

**The Centre-Periphery Dichotomy:
Foregrounding Otherness in Ben Okri's Selected Novels**

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Introduction

Ben Okri's writing is renowned to promote hybridity, that is to say, the collapse of boundaries and symmetries. It consists in putting together high and low cultures, encompassing colonial and postcolonial issues, celebrating polyphony and the mixing of narrative modes as well as the 'New English'. This is justified by the fact that there are no boundaries and that everything is connected in the Okrian fiction. But, behind the façade of the third space that is apparent, lurks an oppositional relation, an incompatibility between frontiers in Okri's works. This is to say that hybridity, which is a legendary trope in *The Famished Road* trilogy, is questionable and questioned. As a consequence, books of the Nigerian novelist are felt to foreground a binary opposition between center/ periphery, self/other, etc, what could be termed anti-hybridity.

Afaf Ahmed Hasan Al-Saidi views this opposition in the colonial perspective. He lays emphasis on the imperial subjects who define themselves as superior selves in contrast to the barbarian others. In this process, the colonizer, who views the indigene as different from him, intends to exert his influence over him. Commenting on this colonial discourse, he had to say that this epistemology "shows the way [for the colonizer] to maintain authority over the Other in a colonial situation, that is, an imperialist must see the Other as different from him" (95). Seeing eye to eye with Al-Saidi, Homi Bhabha, who wrote at length on this speculation, admits that the colonial discourse favors a range of differences and discriminations that finally celebrates racial and cultural hierarchization (67). In Achille Mbembe's *On the Postcolony*, the centre-periphery opposition is analyzed through the lens of the postcolony. The author believes that in societies that lately departed from the colonial experience, a binary opposition sets state institutions and citizens apart. This amounts to foregrounding etatism, that is, the total control of the State over citizens: "*state vs. civil society*" (103). He believes that powers of the State are so exorbitant that its relationships with the civil society are by far hierarchical. In Stephen Slemon's article *Magical Realism as Postcolonial Discourse*, the dichotomy of center and periphery is studied in the opposition between the magical and the realist, and puts to the fore the denial of dual spatiality. In his approach, he states that in magical realism, there is a conflict between two contrasting and unmatchable spheres, with each trying to single out itself from the other. In a conclusive stance, he puts that since "the ground rules of these two worlds are incompatible, neither one can fully come into being, and each remains suspended, locked in a continuous dialectic with the other" (409).

In his rendition of the center/periphery dichotomy, Okri's fiction takes into account the same preoccupations raised by Al-Saidi and Homi Bhabha, that is, the binary opposition colonizer-colonized taking place in the colonial environment. He also concurs with Mbembe in that binary oppositions still exist in Africa in spite of the retirement of the colonizer. But, the difference between their renditions of this binary division lies in Okri's focus on hierarchical discourses maintained by the favored groups against the disfavored ones in the postcolony. What is at issue here is that Okri does not refute Slemon's deconstruction of magical realism which holds the magical and realism as two antonymous and exclusive paradigms.

In this paper I intend to show how hybridity can be questioned in some of Okri's novels with an emphasis on his trilogy: *The Famished Road*, *Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches*. What I am intent upon is that the writer's works can be read another way, and that the third space, which is seemingly a poetics in these novels, can be trespassed. The main issue pinpointed by this article is to highlight the limitations of hybridity, basing on the postcolonial studies. In practice, this theory will be of help in showing binary oppositions between colonizer and colonized, conflicting relations between governors and the governed in post-colonial Africa, and the prevalence of set symmetries, making magical and realist worlds as two incompatible paradigms.

I. Colonial Discourse and Otherness

In Okri's fiction, the relation between the colonizer and the colonized is not that of equal selves. It is one in which the white race proclaims its superiority over black people who are held in low esteem. By despising and disdainning the indigenes that are viewed as the periphery, the British colonialist assumes his race is and should be the center of all interests and attentions. This predominance of the white self gives rise to an open inconsideration of the black subject. This negative epistemology has two major declensions. In *Infinite Riches*, it is first of all perceived through the way the colonizer apprehends the economy of the colony. For Okri, the West views Africa's natural resources from a hegemonic perspective. This amounts to saying that colonies' riches belong more to the colonizer-the centre- than to the colony which should be disposed because it is the periphery. In *Infinite Riches* the Governor-General sets into motion this colonial epistemology. He is so proud of his civilization that he senses that Nigerian mineral riches are fit to fall to his countrymen. As he succeeds in hacking into the white man's dream, Azaro is informed of the secret and cynical project the British administrator is fancying over since he comes up with the knowledge that "He dreamt that on this beautiful road all Africa's wealth, its gold and diamonds and diverse mineral resources, [...], would be transported to his land to enrich the lives of his people across the green ocean" (IR, 236).

