. From the description of the bar, one infers that it is more than a place for drinking and relaxation with friends. Its main functions included, essentially, the microcosmic manifestation of the inhibitive and corrosive elements and influences of the wider society. The bar is a place where a person like Dad, the night soil man, and others, comes with frustration and leaves with despondency; comes seeking for an awakening of his love life, but leaves with no excitement around his groin nor in his affections, an example being Ajegunle Joe; arrives with double troubles but departs with a doubling of his double trouble, as in the example of the night soil man; in short, it is a place in excess of its meaning as a venue for relaxation. It can also be said that whatever principle governing the actions of drinkers also makes them the index of what obtains in the larger setting or surrounding. This setting supports and sustains servile business, be it night soiling or prostitution in “Masquerades,” or patronising mysticism and occultism in “The Dream-Vendor's August,” or watching elatedly as migrants are bulldozed off in “Disparities.” The people in the setting of the last short story must have very uncharacteristic attitudes, and their attitudes speak of who they are. All these are a function of their environment and no matter how these victims of environment want to be freed from its oppressing hold, their locale, their ‘captor’ ends up tightening its hold.

I shall follow the lead already given by the bar, as microcosm of the larger contexts out of which spring characters. Characters, in turn, have influenced their settings in the course of impacting the destinies of other characters. But then, what comprises conventional setting in literature? In light of Okri's works, what specific trait governs his setting? And in what particular ways does his setting deviate, complicate and assume a peculiar artistic status within the larger framework of setting in the Nigerian literary tradition? A setting can be either neutral or dynamic, depending on whether a geographical location or character is

given prominence in a narrative. In the case of Okri, his is dynamic, mostly to be gathered from the values a character espouses. When he describes an environment it is to make it bear on the characters' destinies. Four basic elements of setting: the first, geography, including topography, scenery, interiors, and others; second, the occupation and lifestyle of characters; third, time; and the last, the religious, intellectual, and moral environment are important in literature. But Okri mostly places his characters in the last group, the pervasive spiritual, intellectual, and moral atmosphere. He avoids the first in most of his mature works. So we notice that the conventional setting is not really his main preoccupation, accounting for the namelessness of setting in the majority of his works though a critic like Kehinde approximates Lagos to the setting of *The Famished Road* series (2007: 231–246).

Okri only discusses geography in snippets, and from these bits, I intend to derive principles for his settings' description and of their effects on the physical, psychological, and on the existential space of characters who are victims of their settings rather than villains to their fellow characters. In *Incidents of the Shrine* short story, "Disparities," the narrator-victim says: "No one really cares. Everyone looked at us, they did not really care; it was the common run of the place" (48). What he says of the city of white people unto whom black people from once colonized countries migrated is true of other places, from the ghetto of *The Famished Road*, *Songs of Enchantment*, *Infinite Riches*, *In Arcadia*, and the cities of "A Crooked Prayer," "A Dreamer's Vision in Augusts," "Converging City," "A Hidden History," "Masquerades," "Incidents at the Shrine" in *Incidents at the Shrine*; the cities of "In the City of Red Dust," "Worlds that Flourish," and "Stars of the New Curfew;" and the villages of "In the Shadows of War" and "What the Tapster Saw" in *Stars of the New Curfew*. Self-interest is the number one rule, every other thing follows. In this milieu, the main characters are outcasts. On a ladder, the chief characters of the stories in *Incidents at the Shrine* and *Stars of the New Curfew* are held down to an inimical demonic environment (Frye 1957: 135), while in *Astonishing the Gods*, a work at the ladder's lowest rung, we see a member of that environment seeking to escape it. For the courage to venture, he is rewarded with success by the Invisibles, to whom he is visible and by whom he is made an Invisible.

