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NARRATING THE FUTURE AS THE CONSTRUCTION OF COLLECTIVE IDENTITY IN BEN OKRI'S *THE FAMISHED ROAD TRILOGY*

Abstract. *Research into national identities (e.g. Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities and Homi K. Bhabha's Nation and Narration) has established that nations construct their collective identities through the narratives about themselves. The present paper examines Ben Okri's literary attempt at constructing the collective identity of the post-colonial nation in his Abiku trilogy (The Famished Road, Songs of Enchantment, Infinite Riches). Special emphasis is placed on Okri's narrative about the "unborn nation" with regard to the temporality of the future. In the beginning, the article demonstrates how the idea of the future is embodied in the trilogy's plot scheme which resists the pattern of cyclic repetition. Following that, it discusses the political visions of Okri's characters as a form of imagining the nation's future. The collective experience of dreaming of the future becomes the focus of the last part of the article. By exploring the relations between Okri's narrative and temporality in The Famished Road series, this paper will intend to show that, first, the temporality of the future is the place where a nation can be imagined, and, second, the nation can be understood as the imagined community of people who dream of their collective future.*

Key words: *temporalities; imagining the future; collective identity; cyclicality; Ben Okri.*

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НАРРАТИВ О БУДУЩЕМ И ЕГО РОЛЬ В КОНСТРУИРОВАНИИ КОЛЛЕКТИВНОЙ ИДЕНТИЧНОСТИ В ТРИЛОГИИ Б. ОКРИ *ГОЛОДНАЯ ДОРОГА*

Аннотация. *В области исследования национальной идентичности распространена теория, что нации конструируют свою коллективную идентичность через нарративы о себе (исходя из работ «Воображаемые сообщества» Бенедикта Андерсона и «Нация и наррация» Хоми К. Бхабхи). В данном докладе рассматривается литературная попытка Бена Окри (ре-)конструировать коллективную идентичность постколониальной нации в его трилогии об «Абику» («Голодная дорога», «Песни Очарования», «Несметные богатства»). Особый акцент сделан на связи нарратива о «нерожденной нации» и темпоральности будущего. Прежде всего, показано, что идея будущего воплощена в сюжетной схеме трилогии и противопоставлена концепции цикличности. Обосновано, что политическое видение, которым обладают герои Б. Окри, является одной из форм видения национального будущего. Коллективный опыт сновидений и мечтаний о будущем становится предметом последней части работы. Исследуя отношения между нарративом и темпоральностью в цикле «Голодная дорога», данный доклад доказывает, что, во-первых, темпоральность будущего – это пространство воображения нации, и, во-вторых, нацию можно понимать как воображаемое сообщество людей, мечтающих о совместном будущем.*

Ключевые слова: *темпоральность; воображение будущего; коллективная идентичность; цикличность; Бен Окри.*

The relation between time, nation and narration has been largely discussed in Benedict Anderson's study *Imagined Communities* (1983). As Anderson identifies, the possibility of even thinking about the nation emerged from "a fundamental change... in models of apprehending the world" [3, p. 22], including "apprehensions of time" [3, p. 22]. A major shift in understanding the idea of time happened due to the spreading of newspapers and novels in the 18th century.

Both new “forms of imagining” [3, p. 25], the novel and the newspaper, created a sense of connected social groups that move “*calendrically through homogeneous, empty time*” [3, p. 26]. Thus, ‘time’ began to signify the movement of nations through history. Homi Bhabha, a postcolonial theorist, expanded on the notion of a nation as a community imagined through narratives about itself (*Nation and Narration*, 1990). In the spirit of these studies, the present paper will examine Ben Okri’s literary attempt at constructing the collective identity of the post-colonial nation in his *Abiku* trilogy (*The Famished Road, Songs of Enchantment, Infinite Riches*). Special emphasis will be placed on Okri’s narrative about the “unborn nation” with regard to the temporality of the future. Instead of looking into the past and searching for their nation’s origin or some specific historical period that can be identified as the origin or model, the characters dream of the future. Thus, imagining the future can be treated as a form of construction of their collective identity. My working thesis states that, first, in *The Famished Road* series the temporality of the future is the place where a nation can be imagined, and, second, the nation can be understood as the imagined unity of people who dream of their collective future.