This first understanding of the quotation reveals that Africa naturally consents to let the West take its resources away; and that there is no way to complain about it since this activity takes place in the normal course of things: the center being superior to the periphery. The domination of the continent is led with such mastery that Africans can even not deem to

object to the conveyance of their “gold and diamonds and diverse mineral resources” towards the West. It seems that they are so subjugated that they are enough weak to set up in opposition to the extortion of their resources. Okri thinks that Western authority over Africa is concretely perceived through Africans’ consent to be dispossessed of their own goods. Walter Rodney sees eye to eye with Okri on this point when he admits some economic agreements were tacitly or manifestly sealed between Europe and Africa. For Rodney, the two parties have an unbalanced and dialectical relationship: “Western Europe and Africa had a relationship which ensured the transfer of wealth from Africa to Europe” (75). What the critic insists on is that the colonial apparatus is implemented in such a hegemonic way that it denies Azaro’s countrymen the freedom of speech and choice. They do not have the possibility to decide clauses of their economic relationships with the mother country because they are the periphery. Worse, the transfer of Nigerian wealth to England is not the fruit of a common agreement between the two parties.

For Okri, since the Governor-General has a negative outlook on the colonized, he subsequently assumes that exchanges with Nigeria should always be carried out in favour of the West. That is the reason why food produced in the continent is unjustly conveyed to Britain. What is at issue here is that this hegemonic discourse fuelled by the British administrator serves to degrade the indigenes, by maintaining them on the margin from where they can never be redeemed. From this, the marginal only have to make do with the diktat imposed upon them by the governor who regards them as a “*savage, backward, and undeveloped*” (Tyson, 419) people. Worse, when the Governor-General decides that Africans do not know how to make the best use of their own mineral resources, and that the West can protect them better (IR, 237), their bestiality makes them lose their hold on reality with no African raising the finger in protest.

The second understanding of the quotation can be considered as a conclusive stance of the first one. The idea is that when the colonized forcibly give approval to the transfer of their resources, Britain therefore reinforces its hegemony by profiting from such gratuity. This dominant position makes the Governor-General believe that since Azaro’s people are illiterate and drive behind the times, they are not fit to imagine the progress, the development and the economic growth his country experiences from the conveyance of Nigerian foods. And since the colonized will continue to be ignorant of these privileges, its riches will still contribute to the blossoming of the West. The reason for such baseness is that in the Western ontology, the center needs and deserves progress more than the periphery. This absolutist epistemology is denounced by Shadi Neimneh through his admonition that “European discourses commonly and negatively construct the other as inferior” (133).

For Okri, the colonial discourse assures the economic blossoming of the governor’s country at the expense of Azaro’s nation which keeps sinking into destituteness. He senses that this situation reveals that the economic power of Western Europe rests on the abusive exploitation of the mineral resources of colonized lands. This emphasizes the stance that Nigeria is the bread winner of Britain. So to speak, without the colony’s riches, the imperial power cannot experience such an economic breakthrough. Walter Rodney brings forth this

unfairness by charging the colonizer with liquidating Africa's economic prospects. He posits that "[t]he contention here is that over" the colonial period, "Africa helped to develop Western Europe in the same proportion as Western Europe helped to underdevelop Africa" (75). What the critic drives at is that the colonizer profits by his strategic and political hegemonies over the colonized to cause their impoverishment.

By dint of extorting Nigeria's goods for centuries, this British dependency can only but sink into a continual and severe state of pauperization. By giving without receiving anything in compensation, it is quite obvious the periphery finally becomes undeveloped and poor at the advantage of the center which harvests the dividends of his shameful and unjust exploitation. Through this, the West seems to have trampled underfoot the clauses of mutual business partnership between countries, and which should be advantageous for either party in terms of gains. Unfortunately, this partnership is biased, unbalanced. It is imbued with colonial epistemologies that favors and safeguards interests of the colonial power. From this, it is crystal clear that African economies cannot get out of their retardation. How can it be otherwise if their affinity with their hegemonic partner is asymmetric? Kamalu senses, through his vehement criticism of colonial exploitation, that Okri "frames the asymmetry in the social relationship between Africa and the West in terms of exploiter Vs exploited, master and slave relationship" (42).

