Eleanor A. Dasi, Lywellyn Saha Tata, "Entry on: The Famished Road by Ben Okri", peer-reviewed by Daniel A. Nkemleke and Elizabeth Hale. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2019). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/784. Entry version as of November 21, 2026.

Ben Okri

# The Famished Road

*United Kingdom (1991)*

TAGS: African Traditions Afterlife






*We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.*

| General information | |
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| *Title of the work* | The Famished Road |
| *Country of the First Edition* | United Kingdom |
| *Country/countries of popularity* | United Kingdom |
| *Original Language* | English |
| *First Edition Date* | 1991 |
| *First Edition Details* | Ben Okri, *The Famished Road*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1991, 500 pp. |
| *ISBN* | 0224027018 |
| *Genre* | Fiction, Novels |
| *Target Audience* | Crossover (young adults and adults) |
| *Author of the Entry* | Eleanor A. Dasi, University of Yaoundé 1, wandasi5@yahoo.com<br>Lywellyn Saha Tata, University of Yaoundé 1, lywellynasah@gmail.com |
| *Peer-reviewer of the Entry* | Daniel A. Nkemleke, University of Yaoundé 1, nkemlekedan@yahoo.com<br>Elizabeth Hale, University of New England, ehale@une.edu.au |



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## Creators



Ben Okri by Chris Boland. Retrieved from flickr.com, licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0 (accessed: December 30, 2021).

**Ben Okri , b. 1959**
**(Author)**

Ben Okri is a Nigerian poet and novelist. He was born in Nigeria in 1959. His father, Silver, later moved to England to study law and they all moved to England together. In 1968 his father returned to Nigeria and offered free services to people who couldn't afford a lawyer. Back in Nigeria, Okri is confronted daily with the Nigerian civil war and his friends who tell him the stories of how they see spirits. All of these influenced his early works. He wrote against the Nigerian government, and because of that he entered the government's death list and was forced to move to England. While in England, he studied Comparative Literature in Essex University. During his study period, he had financial problems, though he has rather termed this period the most important in the whole of his writing career. This is because, he says, something dramatic happened with his writing and he tended to write more during this period. His first novel was *Flowers and Shadows*. His reputation as author began with his book *The Famished Road* which earned him the Booker prize. His latest work, *The Freedom Artist*, was published in 2019.

Source:

Bennett, Robert, "Ben Okri (1959)", *Postcolonial African Writers: A Bio-Biographical Critical Sourcebook*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998, 364–373.

Bio prepared by Eleanor A. Dasi, University of Yaoundé 1, wandasi5@yahoo.com and Lywellyn Saha Tata, University of Yaoundé 1, lywellynasah@gmail.com



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## Additional information

Summary

*The Famished Road* is about the life of an *abiku* (spirit child), Azaro, in the ghetto of an unnamed city. At the beginning of the novel, Azaro is a spirit child who lives in the spirit world also called the land of the beginning. It is a land of happiness and joy, where all unborn spirits live before they are incarnated into human bodies. In this land, exists a group called the spirit companions (Abikus), who, in order to enjoy the privileges of the spirit world forever, make a pact never to live in the world of mortals, for it is full of injustice, fear and human heartlessness.

Azaro, who is part of the spirit companions, finally decides to be born; he goes against the pact and outwits his companions. He wants to give joy to the woman who had given birth to him five times in the human world but he had always died each time. Azaro's decision will have repercussions, as he runs the risk of living a life full of hallucinations because his spirit companions promise to haunt him and make his life unlivable for breaking the pact.

Azaro is finally born in a very poor family. At a very young age he is confronted with life's difficulties. He hears the voices of the spirit companions trying to persuade him to die and come back. Azaro oscillates between the two worlds and is sometimes caught in hallucinations; he feels, touches and talks to people only he can see. The spirit companions try to drag Azaro back into the spirit world through the hallucinations whenever they have the opportunity. They almost succeed when Azaro cries so loud that the King of the spirit world intercedes and gets his spirit back into his body. He wakes up and finds himself in a coffin, given that he was already dead in the human world and burial proceedings had begun. It is because of this miracle that he is named Lazaro which is later shortened to Azaro.