Ironically, only one person is at home with this sort of strange setting in "A Hidden History," a black man, List-Image, but he is out of his mind. Or he has to be out of his mind to come to terms with this environment, a requirement he alone possesses. His fondness for the most despised place brings about the abstention of those other animals from the scene. He seems to be replacing the old occupants in a most atypical manner. The haters created the scene that sends former sane occupants packing; now, at their exit, the vile scene created is further made worse by the abnormality of the insane, driving away those that made the departure of the departed possible. Curiously, the setting is not specified by Okri; neither are migrants' autochthonous homes. But with the mention of List-Maker, being Black and with the historical allusion, "they had come, answering the call of their former

rulers, to be menials of society” (81), one surmises that in consonance with the technique of realism, the setting must be one of those countries that attended the Berlin Conference of 1884–5. Despite this realism, the nameless, whether place or person, is an issue. The same namelessness applies to Uncle Saba’s setting in “Crooked Prayers,” Agodi’s in “Converging City,” and Anderson Ofoegbu’s in “Incidents at the Shrine.” With these narratives, including *The Landscape Within* and *Flowers and Shadows*, Okri makes an original poetical and artistic deep impress on the realistic sub-tradition of Nigerian literature and aligns himself with the likes of Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, John Munonye, Ifeoma Okoye, S. O. Mezu, Amadi Elechi, Obinkaram Echewa, Festus Iyayi, Isidore Okpewho, and, in the twenty-first century, with writers like Sefi Atta, Helon Habila, Jude Dibia, Chimamanda Adichie, and others.

4. FROM REALISM TO FANTASY AND THE UNDERMINING OF TRADITION

Nonetheless, Okri seems to set out on a journey in an opposite route by differing greatly from the ‘show and tell’ style of the above authors. To do this, Okri has had to undermine himself before undercutting the tradition that gave him platform. By implication, he first deviated from himself before swerving from the structure of representation of setting in the Nigerian literary tradition – in voice, and patterning, and indices of realism. From the shore of realism, we could see him, sailing away far into the wide sea of “hallucinatory realism” (“The Nobel Prize”), “magical realism” (Aizenberg 1995: 25–30), and “shamanic realism” (Olivia 1999: 171–196). While asail, he finds new company – Garcia Marquez, Mia Couto, Syl Cheney-Coker, Isabel Allende, Luis Borges, and others. He did not join them in one go; only in trickles, while still filiating his narratives to the Nigerian tradition. In *Stars of a New Curfew*, the evidence of this new company emerged as nightmare in “Stars of a New Curfew,” in “When the Lights Return,” as hallucination, in “Worlds that Flourish,” as a befuddled consciousness, and as coma in “In the Shadows of War.” It takes the form of fetishistic, purificatory renewal and deliverance ritual in “Incidents at the Shrine” and of reality-infecting dream in “The Dream-Vendor’s August,” where a midget chats with Joe and gives him bad luck to hold for him. The item given poses certain negative implications for his life until it was given back, still in a dream, in *Incidents at the Shrine*. The presence of spirits, madmen, shrines, merging of images against another, collapsing the known onto the strange, the decoding of the strange using the model of the familiar, and so on are the gradual advancing and emergence of a jolting technique that agitates both the larger Okri’s corpus and the Nigerian literary tradition, especially Tutuola’s and Fagunwa’s and the realistic segment of this tradition. The bizarre in the above works is located in-between realistic segments of the plots.

The varied elements of fantasy identified are what Okri's puts to use in subsequent works – *The Famished Road*, *Song of Enchantment*, *Infinite Riches*, and, to a very small degree, in *Starbook* (2007). He transformed them into a higher mega-technique that is yet to have a name in *Astonishing the Gods*. Maybe prophesy, philosophy, futurism, or vision would serve as one. We recall that the bar is by far an eminent micro-setting that sets the stage for his works' deviation from realism, as branded by the technique of realism, to fantasy. Also noted was that while Dad bears the imprints of the temporal, historical and corporeal setting, Azaro, undoubtedly, holds similar fort for the spiritual without losing his physical features in *The Famished Road* series. The setting of both worlds complicate in Azaro, especially in his most rebellious, call back scene, in that the father, a physical being resorts to a spiritual agent to call back one on a spiritual journey and who is fleeing from the consequences of disobedience of spirit companions. I state that it is with Azaro and the traces of the setting he bears, represents, and perceives that Okri greatly deviates from the conventional setting of the Nigerian narrative in *The Famished Road* series the way Mbachu does with Zahrah's *dadahood* in *Zahrah the Windseeker* (2006).

