

Patriarchy and Gender relations in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*

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Abstract

The paper examines the representation of patriarchal structures in Ben Okri's seminal novel, *The Famished Road*. Through a critical lens, this research analyzes how Okri portrays the oppressive nature of patriarchal societies, particularly in post-colonial Nigeria. The paper explored through the narrative of Azaro, the protagonist, and his interactions with the women around him, including his mother and the various female spirits he encounters. The paper explores the sufferings of women and the plight of women in Nigerian society. It examines discourse of womanhood in areas such as motherhood, marriage, the portrayal of the woman in her private domain of life, in relation to her public image, relations with patriarchy, and the contradictions in the collective experience of women and the self. The paper aims to shatter the age-old shackles bound by patriarchy. **Keywords:** Patriarchy, Domination, Sufferings of Women, Postcolonialism.

Sir Ben Golden Emuobowho Okri is a Nigerian novelist, short-story writer, and poet who used magic realism to convey the social and political chaos in Africa. Ben Okri was born on 15 March 1959 Minna, Nigeria. His first novels, *Flowers and Shadows* (1980) and *The Landscapes Within* (1981), employ surrealistic images to depict the corruption and lunacy of a politically scarred country. Okri won the Booker Prize for his novel *The Famished Road* (1991), the story of Azaro, an abiku (spirit child) and his quest for identity. The novels *Songs of Enchantment* (1993) and *Infinite Riches* (1998) continue the themes of *The Famished Road*, relating stories of dangerous quests and the struggle for equanimity in an unstable land. Okri's works focus on post civil war and life in modern Nigeria. His works explore the patriarchy, gender equality, myths, political violence, power in dreaming, poverty, religious beliefs, military excesses, nationalism, family ties and cultural identity. Okri writings discuss many political and social problems in Africa and the effects of post-colonialism.

Ben Okri's primary aim in *The Famished Road* (1991) is to redefine womanhood and patriarchy. Okri's acclaimed trilogy *The Famished Road* is a representative work of

African magical realism. It is a Bildungsroman novel. The novel has its setting in Nigeria, which obviously evokes Okri's own days in a similar place in Lagos. The roots of success of this novel lie in the central theme, which is connected to the age old culture and traditional practices of African society. One main focus of this study is to examine how Ben Okri mirrors women in their existential reality. Okri proposes a subversion of gender positions intending to advocate equality and social justice.

Patriarchy is a social system in which positions of authority are primarily held by men. The Patriarchy is used both in anthropology to describe a family or clan controlled by the father or eldest male or group of males, and in feminist theory to describe a broader social structure in which men as a group dominate society. The powerful patriarchy represents women as 'other'. African women bound by the chains of gender inequality began to struggle gently in an effort to free the bond. Many women started scrutinising the representation of women in male-authored works. So, women started writing about their experiences so that society could get hold of the first-hand experiences of a woman's life and as time went on, women writers gained an upper hand in displaying their emotions which were so far portrayed from a male perspective. Women writers like Simon De Beauvoir, Virginia Woolf, and many others battled to carve out a place for themselves in a society that fostered the idea that a woman is constructed. Gender is a construct that is largely self-created and it is that which one tries to invent for himself or herself. It focuses on patriarchal relations, sisterhood movements, women's roles in domestic and public life, marriage, motherhood, etc. Women were always presented as dependent, gullible, and voiceless.

Azaro is the protagonist, his mother and father are the two strong characters in *The Famished Road*. To have an understanding of gender equations, one must concentrate on these characters. To become a renowned revolutionary figure, Azaro's mother never gives up her family life. Though she earns through trading, she never leaves behind her household duties. The same thing happens in the case of his father. He is very considerate and ready to welcome his partner's growth and victory. He becomes proud of her over her appearance in the newspaper and shows reverence towards her by cutting out the page of the paper and pasting it to the wall (185). But also, he exposes his dislike which symbolizes the male domination society "What market? What trade? This is how you women behave when you get into the newspapers" (201).

Azaro's mother in the novel as one of the central characters, Okri objectifies the stereotypical role of a mother and offers a redemptive role for his woman character. He

does not give any specific name of the mother character as she can be any Nigerian woman, who is not ready to confine herself to a stifling atmosphere. He presents the main character Mum by assigning her equality with managing private as well as public affairs. Through Mum, Okri unravels the different aspects of womanhood. Simultaneously, she plays the role of a wife, mother, and one who works hard for social upliftment. Through this character, Okri asserts that women are capable of multitasking. In other words, Okri moulds her well fit her into marital, maternal, occupational, and political roles.

