

Body Narrative and Political Imagination in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*

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Abstract: As a classic of postcolonial literature, Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* demonstrates the national dilemma and identity pursuit of Nigeria in the postcolonial era through unique bodily narrative and political imagination. This study focuses on the physical experience of Azaro, the ghost child in the novel, and explores how the body becomes a carrier of political imagination. It reveals how Ben Okri criticizes colonial legacy issues through body narrative and explores the possibilities of Africa's future, from three dimensions: the trauma of the body and the crisis of national politics, the spatial politics and discipline of the body, and the resistance and reconstruction of the body. The novel allegorically presents the trauma and rebirth of the Nigerian national body through the fragility, pain, and transformation of the body. At the same time, through bodily practices such as dreams and boxing, it explores political imagination beyond postcolonial reality.

Keywords: Body Narrative, Political Imagination, Postcolonial Literature, Ben Okri

1. Introduction

Since winning the Booker Prize in 1991, Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* has been regarded as a milestone in postcolonial literature in Africa. The novel uses magical realism techniques and centers around the myth of "Abiku" (ghost children) in Yoruba culture in Nigeria, closely linking personal bodily experiences with the fate of the nation. ^[1] In previous studies, scholars have mostly focused on the magical realism features, postcolonial criticism, or narrative strategies of novels, but have paid less attention to the deep interaction between their bodily narrative and political imagination. In *The Famished Road*, the body is no longer simply a physiological existence, but has become an arena for political power struggles. Ben Okri transforms the political struggles of postcolonial Nigeria into tangible bodily experiences through bodily storytelling. At the same time, he also opened up the creative dimension of political imagination through the transcendent abilities of his body (dreamlike realm, wandering in the spiritual world). Ben Okri constructs a unique political metaphor system through the physical experiences of Azaro, his parents and other characters, revealing the trauma left by colonial rule and imagining the future path of the nation from three dimensions: physical trauma and national political crisis, spatial politics and discipline of the body, and resistance and reconstruction of the body.

2. Physical trauma and national political crisis

American sociologist Brian Turner believes that the body is the carrier and bearer of social meaning or social symbolism ^[2]. Butler points out that the universal dilemma of the body is that the body is always in the presence of others and external environments that are beyond its control ^[3]. The issue of ethnic identity is inevitably linked to the subject of the nation, which is the human mass group with common cultural factors and names. ^[4] And this is often the fact that social constructors and rulers overlook or even ignore the most. The body serves as an organic carrier of national identity, and the trauma of the body is closely linked to the crisis of national politics. This correlation is not an accidental phenomenon, but a concrete manifestation of the interaction between deep power structures and identity construction.

When ethnic groups face systemic crises such as sovereignty erosion, cultural deconstruction, or squeezed living spaces, their bodies often become the "forefront field" of political conflicts - whether it

is bodies that have been violently disciplined in colonial contexts, bodies that have suffered physical injuries during wars, or bodies that have been forced to transform (such as clothing, hairstyles, etiquette) in cultural assimilation policies, their traumatic experiences go beyond individual physiological categories and are transformed into symbols that carry the collective memory and political demands of the nation. These physical traumas may become "emotional triggers" that trigger national identity, forming collective resistance through the aggregation of individual pain; It may also be transformed by hegemonic forces into a tool to suppress national consciousness, dissolving the identity cohesion of the group through sustained physical control.

2.1 The body of the protagonist Azaro

In *The Famished Road*, the protagonist Azaro's Abiku identity is the core carrier of bodily narrative and political imagination. Abiku in Yoruba culture refers to a ghost child who constantly reincarnates and wanders between the spiritual and human realms, with their body endowed with dual symbolic meanings.