Azaro is an *abiku*, a spirit-human child always billed to go back to the *egbe*, mates, in the land of idyll through the vehicle of death. As we shall discover, this route is not strictly adhered to at all times. While many humans have a uni-perceptual experience of reality, his is dual – perceiving the spiritual and the physical, owing hugely to his nature. Hence, he consequently becomes indispensable in the description of the sort of setting that undermines convention. As my take indicates, even Okri sees through his eyes, just as we must describe the scenario through the reality his eyes observe using the first person narrative technique. His sensory organs play supersensory roles besides their natural functions. It is therefore no surprise that he could relate that:

I heard voices all around me, the twittering, vicious voices of my spirit companions wailing in disappointment. I ran till the road became a river of voices, every tree, car, and face talking to me, cats crossing my path, people with odd night faces staring at me unknowingly. At crossroads people glared and seemed to float towards me menacingly. I fled all through the night.

The road was endless. One road led to a thousand others, which in turn fed into paths, which fed into dirt tracks, which became streets, which ended in avenues and cul-de-sacs (*The Famished Road*, 113).

This cannot be the perception of a natural environment. It is of a superreal. He confesses, on one occasion, that “I saw a different reality” and, in that new spirit world a creature ugly and magnificent like a prehistoric dragon, with the body of an elephant, and the face of a warthog. It towered before me.... Its face was incredibly ugly. A devourer of humans, of lost souls, of spirits, of all things wonderful, this creature opened its dreadful mouth and roared. Beneath me the tree began to change. Suddenly it

seemed the tree was no longer a thing of wood. It became a thing of quivering flesh. The wood rippled slowly into flesh, transforming beneath me (246–247).

Later, wanderlust overcomes him and he wanders. But he is beaten by his father, which opens up a circumstance, setting, and activities not once identified in Nigerian narratives. The spirit companions whom he alone perceives were to stimulate his decision to leave the corporeal world through a literarily strange means. He had destroyed the glass windows of the ghoulish blind old man's house and with his father having to pay dearly out of his penury, he issues a threat: "if you want to return to the world of spirits, return! But if you want to stay, then be a good son!" (325). He takes his life through self-starvation in response to this brashness and the waiting allurements of the three-headed spirit messenger. We catch a glimpse of their intercourse:

On the third day of refusing to eat, I began to leave the world.

[...]

'Your parents are treating you atrociously,' he said. 'Come with me. Your companions are desperate to embrace you. There is a truly wonderful feast awaiting your homecoming. They yearn for your lovely presence. You will be treated like a prince, which is what you are. Human beings don't care. They don't know how to love. They don't know what love is. Look at them you are dying and all they do is polish their boots. Do they love you? No!'

I paid attention to the words of the spirit... (325–326).

The spirit's remarks echo the ghommids' reproach to humans in D.O. Fagunwa's *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons* (1938). It takes his father an expensive ritual to bring him back to life. The circumstance of double activities takes place: one in reality and the other in the netherworld. Activities in the former have consequential and replicative power over the latter, where an old woman, with her weapon,

severed one of its [the spirit's] heads. The spirit let out a horrifying cry, utterly human. The woman slashed off its second head. Feathers fell in frenzy over me. The blood of the spirit splattered my face and momentarily blinded me. When I looked again I saw Dad tower over me, a white hen in one hand, a knife of mincing sharpness in the other.... Mum stood with her back to the window, surrounded by nine blue candles, and configuration of cowries. Dad held the white hen firmly, wings and feet and head. Blood dripped down in his arms. [...] The knife in Dad's hand descended swiftly, slashed the air twice. The herbalist released a piercing cry. The old woman struck the spirit at the same moment, with a mighty swipe of her weapon. Dad slashed off the chicken's throat. The old woman severed the spirits last head. The spirit fought vainly in the canoe as the chicken twitched. Its blood dripped on my forehead. The herbalist fell silent. The spirit's head,

landing on silver, looked round, saw itself separated from its body, and let out its final scream of horror, cracking the surface of the river. The mirrors shattered. It became dark. Splinters and reflections caught in my eyes. (338–339).