In order to understand time characteristics in the novels, it is necessary to take into consideration the nature of the society depicted there and its environment. Okri portrays the post-colonial society on the brink of Independence. An abstract African country (as Nigeria is never named directly) is torn by inner political conflicts. The author mentions armed clashes and bloodshed that may refer to the civil war in Nigeria which lasted from 1967 until the 1970s. The story’s major focus, however, is on the ghetto settlement where a little boy named Azaro lives with his family. They exist in the hybrid reality of magical rituals, political campaigns, superstitious beliefs and technological progress. According to the researcher of West-African fiction Brenda Cooper, this hybrid environment presents “*utopian imagining of a society that is simultaneously modernizing and also returning to an original, nurturing source*” [4, p. 36]. Similarly to Cooper’s note on the simultaneous multidirectional development of society, Erin James affirms the plural ontologies of Okri’s world, but from the perspective of econarratology⁴⁵. The scholar suggests “*recognizing Azaro’s world not as bifurcated into two separate geographies and ontologies, but illustrative of an environment and environmental imagination that yields itself to multiplicity and plural ontologies – an environment that can be both living and spirit at the same time and in the same space*” [5, p. 191].

In Okri’s trilogy, several ways of being exist simultaneously: the premodern mode of existence of the society rooted in ritual-mythological thinking; the sudden and uneven modernization that comes with colonization and the idea of historical progress; the postcolonial mode which implies self-identification as an independent nation or ethno-cultural community. Since there are plural ontologies, there are plural time paradigms that exist simultaneously as well, such as time as a ritual-mythological cyclicity, time as a linearly organized history, and time as a constructed narrative about the nation.

The cosmic model of Okri’s world suggests the existence of two dimensions: the World of the Living and the World of the Spirits. Spirits can live among humans, taking anthropomorphic, animal, or hybrid forms and interacting with the villagers unrecognized. The only one who can distinguish spirits from humans is the main character and the narrator, Azaro, the Abiku child. According to Yoruba belief, Abiku is a spirit child “*who dies and is reborn several times into the same family*” [6, p. 62]. Abiku-belief is also widespread among other ethnic groups in Nigeria. For example, among Igbo, it is embodied in the concept of Ogbanje. The image of the Ogbanje girl appears in Chinua Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958). In a poem, Wole Soyinka presents Abiku as an ageless spirit destined for eternal rebirth: “*I am Abiku, calling for the first / And the repeated time*” (*Abiku*, 1968) [10, p. 28]. Thus, Azaro belongs neither to the World of the Living nor to the World of the Spirits. He forever remains in-between. Due to his borderline existence, he can observe the intercommunication of the worlds and travel through multiple realities.

The plot of *The Famished Road* series does not develop in a linear fashion but comprises several motifs that are endlessly repeated. This phenomenon could be best described as the principle of isomorphism, “*the buildup of the same-*

⁴⁵ Econarratology is the innovative literary approach developed by Erin James in her work *The Storyworld Accord: Econarratology and Postcolonial Narratives* (2015). This approach combines ecocriticism and postcolonial narratology.

type episodes according to an invariant model" [1, p. 59]. To give an example, Azaro's journey consists of many adventurous wanderings around his home village, built according to the following invariant model: 1) leaving home; 2) wandering along the roads; 3) overcoming danger; 4) homecoming.

Notably, a set of motifs that constitute the plot structure correlates with the functions of the fairy tale identified by Vladimir Propp. In his study *Morphology of the Folktale*⁴⁶ (1968), the Soviet folklorist argues that the fairy tale's function is its major component, "*an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action*" [2, p. 21]. Propp identifies as many as thirty-one functions, which usually come in pairs: "villainy" – "the initial misfortune or lack is liquidated"; "struggle" – "victory"; "pursuit" – "rescue", etc. While the functions of the fairy tale create "*the actual movement*" [2, p. 30] or progression from "villainy" to the narrative's peak in the form of the removal of the initial lack or misfortune, the functions in the *Abiku* series do not move the plot forward to its peak, but rather repeat themselves on a loop. In particular, the duel between Dad and the creature from the Spirit world, Yellow Jaguar, leads to another fight with the political representative, Green Leopard. The second fight, in its turn, leads to the third combat with the half-human creature, "*the man in white*" [9, p. 468]. Consequently, the structural pair "struggle with the all-powerful rival" – "Dad's victory" reoccurs three times. Meanwhile, the course of the plot has not been affected by it in any significant way.

