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Postcolonial Transformations: the Forest in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*

Abstract I: In *The Famished Road* (1991) Ben Okri rappresenta gli effetti controversi della decolonizzazione in Nigeria, rivelando le conseguenze devastanti delle innovazioni tecnologiche sui paesaggi naturali del paese. Attraverso i movimenti e le percezioni di Azaro, uno spirito-bambino, Okri indugia sulla spietata opera di deforestazione condotta dalle potenze occidentali e mette in evidenza l'incapacità della nazione di ristabilire un'armonia sostenibile con l'ambiente. *The Famished Road* sottolinea anche i legami ancestrali della foresta con il folklore e l'immaginario Yoruba. Nel romanzo di Okri la distruzione della foresta costituisce l'emblema dell'impoverimento progressivo delle risorse naturali e della vita spirituale della Nigeria postcoloniale.

Abstract II: In *The Famished Road* (1991) Ben Okri deals with the controversial effects of decolonisation in Nigeria and unfolds the devastating consequences of technological innovations on natural landscapes. Through the wanderings and perceptions of the *abiku* Azaro, Okri focuses on the ruthless enterprise of deforestation pursued by Western companies and exposes his nation's inability to restore a harmonious relationship with the environment. *The Famished Road* also underlines the ancestral links of the forest with Yoruba folklore and imagination. In Okri's novel, the forest acts as a reminder of the gradual disappearance of both natural resources and spiritual life in postcolonial Nigeria.

In the Western literary tradition, the African forest is the site of an impenetrable darkness but it also encompasses valuable resources and riches to be exploited by the European colonizers (Brazzelli 2015: 129-132). In nineteenth-century colonial discourse, rainforests embody the otherness of Africa, and, at the same time, they encourage the discovery of unknown natural and cultural worlds. Joseph Conrad's and Henry Rider Haggard's "African" narratives especially combine these conflicting approaches, although employing different textual strategies. However, both authors explore the white man's degeneration in the colonies and the disorienting, numbing effect of the forest wilderness captivating the European eye and mind (Mikkonen 2008: 302-303).

After the Second World War, postcolonial perspectives reverse imperial representations, reinserting the forest into its original, "native" sphere. On the whole, twentieth-century African literatures, and especially Nigerian literature, emphasize the role of natural environment and above all of the rainforest. Thus, in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) and in *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954) Amos Tutuola draws on Yoruba myths and folktales based on

fantastic creatures inhabiting the forests. Tutuola's narratives reveal the bush as the abode of spirits, a liminal zone that embodies the chaotic and mysterious forces of nature (Quayson 1997: 44-64).

In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) the Nigerian Igbo respect the sacred value of the earth and maintain the sustainability of their land, employing wise agricultural practices. The forest is crucial for the Igbo because it preserves their social and religious order, as well as the taboos of the community. In particular, the "evil forest" is the place where those who have committed abominations against the earth are dumped. However, the community of Umuofia accepts that the "evil forest" is intimately connected to its rituals and beliefs. After all, Umuofia means "people of the forest" (Gane 2007: 43-44). When the missionaries build a Christian church in the area, they subvert the physical and metaphysical geography of the Igbo community. By giving away the wilderness the natives give away the control over the "evil forest" which keeps dangers at bay; so they become its victims (Garuba 2002: 97-98).

In *The Famished Road* (1991) Ben Okri perceives the natural world in a different light from Achebe, though both novelists share motifs belonging to Nigerian traditions (Nwosu 2007: 102). Writing in the context of globalisation and neocolonial exploitation, with a new understanding of the fragility of the environment, Okri shows a sympathetic awareness of how human agency is a damaging force threatening natural processes. By highlighting the crucial role of the forest in African culture and economy, Okri especially pinpoints its ecological value as well as its strong connections with the spirit world. In *The Famished Road* the forest acts as a reminder of the gradual disappearance of both natural resources and traditional beliefs in postcolonial Nigeria. The use of the word "transformation" in the title of this article comes from Bill Ashcroft's notion of transformation in postcolonial cultures and recalls the imperial contradiction between geographical expansion, designed to increase the economical and political power of the nation, and its purported moral justification, its civilizing mission. This huge contradiction continues in the present-day practices of global power (Ashcroft 2002: 1).

Ben Okri is a novelist and poet born in Minna (West Central Nigeria) in 1959 and has been living in London since the 1970s. In his works the great African tradition (established by Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe and also Wole Soyinka) and, more specifically, the Yoruba folklore interact with Western mythologies, literatures and cultures. A kind of "anti-realism", rather than magic realism, informs his narrations; a new worldview emerges, based on the coexistence of European literary forms and African beliefs (Cooper 1998: 15). *The Famished Road* is the first novel of a trilogy – the second is *Songs of Enchantment* (1993) and the third *Infinite Riches* (1998) – which aims at raising awareness about environmental degradation and in particular deforestation, while it traces the long and uneven movement of Nigerian history towards political independence, and suggests that independence will not bring the much hoped for freedom.