The scenes afore-described are not dreams, hallucinations, nightmares, nor visions, nor do they possess any element of intent or the will-to-make on Azaro's part. And to think that physical and spiritual actions are pitted and, ironically, complemented, one is in quandary to place this scene in a familiar model in the tradition. But there is more. The closest we find is intertribal wars in *Things Fall Apart* which Okonkwo recalls. Even then, it was not a ritual – just war. Azaro's case above contrasts the entire supersensible world. He is at the mercy of the living as well as of the dead. It is doubtful that someone going through the above experiences would be comfortable in his in-between state. Unfortunately, he is not.

What Azaro lacks in not perceiving, sometimes, through dream, his father, mother, and Madame Koto possess. And more than dreaming, in another move of deviation from tradition, Okri sets up inanimate and animate objects, breathes into them to not just do what humans can, but beyond what they can do. Evidences abound in *Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches*. When told that Sami has run away with his bet money, Black Tyger asks his child to run with him and they run in the familiar and realistic and the strange and grotesque scene(s), in one motion. He narrates:

We ran for a long time. The air turned green. A hyena laughed in the dark. An owl called. Ritual noises surfaced among the bushes. Suddenly, everything was alive. The air crackled with resinous electricity. [...]

We ran into a quivering universe, into resplendent and secret worlds. We ran through an abode of spirits, through the disconsolate forms of homeless ghost. We hurried through as sepia fog thick with hybrid beings, through the yellow village of invisible crows, past susurrant marketplaces of the unborn, and into the sprawling ghommids-infested alabaster landscapes of the recently dead. We kept pushing on through the inscrutable resistance of the moon-scented air, trying to find the road back into our familiar reality. (*Songs of Enchantment*, 24–25).

Several environments are described above, each with distinctive quality that finds no correlation to the environment of Sami, the abscondee, nor that of their “familiar reality” (*Astonishing the Gods*, 29). This is strange enough, but to consider that they were not in any way in chase of Sami in this wide hallucinatory floating endeavour is stranger. The ease with which characters glide from the artistically realistic to the wondrous in these Okri's narratives when yet in the course of describing a probable event marks Okri as one artist who had done much to undermine the convention of realism he met in the Nigerian literary tradition, or that his artistic genius began with.

Besides the entire ghetto which has come under Madame Koto's demonic oppression, the bar, in particular transforms in totality into a shadow of its old self and into the shadow haunting the ghetto. The Jackal-headed Masquerade and the white horse are positioned in the bar's frontage for censorship of all hateful political discussions in the bar and its vicinity. Only Azaro, of all the multitudes that marvelled at the strange beings, makes a connection between the masquerade and the blind old man, a sorcerer, and the horse and Madame Koto. He describes the Masquerade thus:

The Masquerade's head was a mighty house. It was not one mind, but many; a confluence of minds. I wandered in its consciousness and found a labyrinthine kingdom. I saw its pyramids, its cities, its castles, its great palaces, its seas, and rivers. I saw its moats and marshlands, its architectural wonders, its splendid dungeons and torture-chambers, its vast armies and police networks, its slaves, cabals, mind-engineers, spirit-distorters, reality-manufacturers, history-twisters, truth-inventors, soul-transplanters, dream-destroyers, courage-grinders, love-corrupters, hope-crushers, sleep-eaters, hunger-producers, money-farmers. (*Songs of Enchantment*, 114–115).

The masquerade, also known as *egwugwu* in Igbo narratives or *egungun* in Yoruba drama, is a consistent and familiar presence in the Nigerian literary tradition. In *Things Fall Apart*, it is sacralized as it dons the paradoxical nature of being one of the spirits of the clan, though behind its raffia palm is a human being. The idea of it being carried about by some 'natives' is what Pilkings, in Soyinka's *Death and King's Horseman* (1975), holds when he puts its regalia on, not minding its sacredness. Consequently, the fragile peace in Umuofia trips on it, bringing about the tragedy of *Things Fall Apart*. On his part, Okri neither sacralizes nor scoffs. But in doing neither, he secularises it, giving it an important diabolic political bizarre function, magical censorship. I categorically assert that never in the history of the Nigerian tradition was the masquerade given the above depiction as Okri has done, not even through a narrator as Azaro. Through Azaro's perception, the Masquerade in the bar premises, a supposedly normal and physical effigy, takes a diabolic predisposition and purposes stretching back to the history of brutality ever known to man since the Fall. It is therefore not meant for the good of the public who are thrilled to see it. It, Koto, the blind old man, and the white horse seal up their definition and configuration as the forces of evil. But a cause for wonder is how Azaro could have, being a physical child and not leaving where he is seated, travel into the consciousness of the Masquerade. This fantastical element is owed to his nature. So his nature is intricately tied to the fantastical setting in those narratives. By him, Okri makes the otherwise unthinkable setting to come into full view, to be realizable as well as thinkable.