In *Infinite Riches*, the binary opposition between center and periphery is also manifest in the cultural field. When the Governor-General sets foot in Africa, he comes across some customary practices which are by far different from his established cultural usages. And since the local populations he found on the spot do not have the same development standards like him, the British administrator straightaway categorizes them as backward communities with an unfinished, incomplete and mutilated civilization. This confirms his idea that his culture is that of the center, and which is entrusted with a civilizing mission consisting in saving Azaro's community from obscurantism. Endowed with this alleged hegemony, the governor does not attach any importance to Nigerian names. He simply views them as evidences of a barbaric civilization. In order to grant these indigenous codes a Universalist aura, he undertakes to coin new words for these realities. Since he wants to make African names sound like European codes, he decides to distort, change, and forge them with the effect to adapt them to Europhone canon. In the implementation of this cynical project, the Governor-General "changed the names of places" (IR, 126). By changing names of places and by replacing them with his own codes, the governor "redesigned the phonality of African names" (IR, 126), which clearly indicates that he "softened the consonants, flattened the vowels" (IR, 126).

Michel Foucault perceives this forgery, this counterfeited creation, as "the arrangement of identities and differences into ordered tables" (72). This statement highlights the Governor-General's venture to make local names espouse Western standards. The phrase "arrangement of identities and differences" suggests his effort to organize the already existing native codes by smoothing down their rough edges, effacing their unwanted traits. This amounts to stripping indigenous names of their African characteristics. This activity mainly

consists in erasing from local names all features (identities and differences) that make them unique and genuine pieces. When this effort turns successful, these forged codes therefore become arranged into “*ordered tables*”, that is to say, into Western Europhone paradigms.

For Okri, the rationale lurking behind this forgery is that the governor looks down on Africans and their cultural values. It is noteworthy that his undertaking fits into a system that downplays everything that is not Western. The Governor-General holds African values in low esteem due to the clichés, stereotypes that circulate owing to the colonial discourse. This epistemology only fosters negative ideas about non-European models of excellence. This is what Homi Bhabha rightfully evokes through the following statement:

An importance of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of ‘fixity’ in the ideological construction of otherness. Fixity, as a sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition (66).

In highlighting fixity, Bhabha regards the Western hegemonic epistemology as an unchanging disorder. He explains that the center’s view of the periphery still remains static, and the logos they develop to identify the colonized never change. Whatever is the worth of Nigerian cultural values, the Governor-General always takes a dim view of them by seeing them as useless experiences. That is to say that since his outlook on Azaro’s culture is strongly dependent on the concept of fixity, the British administrator keeps seeing customary practices in Azaro’s homeland as “*signs of state of barbarism*” (Hodgen, 62), and that opinion always remain the same. So to speak, fixity is the energy that fuels and supports the mechanism of cultural differences. When it is set into motion, it favors the existence of clichés which hold the cultural identity of the colonizer as something disordered. But to make indigenous codes ordered and respondent to universalist standards, the colonizer only needs to arrange them into ordered tables, making them something well organized, something “*always ‘in place’, already known*” (Bhabha 66), that is to say, a standardized paradigm that is rid of any form of attack. Yet, meanwhile the colonial administrator celebrates his values and ceaselessly denigrates Azaro’s local culture; he is still incapable of producing the slightest proof that underpins his criticism.

Fixity, as an unchanging order, means that the colonizer keeps a good opinion of his cultural identity. As he thinks that his civilization is the center of all attentions and interests, he believes that it therefore remains flawless forever, and that no other discourse can contest the verity he has already established. The consequence of such a pretention is that cultural codes of the periphery are those which are and should be at stake. That is the reason why the Governor-General assumes that there is no harm in destroying Nigerian names. As he changes the true essence of these codes, they consequently lose their cultural potency. Azaro confirms this saying that not only do the “renamed things los[e] their old reality” (IR, 126) but they

also “lost their ancient weight in our memory” (IR, 126). This situation shows how evil the center is to the periphery. Because the self assumes his culture is exempt from any reproach compared to that of the other, he avails himself of the right to drive non-Western paradigms to a lingering agony. Through this cultural dictatorship many indigenous customary habits silently and slowly sink into chaos. Their continual mutilation is recorded by Frantz Fanon who posits that the legacy of many a colonized area definitely face a “*continual agony*” which makes that “the culture once living and open to the future, becomes [...] caught in the yolk of oppression” (4). Regrettably, when Nigeria gets independent, the existence of hierarchies still continues.

II. Hierarchical Discourses in the Postcolony

In Okri’s fiction, the prevalence of stereotypes does not come to a term when colonization is over in Nigeria. It still prevails when this dependency is now governed by a local leadership. The reading of works by the Nigerian writer indicates that the center-periphery opposition is a trope that displays the hierarchical relationships of people in the postcolony (post-colonial Africa), that is to say societies freshly departing from the colonial experience. In the postcolony, the social fabric is torn. The different components of the community do not come together. The strong opposition between the ghetto inhabitants makes that the society is stratified and hierarchized, with a group claiming that it is the centre and the rest (of the community) which is viewed as the periphery. In the Okrian novels, this reality is perceived through the two sorts of binary opposition that are predominantly exposed. In the construction of the centre-periphery Manichean division, two major discourses are prevalent in the postcolony.