As a result, the plot structure repeats same-type episodes and corresponds to the pattern of ritual-mythological cyclicity. However, the story is centered around the idea of the approaching elections and "*the endlessly postponed forthcoming rally*" [9, p. 492]. Everyone in the story is waiting for the great political rally that precedes the elections. The rally should provide a glimpse of the national future and determine the main political course for the nation. The expectation of the great political rally and forthcoming elections sets the direction for the story. Even though it goes in circles, the narrative aims to break the loop. In *Songs of Enchantment*, the rally is still going to happen and, thus, increases the tension: "*Meanwhile, the season was changing, and the preparations for the great rally were moving steadily towards their climax*" [8, p. 229]. Time and space get disrupted as the rally finally arrives in *Infinite Riches*. The worlds of the Living and the Dead collide, and the images from the past and future invade the present. Nonetheless, the fate of the nation remains unknown. Paradoxically enough, the much-expected climax, the final arrival of the elections, never happens. The trilogy ends but the expectation continues: "*We had hardly recovered from that shock when, on another morning, on awakening, we found that the much delayed elections were upon us. The elections would seal the fate of the unborn nation*" [7, p. 393]. Altogether, Okri creates an expectation of the elections that are yet to come, and that expectation remains unjustified. As it turns out, the story is partly structured around the event that never actually occurs in the trilogy's diegesis. To put it differently, the story is structured around the notion of the future.

In the novel, cyclicity is associated with misery and pain. For spirits, time is measured in cycles of birth, death, return to the land of origin and reincarnation: "*As we approached another incarnation we made pacts that we would return to the spirit world at the first opportunity. (...) We were the ones who kept coming and going, unwilling to come to terms with life*" [9, p. 4]. In a way, Azaro's decision to stay in the Living World is a rebellion against the cyclical repetition. For the living people, the time of famine gives way to the time of political struggle. Rebellion follows the acts of injustice, and afterwards the people suffer from the vengeance of the corrupt politicians. In-between, the community has collective dreams, suffers from memory loss and confusion, and then everything repeats itself all over again.

However, the future associated with the forthcoming elections becomes the site of variability and hope. Okri's hope for the future comes from the idea of breaking the cycle: "*Our country is an abiku country. Like the spirit child, it keeps coming and going. One day it will decide to remain. It will become strong*" [9, p. 478]. Just like Azaro decides to stay in the human world to "*live the life to come*" [9, p. 5], the country shall overcome the cycle of coups, rebellions, abuse of power, and terror.

The role of the future-oriented mentality in the construction of collective identity can be explored through the

⁴⁶ First published in Russian in 1928.

political dreams of two representatives of the local community in the novels, *Dad* and *Madame Koto*.

Madame Koto is a bar owner. For the sake of business prosperity, she has to balance the interests of politicians and the local people. She accepts the culture of the Western imperial world but at the same time maintains the connection with the culture of her ancestors. Her collaboration with the colonial politicians, sexual relationships with them, pregnancy, altogether with the conduction of electricity and the purchase of a car turn her into a mysterious figure in the eyes of the people. Having a strong influence, Madame Koto sends beggars to schools and turns her bar into the headquarters of the Party of the Rich. Her internal conflict between power and mercy, love for the poor and love for politicians ultimately leads her to death in *Infinite Riches*.

In the final novel, Madame Koto admits that despite abusing power and aligning with the colonizers, she is the only one who has the strength and courage to control her fate and the fate of the colonized nation: “Which one of you can talk to white people in their sleep and listen to their plans of making us smaller while they get bigger, eh? Which one of you can bear the responsibility of power, can fight off all the demons of the poor, tame the devils of the rich, ride the colonized air of the country?” [7, p. 30]. At the same time, Madame Koto’s speech is accusatory. The woman blames people for cowardice as they are afraid to use power, or to even acknowledge the fact of holding such power. In fact, she addresses the mystification of her persona, the very creation of her image, by stating: “I am the tree that you planted, a tree that you can’t find a use for; don’t complain if I give you strange shade” [7, p. 32]. Given all the controversy related to Madame Koto’s image, she is a character who dares to dream of the nation and turns her dreams into reality. She, however, finds herself at the crossroads of having power and abusing it, making her own choices and inducing her choice on people, imagining the nation’s future and imprisoning it.