Same applies to *Infinite Riches*, where Azaro's capabilities also feature. Only that, in the above narrative, Mum, with Dad and Azaro having had their share of perceiving the otherworldly, joins the number as she becomes one more female

hand of Madame Koto's. As "a spirit-child wandering in an unhappy world" (*Infinite Riches*, 249), he describes a scene of the rally, a very natural place that has beings undergoing transformational processes grafted on it:

Near a tree I saw Sami, betting shop owner who had run off with Dad's money a long time ago. I saw him changing into a giant rat, as if he were merely taking off his coat, tearing off an outer layer of human identity. Even as a rat his face was still familiar. When he caught me staring at him he uttered a monstrous syllable, barely human. I ran again, no longer carried by my feet, but by a hot wind. The bad dreams of politicians were wreaking havoc on the earth. A tree burst into flames and a yellow star pulsed into the remote regions of ash-flavoured space. New realities were being born in the birth-throes of a new nation (296).

We can compare the scene above to another rally, a realistic one that takes place in Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People*. The politician is named, Honourable Chief M.A. Nanga; the setting is mentioned, Anata; the circumstances are probable; and one could decipher the period as possibly the First Republic era of Nigeria's history. It is the period of dirty politics (as even today) in a newly independent nation like Nigeria, which in the Nigerian literary tradition subsisted from the realism of *A Man of the People* published in 1964 to Okri's fantastical works, including *Infinite Riches* of 1998. Odili captures the despondent mood of this era, as well as his desire for love that was slipping away: "What I felt was sadness – a sadness deep and cool like a well, into which my hopes had fallen; my twin hopes of a beautiful life with Edna and of a new era of cleanliness in the politics of our country" (Achebe, *A Man of the People*, 130). Okri only subjects the same setting of election, political chaos, or fracas to different techniques of representation and like Odili, Azaro experiences similar reaction.

Besides the representation of the bizarre in *The Famished Road* series, there is Okri's most utopian exploration of an ideal place through the technique of paradox of his entire corpus in *Astonishing the Gods* (1995). His is the forging of a utopia, or a utopian prophecy, while leading readers through its maze. This informs all the incongruous setting of *Astonishing the Gods* and the reason why Green inventively classes him amongst the Romantics of the William Blakean sort (2009: 18–32). I also think it includes the Samuel Taylor Coleridgean strand, too, in terms of representing a utopia. Okri is not advocating for people to suffer in quest of an ideal, but that those who presently do have suffered enough to transform it into something sublime, something that can usher in nobility of ventures and essences of purity in all facets of human existence. So in speaking less and unclearly, through this work, he speaks much and very distinctly. Three thresholds are identified in his bid to carry out the above in *Astonishing the Gods*. On one side is a nameless young man; on another, a nameless landscape from which the nameless young man flees; and, on the last, the nameless island to which he flees. On these tripodal thresholds rests the philosophic fable,

Astonishing the Gods, the setting of which is at extreme to what obtains in *The Famished Road*, *Songs of Enchantment*, and *Infinite Riches*.

Appearances in this strange kingdom are utterly contradistinguished with those of determinate human historical moments the technique of realism captures. Except there is an exotic civilisation unmatched in historical Africa, no place in Africa today boasts of the chessboard landscape sandwiched by a shore and an entrance to the main cityscape. Within the city's vicinity, the atmosphere and the nearby surrounding are unreal. There are "the magic lake," "places made of moonlight" (*Astonishing the Gods*, 10), "a magnificent garden in which flowers bathed in a celestial glow," and "a white unicorn with an emerald horn" (11).