A riot begins and Azaro is separated from his mother. A police officer volunteers to take good care of him until his parents show up. The police officer brings Azaro into his spacious and comfortable house. Azaro discovers he is in danger in the officer's house when he hears voices in the wall saying "the victim is awaiting its sacrifice". Azaro prays to be taken away from that house and his prayer is answered when his mother comes in at the middle of the night and takes him to their new house. This new house looks very strange for Azaro. To him, the new house is simply an expression of their new condition of



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extreme poverty. Father and son become so close and spend much time together. They both go to a bar where they meet Madame Koto who beats her customer mercilessly because he refuses to pay for his drinks. A party is organized to welcome Azaro and his father gets heavily indebted.

Azaro goes to serve in the bar in order to pay the heavy debt his dad incurred. While in the bar, a man enters accompanied by his friends; they do not look like normal human beings. They ask Madame Koto to sell Azaro to them but she refuses. They kidnap Azaro and take him to a river but he succeeds to escape and finds his way through to the city.

There is a van outside belonging to the Rich Party men, who have come for their political campaigns. This van attracts the entire neighbourhood with the loud music they play. The Big Party men share powdered milk to the people in large quantities and this creates a violent scene as everyone fights to collect. In the night, Azaro has a hallucination; he sees an agbada rise from the politicians' milk his mother collected and becomes a butterfly.

The next day Azaro's father throws away all the milk because he hates the party and he thinks they just come when elections are near and soon they will forget about them. The next morning, all the neighbours get sick. They all vomit because of the milk except Azaro's family. The party of the Rich comes back; this time they have garri to share. But none of the people take anything from them. Some of the neighbours pour hot water on the political thugs and beat them up severely. A fight begins; the people beat the members of the Rich Party and set fire on their van, which becomes a "landmark" in the community.

Azaro's father beats him because he broke a blind man's window. Azaro gets angry and decides he won't eat anymore; he goes for days without eating and becomes seriously ill. On the fourth day, his father does nothing to appease him, then the three headed spirit takes this opportunity to convince Azaro to leave the world where no one cares about him and come back to the world of beauty and happiness where his spirit companions await him as a prodigal son. But the rituals Azaro's father performs, his incantations and his wordings weaken Azaro on his journey to the spirit world and Azaro frees himself and comes back to life. The Herbalist advises the parents not to beat Azaro; they should be kind to him and show him love, so that he wouldn't be tempted to leave again. They take the advice seriously



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and treat him like a prince.

Azaro's father becomes more serious with his dream of becoming a boxer; he constantly hits the walls and even gives blows in empty spaces. One the night, a long-time-dead boxer, Yellow Jaguar, comes from the world of spirit to fight Azaro's father. The fight is so ferocious but Azaro's father ends up winning the fight but however regrets that only Azaro was present to see his exploits. Azaro's father is in a very bad condition after the fight. The Rich Party van comes back with its loud music. Azaro's father comes out and turns the music down. This creates a conflict with one of the thugs, Green Leopard. Another fight begins, Azaro's father, who has earned the name Black Tiger, beats Green Leopard and becomes a legend. But he gets into a critical condition after the fight. He sleeps for a long time and transcends to the spirit world. When he is completely healed, Azaro's father becomes different; he has a different view of the world – he wants to be a politician, and he wants to send Azaro to spy at Madame Koto's bar. He now makes speeches like a philosopher. He asks Azaro to read him works on Chinese medicine, Greek philosophy, anatomy, science and astrology. He becomes interested in the *Arabian Nights*. He organizes a party to create relations and from there he gets the beggars as his first followers and disciples. He is completely transformed in the spirit world. His philosophy expands in strange ways as he reads Homer's *Odyssey*.