Okri's writings are rooted in Yoruba mythology, he makes use of the abiku myth to explore the different facets of womanhood. Yoruba mythology says that the myth of abiku emanates from their belief in reincarnation. Analysing the abiku phenomenon clarifies that abiku is a spirit child who maintains a cycle of dying and being reborn. Abiku children are not interested in remaining in the physical realm and go back to the spirit world by leaving their mothers into an abyss of grief. The line "we caused much pain to mothers. Their pain grew heavier with each return . . . we remained indifferent to the long joyless parturition of mothers" (5). Okri clearly explains their apathetic attitude towards mothers. Through Mum, Okri brings out the pain and stigma experienced by an African woman who is the mother of an abiku child. She is a representative of a mother who suffers the pain and agony of losing her child many times. Azaro himself declares that it is his mother's unending suffering that made him free her from the dilemma of motherhood, It is the reason which makes him stay in the earthly world. He says "But I sometimes think it was a face that made me want to stay. I wanted to make happy the bruised face of the woman who would become my mother." (6)

Okri explains that in Nigeria, a woman's social visibility is determined by her ability to give birth to children, in this novel, portrays the plight of motherhood through Azaro's Mum. Making Mum, a prototype to paint the pathetic plight of African women Okri hints at the truth that in African society a woman is assessed in terms of her ability to give birth to children. Her acceptability is determined in terms of her reproductive ability. American author Bell Hooks statement on motherhood is very much relevant here,

"Motherhood was proposed as the central lever with which women would bridge the world and in practice, it offered the best opportunity to women to heighten their domestic power"

(71). Women are presented as people who are good at trade and support their families

financially.

Ben Okri unravels the intensity of the pain of the motherhood through the words of Azaro who says, “I passed a house where a woman was screaming ... I thought thugs were beating her up and I went there and learned that she was giving birth and she had been in labour for three days and three nights” (189). Mum handles the role of mother and as a wife with the same ease. One can label her under the category of a womanist rather than a feminist. She never wants to dominate the male figure, Dad. She acknowledges her husband and accepts his value as a supporter. One never feels this character as a woman who is an embodiment of tolerance and silence. Sometimes she too expresses his dissatisfaction over the pathetic situation through which she goes. Her lamentation “I was the most beautiful girl in my village and I married this madman and I feel as if I have given birth to this same child five times. I must have done someone a great wrong to suffer like this” (508) substantiates her resistance. Raising a voice is not considered a feminine quality.

As a woman, Azaro’s Mum never wants to limit herself within the four walls of life. She tries her best to be an independent figure by becoming the breadwinner of the family. When her husband gets imprisoned, it is Mum who finds a room for them to occupy by paying a month’s rent in advance. Every time she proves her ability as a calculative wife. Here again, she becomes the symbol of Nigerian ghetto women who work hard to run their families along with their husbands. The physical sufferings she has gone through is highlighted when Okri writes, “She looked much leaner and her blouse hung from her and the straps fell over her shoulders as if she had shrunk in her clothes” (96). By supporting the family her identity becomes more visible to the society that tries to suppress her by putting her into the cage of patriarchal forces. Azaro’s Mum is a representative of every other Nigerian woman whose fate is similar to hers. He also, portrays the plight of Nigerian women as:

The women wore faded wrappers and dirty blouses; their faces were like Mum’s In her suffering . . . Mum’s, many faces that could have been hers, and I saw that her tiredness and sacrifice were not hers alone but were suffered by all women, all women of the marketplace. (190)

The patriarchal mentality of Dad makes him believe that women who are engaged in matters other than their family will neglect their familial roles. But Mum sees this as the uttering of an envious husband. She realizes the importance of education in refining a person’s character and this is revealed when she tells Azaro, “You must like

school. If your father had gone to school, we wouldn't be suffering so much. Learn all you can learn. This is a new age. Independence is coming. Only those who go to school can eat good food. Otherwise, you will end up carrying loads like your father" (109). Okri is very authentic and successful in providing a platform for Mum the representative of Black women, from where she can speak of her individuality and history. Here, she becomes a staunch advocate of African tradition and heritage.