On one hand, members of the Party of the Rich (the ruling party) state their superiority to the Party of the Poor (the opposition). In *The Famished Road*, the political arena of post-colonial Nigeria is dominated by the binary opposition ruling party/the opposition. It highlights the supremacist discourse of the Party of the Rich over the Party of the Poor. With the State apparatus within hands, the ruling party takes the lead over the opposition, considering themselves as the centre of all attentions. Metaphorically, it sees itself as the navel of the political life in the ghetto, the focal paradigm around which all interests should be crystallized. The party in power nurtures the idea that it is exempt from any reproaches and that its members always have decent behaviors. And in the meantime, the opposition is seen as the margin which all negative superlatives are and should be attached to: its militants are seen as the embodiment of evil. The Party of the Rich views members of the Party of the Poor as the main agents of all oddities that undermined the ghetto. The latter are so vilipended by the power that when something wrong interferes with community life, they are held responsible for this. This Manichean vision maintained by the rich party is fuelled by lies and false verities. The idea is that the centre seeks to corner at all costs the periphery by charging it with misdeeds it has even not committed. In the following episode, militants of the rich party once distributed some rotten milk to Azaro’s fellows. When the famished folks ingurgitated the bad food, many died and a great majority was left sick. Back on the ghetto square to diffuse their political platforms, these politicians realize the evil their milk had

committed. To redeem in the eyes of the masses, they shamefully lay the guilt on the opposition, discharging themselves. To give credence to their discourse, their megaphones untruthfully utter that: “*THEY WERE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE MILK, NOT US. THEY WANTED TO DISCREDIT US*” (TFR, 52).

This stance displays the bad press the ruling party maintains and circulates at the disadvantage of the party of the poor. When holding them as responsible for distributing the poisonous and stale milk, the power is intent up discrediting the party of the have-nots in the eyes of Azaro’s people. In so doing, the Party of the Poor is disdainfully categorized as the periphery of all sins by the centre. The statement “*THEY WERE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE MILK, NOT US*” clearly accounts for this. The first particle of the sentence metaphorically suggests an accusing finger pointing at the responsible for the bad food. It also shows how the ‘other’ is exposed to public condemnation; and that if the population should decide to trace the poisoning back to its sources, the opposition may be castigated. And in the meanwhile the ‘centre’ is exempt from suspicion; the particle “*NOT US*” giving credence to this.

Even though they have truly committed this oddity, the party in power does not acknowledge their fault. Worse, they decide to lay the blame on the opposition. This unfair situation puts to the fore the binary opposition between the leading and opposition parties in the postcolony. Highlighting their conflicting relationships, Ikenna Kamalu pens that “the CENTRE-PERIPHERY image schema frames social relationship in spatial terms” (42). What the critic is driving at is that social relationships in political life are never those of equal selves. Political organizations in post-colonial Africa are never the same in all respects. While rulers assume they are the good, their opponents are viewed as the bad. And parties which have the chance to be in power readily display a haughty attitude towards the opposition. This leads to the hierarchization of social relationships of politicians in Nigeria. What comes out of this division is that people involved in politics can and will never be able to come to a common ground animosity is so undermining their bonds. Kamalu believes that this unrest is caused by the fact that the Party of the Rich always despises the Party of the Poor when they openly state that “we versus them” (42). And since the Part of the Rich versus the opposition, they do not even dare to unfairly accuse them of poisoning Azaro’s ghetto fellows with the rotten food.

Okri draws a parallel between this binary opposition in *The Famished Road* and the hierarchical relationships of political parties in Africa today. He denounces the supercilious attitude of ruling parties towards their opponents. When a party gains access to power, they thoroughly forget that they may lose it someday. This hegemonic position leads its members to put on airs, and to be prompted by the strong belief that they have more rights than the militants of the opposition in the country. This arrogance is generally perceived on a political social plan. Prior to elections, ruling parties of the postcolony sometimes forge some dispositions of the constitution with the view to eternally remain in power. And when the opposition takes to the street in protest, riot squads are the right interlocutors authorities send for them. No wonder if protesters’ sit-ins, meetings or demonstrations, initially meant to be peaceful, sadly turn out in bloodshed. But in an adverse view, when the power organizes a

political rally, it is always a success since security forces are there to manage militants. And when a problem should interfere, the police act in time to overcome it. For Okri, social unrests will always befall the postcolony. Since the leading class is inclined to believe that, being in power, grants them the privileges attached to the 'centre', the opposition will keep on rioting in order to change for the better its disdainful attributes being the periphery.