On the one hand, Azaro's multiple deaths and rebirths symbolize the cycle of hope for African countries after independence in the post colonial era, constantly dying and being reborn. His body became a microcosm of the fate of the nation, symbolizing the demise, birth, and rebirth of the dreams of the people for human rights, democracy, freedom, and prosperity after the independence of African countries in the 20th century. Ben Okri questioned the linear progressive view of history through this cyclical narrative, implying that the liberation of postcolonial countries was not a one-time solution, but a difficult process full of twists and turns and setbacks. On the other hand, Azaro's hunger, disease, and vulnerability reflect the collective suffering of the Nigerian people during the colonial and postcolonial periods. For example, the physical hunger depicted in the novel is not only a physiological phenomenon, but also a political "path of hunger", stemming from resource scarcity caused by colonial plunder and corrupt rule. This hunger experience not only torments the Azaro family, but also becomes a common condition of the national body. When Ben Okri describes the road has never been able to escape hunger, he cleverly projects the feeling of hunger in his body onto the path of national development, implying that the entire nation is in a continuous state of scarcity.

2.2 The body photographed by the photographer

On the day of "Politician Milk Powder Day", political party thugs attacked the masses with sticks, stones, whips, and wires, while neighbors launched a counterattack with machetes after the chaos. As an ordinary member of the impoverished and starving civilians, the photographer bravely and fearlessly captured piles of milk powder and vomit outside the room, causing women and children to pose around. "The photographer flashed his camera at a woman with a swollen eye, a basin of milk on her head. I saw a man running out from the crowd's vanguard, with deep scratches bleeding down his face."^[5] He captured the child's sickly appearance, the man's painful convulsions, and the woman's hungry anger. The photo showed the detestable face of the leader of the wealthy party, and the photographer was subjected to political persecution as a result, ultimately going into exile overseas. His experience succinctly reveals how powerful social forces will take action against anyone who dares to expose their ugly behavior in the context of colonial rule and ethnic strife. This riot fully exposed the chaotic political situation in Nigeria, with violent conflicts between the ruling class represented by police, thugs, politicians, landlords, and the poor revealing class contradictions within the nation.

2.3 The body of Azaro's father

Through this allegorical treatment, Ben Okri transformed his personal body into a symbol of national politics, achieving a preliminary integration of body narrative and political imagination. The bodies of other characters in the novel also carry political metaphors. Azaro's father was originally a retired porter from the British army, and his body's curvature and strain symbolize the permanent damage inflicted on African bodies by colonial violence; The exhausted body of the mother as a vendor represents the resilience of women who maintain the survival of their families in political turmoil. Madame Koto's body transformation and wearing Western style jewelry represent a manifestation of cultural identity crisis.

These bodily narratives not only record the suffering of individuals, but also construct a set of national fables that allegorically present the trauma and rebirth of the Nigerian national body through the fragility, resilience, and transformation of the body.^[6] Ben Okri criticized the deep harm caused by

colonialism, which not only stayed at the political and economic level, but also penetrated into the most intimate bodily experiences of Africans.

2.4 Body abnormalities and carnival

According to Bakhtin's carnival poetics, carnival refers to a physical state in which people break free from conventions and dogmas, and thus life itself becomes a symbolic performance. And the bizarre is both a literary mode and a subjective mode, a fierce blend of Baroque transition and incompatible factors.^[7] In the novel, the ghosts and monsters in the ghost world often appear fragmented and deformed. The ghost children who lured Azaro back have withered bodies, imbalanced limbs, and skin as stiff and fragile as faded cowhide pockets, echoing the cruel reality of high infant mortality rates in the human world. What is more frightening is the political metaphor of the multi-headed ghosts. They bear a swollen and purulent head, their limbs are twisted into a Fried Dough Twists shape at the waist, and the black eye sockets are dripping with mucus, which is just the embodiment of warlord separatism and politicians' greed. Multiple skulls symbolize the proliferation of factions, while twisted limbs symbolize the alienation of human nature by power.

These deformities are not simply terrifying renderings: the withered body corresponds to the material scarcity on the famished road, the exposed organs imply the decay of social texture, and the asymmetrical limbs reflect the fragmentation of cultural identity. Just like the repeated reincarnation of the "Abiku" ghost child, the deformities of ghosts and monsters are also strengthened in the cycle, and every defect is a trace of Nigeria's hunger, war, and cultural conflicts in the post colonial era, becoming an indelible totem of suffering. The existence of the body as a rebellious and subversive force reveals Ben Okri's pursuit of national identity beyond gender, age, and rank.