And then to cross a bridge is not that casual, Okri must cast it in initiatory and ritualistic splendour to assert the more the strangeness of the stranger. In this initiatory process of crossing the bridge, all properties and features of the outside world in the young man must be expunged, shed off through the nameless city's own method of integration. Though he is not compelled to enter it, it seems to be a condition of the place that the environment itself has the capacity of doing the bidding of its people without being pressed to so do. He crosses it and he describes the atmosphere of this kingdom and his experience:

He had entered another marvelous street. The moonlight made the chessboard universe quiver. At first, as he went down the street, he noticed huge white and silver forms looming high up in the air. He noticed the great extensions of their dazzling and partially concealed forms. They filled him with an unaccountably holy terror. The forms, alive in a way that only the most awesome things are alive, encompassed him with their total knowledge of his being. As he passed under them, he became even lighter. He felt himself changing into light. ...

He felt himself sinking into those depths as he passed beneath the charged immanent wings. And as he sank deeper into new invisibilities he had a sudden monstrous suspicion of the endlessness of it, the bottomlessness of it, till he could imagine a stage of invisibility that shaded into the eternal, the infinite. ...

And when he opened his eyes he found himself bathed in the most splendid black starlight. And up above, like a forgotten god of the mountains, a towering colossus made of primal light, was the startling presence of the great archangel of invisibility (13–15).

This is a place where contemplation, a mere stroke of thought, is action, setting in motion the action so contemplated, the thought of "falling back towards the stone of a familiar reality" (29). What about the physical structure of the place? The narrator describes "the houses of the Invisible city" (36): "houses, buildings, and offices were all majestic and all of stone, but it was a stone that seemed in a permanent state of dreaming" (36). What state of reality is this then? A subreal vision. But we hear more:

It was the harmonies in the air that made him sense that the visible city was a pretext and a guise for an invisible realm. All things suggested something divine. [...] The visible city was a dream meant to deceive the eyes of men. He sensed that everything seen was intended to be visible only that it should pass away. [...] The city was a world; and the world was telling him things that he couldn't understand for many years to come. [...] And yet, all about him, the city was yielding its forms. Houses seemed to turn into liquid, and to flow away before he reached them. A horse in the distance became a mist when he got there. Fountains dissolved into fragrances. Palaces became empty spaces where trees dwelt in solitude. Cathedrals became vacant places where harmonies were sweetest in the air. (38–40).

For the first time in the fantastic segment of his artistic career, Ben Okri devotes a full narrative to the description of a geographical location: the courtyard, streets, the bridge, the city, and the houses of an indescribable locale and space, the first of its kind in the Nigerian literary tradition. Here, the plot of the narrative is not so much hugely guided by action as by cinematographic space of structures and beings. One could say then that *Astonishing the Gods* is a geographical book of African version of utopia. In comparison to *Astonishing the Gods* and in terms of the probable and the improbable, earlier fantastical works – *The Famished Road*, *Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches* – seem to be less elusive, and go to make light what critics have alleged regarding their plotlessness. However, by the same token, he appears to have undermined the principle of description of setting through the masterful application of the technique of transformation. For instance, he sees a “floating street” (49). It is impossible for a street to float. One cannot term this science fiction. The closest description is that it is a miracle of engineering and transformation. The same applies to the bridge sub-setting. In fact, the whole setting is a setting of transformation. In contrast to Tutuola, there is no particular talismanic, magical coloration at all. It almost bears the bent of science fiction, which convinces us that Mbachu must have picked up a hint or two from Okri in her *Zahrah the Windseeker*. In *The Famished Road* and *Zahrah the Windseeker*, both major characters are odd and weird persons in their communities as *abiku* and *dada* respectively.

Contrasting the people of the ghetto in *The Famished Road* series and in the Nigerian tradition with those of *Astonishing the Gods*, one observes that the condition of the community of *Astonishing the Gods* approaches the state of divinity, godlikeness, and sacredness. Their institutions are contrary to those conventionally represented in Nigerian narratives. The universities, we are told, were places for self-perfection, places for the highest education in life. Everyone taught everyone else. All were teachers, all were students. The sages listened more than they talked; and when they talked it was to ask questions that would engage endless generations in profound and perpetual discovery.