On the other hand, politicians (of both parties) maintain and safeguard their domination over the marginalized poorer population. In the fiction of the Nigerian novelist, this hegemonic discourse is perceived through the relationships between politicians and the population. The dominant position of members of both the Party of the Rich and the Party of the Poor compared to the ghetto residents is examined in terms of access to a decent life. People involved in politics believe that they are the ones who not only deserve to be protected from hardship but who should lead an enviable life. In *The Famished Road*, newly independent Nigeria is marked by the advent of modernity and its implications and results. Among the population of the ghetto, politicians are those who have access to the new episteme. Madame Koto, a fervent militant of the richest party, has the privilege to possess electricity: "The most extraordinary things were happening in Madame Koto's bar. The first unusual thing was that cables connected to her rooftop now brought electricity" (TFR, 373). Azaro informs that she is also wealthy because she has "bought her car" (TFR, 383). While she allows herself such prosperous and rich conditions, the great majority of Azaro's village people have "hunger on their faces" (TFR, 122).

From this, Okri clearly displays the social division occurring in the postcolony. He depicts a great malaise in the ghetto where politicians, the richer ones, have no regard for the poorer and lower classes. They think they are the only category of the population which merits to profit from the country's wealth in contempt of the poor who should remain in unprecedented poverty and hunger. This is what a drinker- in Madame Koto's bar- admonishes when he says that members of the Party of the Poor "think of them, that's all they do" (TFR, 212). The man indicates that these politicians strive for their own benefits and that they do not intend to see the rest of the ghetto residents attain any social wellbeing. They think of them, that is all they do when it comes to share 'the national cake'. They do not even dare to lend the poor a tiny portion of public wealth. They only reserve for themselves the lion's share. What they do, in return, is to take away everything leaving the masses in destituteness. Through the drinker's complaint, the "CENTRE-PERIPHERY image schema fram[ing] social relationship" (Kamalu, 42) is clearly established. It clearly exposes the hierarchical discourse of politicians which aims at the stratification of the population. This division yields two groups. There is a privileged category or the centre which should be the well offs while the other group, the great majority, should not have access to comfort. Since they are assumed to be the periphery of all misfortunes, the rest of the population is kept in poverty, on the fringe of the society. Ikenna Kamalu strongly disproves this biased social arrangement. He ranges against the hierarchical discourse that the Party of the Poor circulates in the postcolony, in the ghetto of *The Famished Road*. In his approach, the critic gives credence to the drinker's complaint. That is the reason why he believes that people involved in politics have never been preoccupied with the social progress of the masses. On the contrary, what they are champions

at is their chase after wealth, their desire to hoard money when the inhabitants of the poor districts are crushed by hunger. In corroboration of the denunciation of this centre-periphery dichotomy, Kamalu pens that “the politicians versus the inhabitants” (42) in Okri’s fiction.

What is at issue here is that the centre does not let any possibility to the periphery to accede to wealth: the centre versus the periphery or else politicians versus the inhabitants of the ghetto, to paraphrase Ikenna Kamalu. This radical division is put in the foreground through the paired opposition such as Madame Koto-the ghetto dwellers. The barkeep is a prosperous businesswoman who makes money not only thanks to the dividends she gains from palm wine and pepper-soup but also, and to a large degree, owing to her membership to the ruling Party of the Rich. Endowed with this asset, she frequently gains contracts by hiring her car during rallies organized by the party or by receiving payment when he bar hosts ceremonies of the secret society (the lobby group of her party). Koto is presented as a heartless woman who is only interested in accumulating money, never any good to the poor. In the image of the other politicians of her kind, she is “motivated by the lavish possibilities of increased wealth and power” (Hemminger, 52) when the masses are bowing under the burden of misery. As someone of the centre, she does nothing to improve the social conditions of people parked in the periphery. Worse, she contributes to the worsening of their unenviable situation. For Koto, it does not matter if the population is getting poorer and poorer provided she keeps on becoming richer and richer. This selfish attitude of the woman is echoed by Bill Hemminger when he pens that “[a]s the ghetto swelters in poverty, she becomes rich, she safeguards her worldly wealth” (77). The critic clearly shows the radical opposition rich-poor that marks the social conditions of people living in Azaro’s country. He indicates that the division keeps on widening between the well off and the have-nots, and that nothing can make them merge together. In a denunciation of politicians’ hierarchical discourse, Kamalu suggests that the drinker in Madame Koto’s bar is suspected to end up his complaint voicing out “*they versus us*” (42).