The spirits in the bush as well as the people living on the land define Okri's fictional construction. Azaro, a child originally named Lazaro (alluding to the biblical Lazarus), is both a "native" and a "nomad", lives on the earth and also in the spirit world; his wanderings often lead him into the bush, teeming with spirits. The *abiku*, or the spirit child, a recurrent figure of West African cultures, otherwise called *ogbanje*, struggles to stay among the mortals, thus

accepting a state of perennial suffering, continually swinging between the real world and the world of fantastic creatures generated by the collective imaginary of Nigerian Yoruba.

Azaro's double position between the visible and the invisible unfolds the repetitive pattern of *The Famished Road*, including the main character's meandering and his visionary perception of the world. The cycle of birth, death and rebirth of the *abiku* is similar to that of Nigeria, marked by endless repetition and arrested development (Lim 2005: 70). In Okri's novel the dominant perspective embraces the spiritual sphere; the alternative world is the Lagos ghetto, in which Azaro's Mum and Dad live. The spatial elements that contribute to model Okri's fictional world are the ghetto, the forest and Madame Koto's bar.

The first two places are the destinations of the *abiku*'s movements, the bar is the threshold between them, a kind of liminal junction (Costantini 2002: 173). The dirt and violence which characterize the ghetto are the consequence of colonial and neocolonial policies pushing towards a chaotic urbanisation. The forest instead is the site of resistance, the domain of vegetal power, energy from nature facing human violence. Azaro spends most of his time wandering around his ghetto, walking into the nearby forest, and sitting in Madame Koto's bar, as a witness of the changing scene of the neighborhood: the rivalry between the Party of the Poor and the Party of the Rich as the debate on independence increases, the poverty of the manual laborers like his parents and the relative wealth of property owners like Madame Koto, deforestation and the building frenzy that accompanies the destruction of the trees. Azaro's small neighborhood, the forest and the road demarcating it as well as the nearby big city (assumed to be Lagos) remain unnamed in the novel.

Vanessa Guignery (2013) remarks that "The homelands of *The Famished Road* are certainly 'imaginary' and invisible as the novel is not explicitly bound to a specific geographical and historical place or nation" (13). This lack of certainty on the location of the narrative plot encourages a metaphorical reading of this small community, making it any country in Africa, or any emerging postcolonial nation in the world. On the other hand – and I strongly support this approach – a "bioregional" reading of *The Famished Road* suggests the existence of a specific location for the novel by examining the meteorological events and the animal and vegetal species. Thus, despite the abundance of fantastic elements in the text, Okri's novel retains a sense of local environment we can call "local realism".

In fact, as Erin James (2012) remarks, the novel features over one hundred and thirty animal and vegetal species, ranging from those familiar to Western readers such as corn or tomato to those more firmly associated with a Nigerian setting, such as flame-lily, baobab, and yam. The flora Azaro finds as he explores the forest that borders his ghetto, such as mistletoe and palm, obeche, iroko, rubber, and mahogany, localize *The Famished Road* to tropical Africa. The fauna mentioned in the novel, including the antelope and the duiker, restrict the text further to the Yorubaland in the southwestern part of Nigeria's rainforest, which is particularly known for these two species, both endangered by hunting pressures (269).

The geographical location of the novel is relatively narrow, restricted to the neighborhood where Azaro and his family live, and to the journeys taken by Azaro on 'endless' roads. This limitations of the geographical area render the sense of change even more clearly:

Steadily, over days and months, the paths had been widening. Bushes were being burnt, tall grasses cleared, tree stumps uprooted. The area was changing. Places that were thick with bush and low trees were now becoming open spaces of soft river-sand (Okri 1992: 104).

Okri's novel opens with a cosmological image: "In the beginning there was a river. The river became a road and the road branched out to the whole world. And because the road was once a river it was always hungry" (3). The opening lines suggest a cyclical transformation questioning the chronological sequence of history; the origin of the "famished road" lies in myth, not in history. This narrative of beginning also deconstructs images of pastoral origins, while the road's perpetual hunger testifies to the earth's predatory violence (Ogunfolabi 2012: 277). Employing a (biblical) formulaic opening, Okri seems to put the events that follow beyond any recognizable time and suggests the mythic possibilities of the narrative, characterized by a mix of Christian and Yoruba mythopoeia. Moreover, the mention of hunger also explicitly alludes to the colonial and postcolonial exploitation of the land.