3. Spatial politics and discipline of the body

The term "discipline" was first proposed by the famous French philosopher Michel Foucault in his masterpiece *Discipline and Punish*. Foucault subverted the binary opposition of consciousness/body in Descartes, and based on inheriting Nietzsche's ideas, constructed a genealogy centered on the body. It can be said that Foucault completely overturned the binary oppositional consciousness in the Western metaphysical tradition that emphasizes spirit and reason, neglects the body, and obscures the physical body. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault wrote that discipline is neither equivalent to a system nor to an institution. It is a type of power, a track for exercising power, which includes a series of means, techniques, procedures, application levels, and goals. It is a physics or anatomy of power, a technical science.^[8]

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault elucidated the relationship between power and the body. He believed that power operates through the body, which is integrated into the structure of knowledge and power. Power disciplines and punishes the body through discourse, ultimately constructing and shaping individuals into subjects that conform to certain social norms. He also pointed out that ultimately it always involves the body, that is, the body and its power, their availability and tamability, their arrangement and conquest, and power relations are always directly controlling it, intervening in it, marking it, training it, torturing it, forcing it to complete certain tasks, performing certain rituals, and sending certain signals.^[8] Moreover, political intervention in the body is often combined with economic means, and they work together to affect the body. Here, the body is not just a biological entity, but also a place where various forces are engraved. The slums where the Azaro family resides are a legacy of colonial spatial order, filled with violence from corrupt police, false promises from political parties, and economic oppression from landlords. These power structures achieve political control by controlling bodily movements such as kidnapping and imprisonment. The violent law enforcement by the police not only harms individual bodies, but also creates fear in the collective psyche, thereby ensuring the stability of the power structure. Ben Okri presents the operational mechanism of life politics in postcolonial cities through detailed descriptions of the crowding, dirtiness, and disease of bodies in slums.

As a greedy and devouring existence, the famished road is both a spatial image and a carrier of political and economic criticism. The road used to be a river, but due to colonial invasion, it has become a road, implying that Africa's natural ecology and social structure have been distorted by colonialism.^[9] The devouring of the body by roads (such as car accidents) metaphorically represents the plunder of African life by colonization and modernity. Ben Okri reveals through the narrator's mouth: "And to this day some people still put a small amount of food on the road before they travel, so

that the King of the Road will eat their sacrifice and let them travel safely".^[5] The "King of the Road" here can be interpreted as both the historical violence of colonialism and the oppressive political structure that continues in the post colonial era.

Madame Koto's tavern is a place where physical experiences and cultures blend together. The process of her transformation from a traditional woman to a symbol of power reflects the internalization of colonial mentality: the transformation of her body (increasing size, wearing jewelry) and the westernization of her lifestyle (electrification, buying cars) have become physical manifestations of cultural identity crisis. As a "third space", taverns are neither completely traditional nor completely modern, but rather places where colonial and colonized cultures engage in conflict. Here, the African body attempts to find balance between two cultures, but often falls deeper into alienation. The ultimate tragedy of Aunt Kudo shows that simply imitating colonizers or sticking to tradition cannot find a true way out for the African body.

In these spaces, the body is both an object of power oppression and a place of resistance. For example, Azaro achieved escape and criticism of the real political order through hunger strikes and wandering in the spiritual realm. His spiritual wandering is not only a temporary escape from the oppression of reality, but also an act of political imagination by providing references for changing the real world by experiencing the possibilities of another world.^[1] Similarly, his father's boxing training in the tavern transformed his body from a disciplined object to a rebellious subject, reflecting the efforts of the lower class people to regain their autonomy through physical practice. The interaction between body and space in *The Famished Road* further deepens the level of political imagination. Ben Okri reveals the discipline and oppression of power on the body through the experiences of the body in urban slums, pubs, and roads.