From what has been said earlier, Okri seems to suggest that the two hierarchical discourses that are prevalent in the ghetto show “the way to maintain authority over the Other in a [post-]colonial situation” (Al-Saidi, 95). When the Party of the Rich holds the Party of the Poor as responsible for poisoning the ghetto residents with the rotten milk, their desire to maintain authority over the opposition is clearly propounded. In fact, the accusation brought against the opposition definitely makes them keep a low profile in the eyes of the population. Since they now have a bad press, the balance of power is no more established. The ruling party profits by this situation to turn the course of things in their favor. Once the great majority of the voting populations turn their back on the poorer party, their desire to win the elections readily becomes a chimera. In return, the party in power meets no significant difficulty in being reelected. So, in circulating and fostering negative opinions about their opponents, culminating in their defeat during the polls, the Party of the Rich succeeds in maintaining authority over them.

The same disproportionate situation applies to the relationship between politicians and the population. By getting wealthier and wealthier while “malnutrition devoured the children,

while poverty crushed the hopes of the inhabitants” (IR, 200) of the ghetto, politicians create a big gap between the favored and the disfavored. And since the poor will never be able to match with the well off, politicians’ hierarchical discourse in the postcolony “see[s] the Other as different from the Self” (Al-Saidi, 95). When they succeed in maintaining enough identity with the ‘Other’, people involved in politics can valorize control over it, to paraphrase Afaf Ahmed Hasan Al-Saidi. For sake of argue, one can assert that Azaro’s begging Madame Koto for food (TFR, 83) is an episode in which the self exerting control over the ‘Other’ is evidenced, since asking for pittance shows the boy’s strong dependence on the rich politician woman. This dream of the self to rule over the other is also rendered in spatial terms.

III. Realism vs. the Magical

Okri, in his writings, stands against the principle of the real world and the spiritual abode coming into being. He does not adhere to the idea that the natural and the supernatural can have some bonds, making them become blurred worlds: what is called magical realism. On the contrary, the Nigerian novelist does see an incompatibility of frontiers on either side of the dividing line between the physical and the immaterial realms. For the Nigerian writer, space is not hybrid. This dialectic which shows realism and fantasy as exclusive paradigms also foregrounds the dominant epistemology of the fantastic over the real. To be specific, the mundane realm views itself as superior to the immaterial abode. The idea central to this point is that the world of humans considers itself as the centre and in the same time parks that of spirits, demons and extraordinary happenings in the periphery. This spatial division, which is to be seen in *The Famished Road*, opposes the physical world (in which fully human beings live) to the spiritual realm where Azaro’s spirit-friends and demons dwell. In the novel, Mum and Dad think that no interference of the spiritual world with their realm is possible. Characterized by this single-minded experience of spatiality, the spirit-child’s parents assess all happenings from a realist point of view, that is to say, in accordance with the laws and properties that govern the mundane realm. This dominant assumption makes them attach less importance to the otherworld. That is to say that they view realities of their world as the centre, and any happening emanating from the spiritual world is evidently seen as belonging to the periphery. This is precisely what happens in the following episode when Mum and Dad mock at their son’s idea that spirits can break a window:

[S]he turned on me [...]

Why did you break their window, eh? [...]

‘I didn’t break it!’

‘Who did?’

‘The spirits.’

‘What spirits?’

‘How can spirits break a window?’ Dad wondered.

‘I don’t know.’[...]

‘You’re lying.’

‘I’m not’. It was the spirits (TFR, 321).

This gapped communication between Azaro and his parents indicates that the periphery (the otherworld) cannot coalesce with the centre (realism). When the boy suggests that spirits leave their original world, step into the physical sphere and damage the blind old man’s property, the father does not give credence to this allegation. He is rather convinced that the magical and realism are two exclusive and incompatible paradigms and that there cannot be any possible intertwining between both worlds. Provided that immaterial beings belong to a space which is assumed to be obscure and abstract, and that humans live in a physical space, Dad thinks that no dweller of the material world can go beyond the limits of their spatial boundary. Moreover, what Dad does not publicly say is that spirits and demons of the inferior realm can on no account step into the superior world of humans That is the reason why he disdainfully wonders that “How can spirits break a window?” when his son accuses spirits of breaking the old man’s window.