In opposition to Madame Koto’s twisted and corrupted dreams, Dad’s dreams focus on bringing people together. Dad wants to be independent in his decisions and denies any association with the colonizers, and later, any political party in general. In *Songs of Enchantment*, Dad becomes possessed by “the luminous Demon” [8, p. 7] and creates his own political party with the promise of enlightening and educating the poor. Even though Dad fails his educational project, he becomes a leader in the community. After the carpenter’s death at the hands of Madame Koto’s party, people lose their sight. Blindness serves as a metaphor for forgetting and refusing to perceive reality as it is, as well as refusing to act. Dad becomes the only one on whom the community places hopes for salvation: “... the whole community was dreaming him on towards our universal delivery, urging him on towards our restoration...” [8, p. 276]. Calling on the spirits of his ancestors and hoping that the visions of the future transformations will open to him, Dad recreates the world anew and re-names all things. By performing this act, he gets his sight back. He breaks the politicians’ ban on burying the body of the carpenter. When the entire community joins the funeral, the enlightenment of one person becomes the enlightenment of all, or as Okri puts it, “*The Freeing of One Vision is the Freeing of All*” [8, p. 283].

Finally, Okri develops the idea of the creative power of dreams throughout the entire trilogy. Life, he believes, is a collection of dreams and dreams can bring to life everything that is stuck in-between, like an unborn nation or like a spirit child: “Things that are not ready, not willing to be born or to become, things for which adequate preparations have not been made to sustain their momentous births, things that are not resolved, things bound up with failure and with fear of being, they all keep recurring, keep coming back, and in themselves partake of the spirit-child’s condition” [9, p. 487].

Similar to Hamlet’s dilemma of “to be or not to be”, Okri wonders who will have the power “to be”, to give meaning, to dream the future, and to act: “One great thought can alter the future of the world. One revelation. One dream. But who will dream that dream? And who will make it real?” [7, p. 5]. Okri postulates that history is man-made and immediately raises the question of the collective responsibility for that history. If reality and history are conventional and constantly rewritten, why not come up with a better, fairer reality? In Okri’s world, the dream is the creative force and the basis of everything. While dreaming, characters create their myths, their reality, their own history, and the history of the nation.

There are three dreams, three stories of the nation, created by Madame Koto, the Governor-General, and the old woman in the forest in the sequence of chapters entitled “*A river of contending dreams*” [7, p. 233], “*Contending dreams (2): god of the insects*” [7, p. 235], “*Contending dreams (3): good disguised as bad*” [7, p. 239], respectively.

Madame Koto dreams of a diverse nation that does not use its full potential. That’s a “*bad dream*” [7, p. 233], but Madame Koto refuses to alter it. Moreover, the people affected by the dream of Madame Koto also become inactive: “*And we who tuned into the resonances of her spirit were infected with this failure to change our future*” [7, p. 233]. Everyone who dreams only of personal benefits and whose dreams are too self-centered creates limitations for the nation’s development and limits the dreams of others. Azaro says, “*The dreams were too many, too different, too contradictory: the nation was composed not of one people but of several mapped and bound into one artificial entity by Empire builders*” [7, p. 234]. In Madame Koto’s dream, there is no unity, only greed for power.

The Governor-General dreams of the enslaved nation. He dreams of the grandiose road along which all Africa’s riches are to be exported overseas. He presents Africa only as a subject of study, a jewel placed under the glass in the museum. His image shocks him too, but, like Madame Koto, he makes no attempt to change the dream. The narrator points out: “*Those who cannot transform their bad dreams which might become real, should be rudely awoken*” [7, p. 238].

In contrast, the old woman dreams of choice. She dreams of new beginnings, chaos, times of colonization and quarrel, but also people’s choice between submission and action: “*She dreamt of the suffering to come which would either waken people to the necessity of determining their lives or make them dependents of world powers, diminished for ever*” [7, p. 239].

It can be seen that the question of choice is the key concern in the discussion of dreaming or imagining the nation. Okri stresses the fact that people have the ability to create their own history and choose their own paths. People can make the world a better place by imagining the future collectively, with “*the multitudes of dream-pleaders*” [9, p. 493]. The author emphasizes his idea in the final sentence of *The Famished Road*: “*A dream can be the highest point of a life*” [9, p. 500].

Therefore, it can be concluded that, first, in *The Famished Road* trilogy the temporality of the future is the place where the nation is imagined, and, second, the nation can be understood as the imagined unity of people who dream of their collective future.

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