4. Resistance and reconstruction of the body

"Consciousness of body politics" refers to how individuals consciously use their battered and damaged bodies to exercise their power, rebuild their degraded subject consciousness, and thus rewrite or re-establish their identity under conditions where their bodies are controlled, violated, and disciplined.^[10] In Foucault's theory, the body is the object and goal of power, the engraving field of power, and the body is constantly shaped and regulated by power, therefore the body is passive and tamed. This kind of body is no longer a body filled with animal spirit, a body filled with the will to power, a body filled with the ideals of Superman or schizophrenia.^[11] Foucault's understanding of the body ignores the construction and reconstruction aspects of the body.

Azaro's father's dreams are endowed with the power to transform reality. In a coma, he dreams of building a better world in his mind, yearning for freedom, justice, and dignity.^[12] This dream narrative transforms the body into a carrier of political utopia, transcending the limitations of postcolonial reality. Ben Okri constructed a space of adversarial political imagination through his father's dreams, in which the body is no longer a passive recipient of power, but a creator of a new world. This kind of dream politics does not provide specific political plans, but creates prerequisites for real change by changing people's consciousness and desire structures.

Azaro's father's transformation from a porter to a boxer symbolizes the self liberation of the oppressed through physical training. The victory on the boxing ring symbolizes the possibility for African people to resist political oppression through physical strength. Ben Okri detailed how his father transformed his tired and fragile body into powerful and agile combat tools through rigorous training, symbolizing the transformation of the colonized from a victim to an active agent. Boxing, as a physical technique, not only enhances individual strength, but also provides a metaphor for combating oppression: vulnerable groups in postcolonial societies need similar self empowerment to win in the struggle against power.

Azaro's mother's physical experience demonstrates the dual role of women in political imagination. She is both the bearer of traditional sacrifices (enduring hunger and pain) and the maintainer of family order (saving Azaro multiple times). Ben Okri reveals the complexity of women's bodies in ethnic narratives through her. During the period of political transition, women's bodies are often symbolized as symbols of national purity, but are rarely given true subjectivity. However, the mother in the novel breaks through this limitation to some extent through her resilience and wisdom, demonstrating the crucial role of female bodies in maintaining community survival and cultural continuity.

These bodily practices collectively construct a dynamic resistance politics, in which the body is not

only a place of suffering, but also a source of creating new political subjects. Ben Okri suggests through the diverse practices of the body that the future of Africa lies not in simply rejecting or accepting a certain political model, but in finding a body politics that can accommodate complexity, contradictions, and dynamic changes. Ben Okri did not stop at political criticism, but explored the possibilities of the future of the nation through physical practice. The novel showcases the creative dimension of political imagination through the transcendent experience of the body and the reconstruction of bodily abilities.

5. Conclusions

The Famished Road provides a unique critical and creative path for postcolonial literature through the deep integration of bodily narrative and political imagination. Ben Okri not only sees the body as a recorder of colonial trauma, but also as a planner for the future of the nation. Ben Okri presents how the historical violence of colonialism has transformed into structural oppression in the post colonial era through the fragility, hunger, and disease of the body, continuing to affect the lives of ordinary Africans. Criticism rooted in concrete bodily experiences provides abstract political and economic analysis with perceptible dimensions. Ben Okri proposed a political vision based on love and justice, cultural hybridity, and ecological coexistence through transcendent experiences of the body (such as dreamland and spiritual wandering) and physical practices (such as boxing and hunger strikes). These visions are not complete political blueprints, but are scattered in the form of seeds within the novel, suggesting possible directions for change. The core of Ben Okri's political imagination lies in his belief that true political change must start at the physical level - changing the way people perceive the world and reshaping their relationship with the world. In the end, the body in the novel is both the bearer of the the famished road and the hope to break the cycle. This interaction between bodily narrative and political imagination not only enriches the aesthetic dimension of African literature, but also provides profound insights for political exploration in postcolonial societies.

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