For Okri, what is at issue here is that Azaro’s parents have a realist conception of space. They do not believe in magical realism, that is to say, when space is concomitantly fantastic and real with spirits intruding in the physical abode and humans getting immersed in the obscure realm. On the contrary, Dad and Mum believe material and objective realities, which hold that “the external world is real and that our senses give us a true report of it” (Watt, 89). This means that they look out the world from purely physical and Cartesian perspectives. The idea is that when they look at things, they only perceive their physical aspect, that is to say, through the possibility to touch and feel them. According to this principle, Dad and Mum cannot admit the possible presence of immaterial things and beings in the ghetto they dwell. And by dint of having this exclusionist outlook, it finally becomes fetishist to the extent that Dad and Mum consider it as the only valid truth about space. Taylor concludes that Azaro’s parents have a “dominant rationalist view” (319) of spatiality. The reason is that Dad and Mum, who view the ghetto-space with a hegemonic epistemology, believe that spirits and demons from the peripheral abode cannot interfere with it, transgress its boundaries. When their son accuses spirits of wrecking havoc in their compound, they only laugh at him because from the picture they have of spatiality, the magical and realism, rather than being inclusive paradigms, are by far engaged in a dialectic relationship. Stephen Slemon sees eye to eye with Azaro’s progenitors. However, the critic goes beyond the simplistic antagonism of spaces, and preferably views the immaterial and the mundane as conflicting things. He epitomizes his thought through this:

[I]n the language of narration in a magical realist text, a battle between two oppositional systems takes place, each working toward the creation of a different kind of fictional world from the other. Since the ground rules of these two worlds are incompatible, neither one can fully come into being, and each remains suspended,

locked in a continuous dialectic with the ‘other’ a situation which creates disjunction within each of the separate discursive systems, rendering them gaps, absences, and silences (409-410).

Slemon’s quotation is interesting on two plans. Firstly, it denies the inclusive principle of magical realism in *The Famished Road*. It also stands against the idea that the spirit-child, Azaro, mediates the two worlds. Through this stance, Okri seems to laugh at Olatubosun Ogunsanwo’s analyses that “the supernatural and the natural are believed to be combined in an abiku, a spirit-child” (44) and that Azaro “apprehends both worlds simultaneously” (44). What the writer insists on is that in the association of the fantastic and the real, there is a tendency that “a battle between” between these “two oppositional systems takes place” with either element trying to exclude the other. Secondly, the core issue in Slemon’s insight emphasizes the inclination of the centre (realism) to claim its domination over the periphery (the magical). This hierarchical discourse gives credence to Dad and Mum’s arrogant and downgrading opinion about their son who obstinately opines that spirits can hack into the physical abode and break the old man’s window. Their ‘dominant rationalist view’ is echoed by Wendy B. Faris who openly militates for the hierarchization of spaces in magical realism. What one can ascertain is that she does not want people to see this postcolonial tool as the meeting of two paradigms that cancel each other out, but as an association in which realism is prevalent. She writes that “magical realism is a combination of realism and the fantastic in which the former predominates” (102). In her quotation, it clearly appears that realism, denoted by the adjective “former”, has the upper hand over the magical through the use of the verb “predominates”. Taking our cue from Faris, we can say that through the widow’s episode in *The Famished Road* Dad and Mum are right to disbelieve in Azaro and mock at his allegation of spirits breaking raising havoc in the ghetto-space because their rationalist picture of the world prevails over the supernatural perspective.

Through the predominance of realism over the magical, Okri purports to show how many African people have adopted Western ontology, which commands that space should be viewed from an exclusive rationalist perspective. With their downgrading outlook of the world of spirits, Africans become reluctant to metaphysical and spiritual speculations. When they fail to account for happenings from an objective system of knowledge, they subsequently consider it as evil. From this, it appears that Cartesian minds view the world of spirits as the receptacle of satanic manifestations. Moreover, spirits’ weird space should be dreaded because getting involved with it set problems. And anyone who is suspected to have commerce with spirits or the spiritual sphere is unfavorably looked at. This is the case of Azaro, “*the abiku*” child who “is generally dreaded by the living and regarded as eccentric or mad because of its regular ‘soliloquies’ or mysterious conversations with invisible spirit-friends” (Lim, 63) in *The Famished Road*.

Beside this dull tableau of the periphery, the material world is seen as the epitome of all positive superlatives. Okri senses that people in Azaro’s ghetto hold that things which can be seen and felt are those which deserve to be promoted. Under these circumstances, they foster and maintain the idea that the truth resides in physical things; and that scientific truths

exclusively belongs the material world, but not to an immaterial space which champions at circulating postulates and whose doxa can on no account be checked out. Ayobami Kehinde who does not refute the binary opposition which puts realism at odds with the magical rather labels it a “*Manichaeism Delirium*” (110). Through this phrase, Kehinde clearly presents both worlds as stratified spaces. In this, he admits that the result of this hierarchization amounts to seeing the real as ‘the good’ and the unreal as ‘evil’, or better material manifestations as the truth and immaterial phenomena as falsity.