Madame Koto, the second significant woman character, is portrayed as a multi-dimensional and complex character. Many critics viewed her as a metaphor for colonial domination. Madame Koto is portrayed as a character unable to belong neither to her own old culture nor to the colonial culture which resulted in creating a hybrid identity which is less native and more western. This resulted in creating in her a sense of hollowness. It was men who constantly tried to rule upon their woman counterparts. But here Madame Koto has inverted the scheme of exploitation by misusing Azaro and other ghetto dwellers. Okri presents Madame Koto as a neo-colonial thug and capitalist. How she establishes her power is well caught up in the following lines:

Madame Koto sucked in the powers of our area. Her dreams gave the children nightmares. Her colossal form took wings at night and ... corruption and disintegration, of innocent women and weak men. Her snoring altered the Geography of our destinies. Slowly, while the people of the area grew weaker, more accepting, more afraid, she grew stronger. (568)

Madame Koto subverts the perception that a woman must possess a tender body, while a man should have a rigid, tough one. In her one can see a complex female character, feminine in make-up but the conduct of whom is essentially masculine-feminine. This is to say that she possessed certain masculine-like traits, which was her exclusive character trait. Madame Koto is introduced at the beginning of the novel as an ambitious local bar owner. She starts her journey as a downtrodden in society. From the beginning to the end, she remains a mysterious figure so no one is sure about her origin or her growth. Others know about her through gossip, "They said of Madame Koto that she had buried three husbands and seven children and that she was a witch who ate her babies when they were still in her womb. They said she was a bewitcher of husbands and a seducer of young boys and a poisoner of children." (118)

Madame Koto explains well how a self-made independent woman is looked upon by her female counterparts in a male-dominated chauvinistic society these are the

opinion of the people. Among the black community, to get the privilege over others, women prefer to label themselves as matriarch. Here, Madame Koto who addresses herself as a matriarch exerts her power over others in different ways. It is quite common that in a matriarchal society, women will be economically safe and secure. As a matriarchal figure, she succeeds in bringing revolutionary changes to the society to which she belongs. She is successful in displacing patriarchy and the new social status that dawned upon her helped her to have a dominant voice in her relationships with both men and women. As a woman, she tries her best to uplift the lives of women socially and economically and thereby make them self-sufficient and secure. Her material affluence changed her physical appearance.

In a country like Africa, a woman's status is often read under the profile of motherhood rather than anything else. Motherhood often acts as a source of power and the same power is denied to Madame Koto. Her lack of motherhood makes her ashamed in front of society. Her desire to keep Azaro close to him shows her love and sincere longing for a child. And every time she incarnates in the form of a great mother who protects every Nigerian woman whenever they are under siege by oppressive forces, she shows her matriarchal prowess and authority. She turns herself into a guide and mentor for her peer groups.

Madame Koto dependents treat her as their mother and they mourn her death in the way people lose their mothers. Each woman, who comes to pay homage to Madame Koto, is extremely settled by themselves and enjoys a good financial status only because of Madame Koto. Okri draws the women characters by giving them a perfect shape and a worthy position in society. Madame Koto transcends her material profile through her hard work and thus changes her subjugated femininity into an authoritative one. She affirms her existence by forcefully eliminating masculine dominance over her in various forms.

Madame Koto exerts her authority over both men and women. She displays women's possibilities in deconstructing the patriarchal myth. Through many circumstances, she substantiates that a woman too can be powerful and be voiced. At the beginning of the novel, she shows the courage to throw down a customer who refuses to do the payment. The entire crowd around her gets stuck at the performance made by Madame Koto. She establishes her strength and supremacy through her massive figure. She becomes a symbol of evil or wicked figures who spread evilness over others. "People came to believe that Madame Koto had exceeded herself in witchcraft. They said she

wore the hair of animals and human beings on her head.” (428)

Though Madame Koto is portrayed as a negative character here, positive aspects of Koto dominate her negative traits. She acts as the harbinger who brings modernity to the Nigerian ghetto by introducing electricity, a fully furnished bar, and even a car too. For the people of Nigeria, the sight of a car is a wonder. Thus, she becomes a pioneer in bringing innovations to the so far undeveloped African society. Okri selects Madame Koto as the antagonist. She appears as a negation of Patriarchal power. Madame Koto has developed through her assertive style.

The two prominent female characters Mum and Madame Koto well explains the truth, that life is not easy for women in a male-dominated society. But through enduring many difficulties these two women emerge as empowered and they are suggestive of societal and cultural improvements that are slowly happening in Nigeria. In *The Famished Road*, Ben Okri leads women from the margins to the center, which helps to remove the negative stereotypes about women. Both female characters are effective in discovering their own personal spaces as well as assisting other women to do the same. They convey the truth that women have a unique role to play in the patterns of social development.

The paper thus highlights the female characters in *The Famished Road*. One can easily comprehend the different ways in which they gained an independent status of their own by shattering the age-old shackles bound by patriarchy. Madame Koto and Mum can be seen as examples of women from all over the world who rebelled against authority by voicing their rage and fear. Ben Okri empowers his women characters by assigning them certain responsibilities, which they extensively fulfil and thereby present themselves as opposing the stereotypical representations accorded to many a female character.

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