In Madame Koto's bar during the party he meets the man in white, who has always wanted to fight him. Azaro's father sends for Sami, the bet taker since he thinks the fight with the man in white can fetch him enough money to build a university for the beggars. They both get into a horrible fight and Black Tiger (Azaro's father) does not give a single jab that touches the man in white. He finally succeeds in tearing the man in white's dress, thereby reducing his supernatural powers. This further gives him enough courage to fight on and on, until he finally wins the fight even though he is in a terrible state as he has never been before. He is between life and death.

Azaro's father has been unconscious for three days. The beggars too are still around, sleeping under the eaves of the compound-front, expecting Azaro's father as a messiah. In the spirit world, "he sees a world in which human beings suffer, sees people drowning in poverty, famine, drought, and the blood of war; he sees his people always preyed upon by other powers, manipulated by the Western world" (p. 492). Azaro's father finds out in his dream that all nations are



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children, and their own nation is an *"abiku"* (spirit) nation, one that keeps being reborn and which refuses to stay till a propitious sacrifice is made to display serious intent to bear the weight of a unique destiny. During this period, Madame Koto grows more powerful. She becomes known as the Queen of Ghetto Night, many of the people have dreams about her as a future spirit-bride to head of states and presidents. She appears in Azaro's dream asking for some of his blood because she is two hundred years old and needs his blood to live. Azaro denies, her spirit is about to swallow Azaro when a great lion appears and drives her spirit away. He sees this as new spirits of justice born to match the demands of the age, as for every power on the side of those that feed on earth's blood, a fabulous angel is born. Azaro's father wakes up suddenly, his wounds are completely healed and his spirit is sharpened, he calls his wife and Azaro and immediately makes a speech about what he has seen in the spirit world.

That night, there are no spirits, no moving objects, the air is clear and wide, the sky is serene. It's so silent and peaceful that Azaro is worried because he had never had a night like this. He keeps expecting songs from his spirit companions but nothing happens, the sweetness of the night dissolves his fear. Azaro sleeps peacefully like he has never before.

Analysis

Ben Okri's use of the *abiku* as narrator is significant because according to Nigerian belief *abiku* is a spirit-child with memories of previous life experiences. This belief gives Okri a chance to examine earthly realities in a larger framework. The unspoken acknowledgement of another world helps the author to project hope even while portraying the bleakness of present reality in novels such as *The Famished Road*. He presents the oppositions between the spirit and physical worlds, with the spirit world more pleasurable than the physical world. It attempts an explanation as to why infants cry when they enter the world – because it is full of pain, suffering and human folly. This is exemplified through the torture Azaro goes through in the hands of humans and spirits alike. Based on the Yoruba phenomenon of *abiku* or spirit child, the story offers an explanation to the origin of the spirit component of the human personality and the phenomenon of reincarnation, which is also common in other African and world cultures and mythologies.



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| | *The Famished Road* is a story that describes the terrifying journey of life as portrayed in Azaro's unceasing fear of human faces and voices. Furthermore, his constant disappearances in the forest, market and streets point to the economic and political confusion that plagues society. It therefore accentuates the need for moral development to overcome societal evil, while acknowledging the role of fate in human life. In sum, we are exposed to the moral dangers of poverty and the struggle for survival. These thematic concerns make this novel appealing to young adults. |
| Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts | African Traditions Afterlife |
| Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture | Adversity Character traits Morality Religious beliefs Resilience Social class Survival |
| Further Reading | Hawley, John C., "Ben Okri's Spirit Child: 'Abiku' Migration and Postmodernity", *Research in African Literatures (New Voices in African Literature)* 26.1 (1995): 30 (10). |
| Addenda | First Edition: London: Jonathan Cape, 1991. Since then, many editions exist: Published February 6th 1992 by Vintage, June 1st 1993 by Anchor Books, February 6th 2003 by Vintage Classics, June 2007 by Serambi, October 25th 2016 by Open Road Media and March 25th 2013 by Phuong Nam Book & NXB Văn Học. |



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