Through the radical division of both worlds, Okri foregrounds the dominant epistemology of realism which constructs the picture of the otherworld through the prism of otherness, “which is at once an object of desire and derision, an articulation of difference contained within the fantasy of origin and identity” (Bhabha, 67). Taking our cue from the Indian theorist, we can argue that humans range the world of spirits, its habitants and everything that is connected to it as the ‘other’. In a similar vein, Dad and Mum, who view Azaro as an object of derision, construct the spirit-child’s identity as that of the ‘other’. Since he frequently goes to and fro between both worlds, the spirit-child is believed to be the ‘other’. The reason for his social and cultural rejection is due to his hybrid feature, which makes that he cannot be a full dweller of the realist realm his parents inhabit. As a matter of fact, he frequently comes up against “his parents’ inability to understand his experience at the hands of his mischievous kindred spirits” (Ogunsanwo, 47). The little boy who had previously broken his original pact with the spiritual sphere, with the hope to be adopted and cherished by his earthly parents is now confined to the status of the ‘other’. Mocked and psychologically tried, the “abiku [the other] is generally believed to be mischievous and heartless” (47). But if they keep on seeing him through the prism of otherness, the spirit-child may be tempted to heed his spirit-friend Ade who has decided “to find peace and relief from suffering in the leap of certain death” (Mahmutovic, 2); an opportunity for him to have a higher status: that of the ‘centre’.

Conclusion

In this paper, my concern was to analyze the centre-periphery division in the Okrian fiction, particularly in his trilogy. And at the twilight of this reflection, I can assert that life is made of contradictions, and that binary oppositions are realities that are ever-present everywhere and every time in relationships between people or organizations. Today, the hierarchical epistemology of the West is present in many spheres. In international relations, the West continues to rule over the rest of the world, mainly the Third World. At the United Nations, the centre-periphery division is also present. Decisions that are made in this institution should always meet the consent of the European Union, the US, etc. On the academic plan, the centre does not still trust educational systems of the periphery. That is the reason why some brilliant African students sent to study abroad are mostly relegated to lower forms when others are compelled to resume the forms they have already completed in their country. This is what Shadi Neimneh admonishes when he writes that “Europeans discourses commonly and negatively construct the other as inferior” (133).

In the postcolony, politicians and leaders have not divorced from dominant discourses that once circulated in the colonial era. They have reactivated them, making them a poetics. Achille Mbembe pens that the postcolony is “a particular way of [...] re-forming [colonial] stereotypes” (102). In Africa today, ruling parties have hierarchical relationships with their opposition. Their desire to always maintain themselves in power and keep the rest of the population under their authority urges them to develop stereotypes. The arrogant discourse of ruling parties brings about political turmoil in post-colonial Africa. The unfair measures of rulers do not favor a peaceful environment in African States which become hot spots where chaos reigns supreme. The political tension that occurred in Burkina Faso subsequently to President Blaise Compaoré’s desire to run for another unconstitutional presidential mandate set the country ablaze, culminating in his downfall. This typical example allows us to say that in the postcolony, the political struggle between ruling parties and the opposition is akin to the centre-periphery rat race over the access to power.

In many African countries, relationships between politicians and the masses are tensed and hierarchized. Since they are viewed as the periphery, the masses are excluded from gratifications. In Nigeria, politicians misuse this money just for their own egocentric interest. Oladayo Nathaniel Awojobi complains about the political corruption that is given to notice in the Fourth Republic. He illustrates his admonition saying that “in Nigeria, funds that are allocated to the development of the country after the installation of democratic governance in 1999 are mismanaged by political office holders” (124). He argues that since federal authorities do nothing about this regretful situation, the country sinks into despair since “corruption has constituted a major hindrance to development in the country” (155).

For Okri, studying the magical and realism as two opposed paradigms suggests Africans’ disbelief in their traditional religion, and their manifest interest for the religious confession of the colonizer. Once they convert to Christianity, they adopt the ecclesiastical discourse demanding a thorough and exclusive submission to Jesus Christ’s teachings. Likewise, they are taught during Sunday services that any worship of spirits and ancestors are sinful practices that may lead them into the depths of Inferno. From reading the Bible and applying its recommendations, people grow to turn their backs on the religion of their ancestors. In so doing, Africans clearly show that they no more believe in the protecting power of the manes of their ancestors, and that the idea holding that the dead are still living, according to the African ontology, is only a chimera. In the same range of ideas, Okri despises the mimetic attitude of African people who only cherish Western standards at the expense of their own cultural values, casting them aside. Moreover, the Nigerian writer reproaches some of his countrymen not only for mocking at the abiku phenomenon but also for viewing it as ill-adapted to explain a mother’s unexplained and successive child losses. However, the best way to account for these motherly pains is to place them in their socio-cultural environment since “*the abiku phenomenon is a very rich cultural resource*” (Soliman, 167) for the good understanding of the West African worldview.

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