The universities and the academies were also places where people sat and meditated and absorbed knowledge from the silence. Research was a permanent activity, and all were researchers and applicators of the fruits of research. The purpose was to discover the hidden unifying laws of all things, to deepen the spirit, to make more profound the sensitivities of the individual to the universe, and to become more creative. (66).

The courts and the library did not miss Okri's attention,

Courts were places where people went to study the laws, not places of judgement. The library, which he took to be one building, but which he later discovered was practically the whole city, was a place where people went to record their thoughts, their dreams, their intuitions, their ideas, their memories, and their prophecies. They also went there to increase the wisdom of the race. Books were not borrowed. Books were composed there, and deposited. (66).

It is no longer the place Ezeulu would send his son to learn the white man's ways and wisdom in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* (1964). And the banks "were places where people deposited or withdrew thoughts of well-being, thoughts of wealth, thoughts of serenity. When people were ill they went to their banks. When healthy, they went to the hospitals" (69). In this seeming illogicality of both places, this jarring of our predictable perception of what we know these institutions to be in the Nigerian literary tradition, we are further dazed by:

The hospitals were places of laughter, amusements, and recreation. They were houses of joy. The doctors and nurses were masters of the art of humour, and they all had to be artists of one kind or another.

[...]

The masters of the land believed that sickness should be cured before it became sickness. The healthy were therefore presumed sick. Healing was always needed, and was considered a necessary part of daily life. Healing was always accompanied by the gentlest music. When healing was required the sick ones lingered in the presence of great paintings, and sat in wards where masterpieces of healing composition played just below the level of hearing. Outdoor activity, sculpting, story-telling, poetry, and laughter were the most preferred forms of treatment. (69).

These are not all; the unit of exchange is idea, "the quality of thought, ideas, and possibilities" and the currencies that are invisible (71). With all these and many more, there is no reason why the nameless quester would not be filled "with amazement" (72).

It is clear that Okri has left our own world of experience for utopia, and it is this world that he now describes. Voltaire's *Candide* (1759) and Gustave Dore's *Gargantuan and Pantagruel* (1873) come to mind here, but not as glamorous, fabulous, enchanting, enthralling, realism-divested, and as wish-inspiring in the

reader as Okri's *Astonishing the Gods*. These narratives are outside the Nigerian literary tradition but, curiously, *Astonishing the Gods* bears no categorical resemblance in setting to Fagunwa's *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons* or Tutuola's *The Palm-wine Drinkard*.

5. CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, Ben Okri has so far demonstrated astute difference from the tradition he commenced his career with. I have tried to read him as nationalist and individual critics would by teasing out how aligns himself with Nigeria's realist literary sub-tradition of Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, John Munonye, Ifeoma Okoye, Amadi Elechi, Festus Iyayi, Isidore Okpewho, and, in the twenty-first century, with the likes of Helon Habila, Jude Dibia, Chimamanda Adichie, and others in the depiction of realistic setting. I have also taken care to draw attention to how he undermined the conventional sub-setting of the bar and the setting of a true-to-life third world ghetto and villages; relapsed to the representation of the grotesque, fabulous, and marvelous with some liberal sprinkling of realism; and, finally, pitched his tent with the prophetic of the Blakean kind. Remarkably, too, this piece discovered that as Okri's genius matures, he appears to judge conventional setting only important in so far as it is artistically agreeable with and supportive of the dominant imagery figured by major characters. The first time he focuses on setting exclusively, he subverts what setting *qua* setting ought to be – a setting significantly at variance with what obtains in Nigerian literature. In essence, he also has ruptured the seeming theoretically assured, concrete and smooth running literary conditionality of the setting Nigerian literature portrays. This includes Jeyifo's 'show and tell' technique; Obiechina's mimesis of "traditional beliefs and practices" (Quayson 1997: 2); Kehinde's Lagos; and Moh's "Nigeria" (2004: 74). Beyond these, for the first time in modern Nigerian narratives, he fuses the magical, the improbable, the fantastical, the visionary, the prophetic, and the realism-oriented in his corpus in a way tremendously at odds to what is obtainable in Nigerian myths, legends, and folktales. He seems to be in flight from the space of the conventional, and in this wild flight, there is no suggestion that Ben Okri, the Nigerian tradition's prodigal literary artist, would come back to roost on his 'hometown'.

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