Not only cultural transformations have caused the ecological degradation of a whole country, swallowed by "the stomach of the road", but such an ecological degradation actually contributes to the indigenous Yoruba people's alienation from their traditional beliefs. In fact, local communities are endangered by the woodcutting activities, their forestry-related activities are reduced and their access to food is limited. The transition from the forest as lived-in space to alien territory implies its inhabitants' abandonment of traditional religious taboos relating to logging and farming practices and the loss of a long-established way of seeing the forest as life giving.

The terrifying destruction of the environment is reinforced by the fantastic imagination of the spirit child:

I had emerged into another world. All around, in the future present, a mirage of houses was being built, paths and roads crossed and surrounded the forest in tightening circles, unpainted churches and the whitewashed walls of mosques sprang up where the forest was thickest. I heard the ghostly wood-cutters axing down the titanic irokos, the giant baobabs, the rubber trees and obeches. There were birds' nests on the earth and the eggs half-formed and dried up, dying as they were emerging into a hard, miraculous world (Okri 1992: 242).

Both the road and the river embody the motif of the metamorphosis: cycles of life and death are connected with the nation and also the *abiku*. If Okri's major point focuses on the obsessive colonisation of nature, also the trauma of the Nigerian civil war or Biafran war (1967-1970) is transposed into a disfigured landscape, imbued with disorder, deformity, disease.

Okri's main character is born in one of the most precarious and chaotic times in the history of the African territory on the verge of becoming the modern, independent nation of Nigeria. The many events of the novel are indeed seen through the eyes of a child who straddles two worlds. The fate of the country on the eve of independence is constantly compared to that of Azaro, who has not yet decided whether he will go on living on earth.

Suffering is one of the main themes of the novel, as the wretched poverty that plagues Azaro and his family points out.

According to Olusegun Areola (1991), slums are not part of the traditional urban settlements in Yorubaland but rather are products of the colonial promotion of Nigerian urbanisation. The rapid development of urban areas under colonialism actually leads to the “disintegration of the family compounds and the rise of slum housing conditions” (202). In this sense, Okri’s representation of an urban slum in Yorubaland aims to criticize the way in which the colonial policy of Nigerian urbanisation weakens family and kinship ties that originally sustain traditional urban settlements.

In leading Azaro into the forest and showing him what “the new world” (post-independence Nigeria) will be like, Dad warns Azaro of how forests surrounding the city will be gone soon, due to the endless expansion of urban slums. Azaro’s father says to his child: “Sooner than you think there won’t be one tree standing. There will be no forest left at all. And there will be wretched houses all over the place. This is where the poor people will leave [...] This is where you will live” (Okri 1992: 34).

This prophecy suggests that Nigeria in the postcolonial era will suffer a cultural crisis as well as an ecological one. In other words, in the case of postcolonial Nigeria, the crisis of cultural hybridisation goes hand in hand with that of ecological degradation. If the expansion of urban slums is one cause of the disappearance of the forest in Nigeria, then the endless construction of roads in the name of unlimited development is another feature of the environmental deterioration (Wu 2012: 102).

The forest is identified as the boundary between the visible world and the spirit world. What Okri offers in *The Famished Road* is a redefinition of the notion of space and a representation that challenges the frontier between the visible and the invisible, between landscapes “within” and landscapes “without” (Guignery 2014). The inner spaces of the imagination are a kaleidoscopic world, fluid and shifting, in contrast with the confined area in which Azaro and his family live.

The division between inner and outer landscapes is destabilised in a novel in which the same space can be submitted to both a realistic and a fantastic treatment; in *The Famished Road* this ambivalent approach implies the author’s positioning between the European literary tradition of realism and the West African narratives based on mythology and the supernatural (Ogunsanwo 1995: 43). Being a multidimensional space, Okri’s forest is the best example of such a blurring of boundaries between inside and outside. Its edge marks the frontier between known and unknown:

The forest swarmed with unearthly beings. It was like an overcrowded marketplace. Many of them had red lights in their eyes, wisps of saffron smoke came out of their ears, and gentle green fires burned on their heads. Some were tall, others were short; some were wide, others were thin. They moved slowly. They were so numerous that they interpenetrated one another (Okri 1992: 12).

The forest is a magical “nowhere land”, where things change form, as in dreams. Also the instability of beings and the transformation from one state to another is constantly por-

trayed by Okri. Azaro finds refuge in the forest, where he collects a great variety of objects: "Sometimes I played in the forest. My favourite place was the clearing. In the afternoons the forest wasn't frightening [...] I wandered through the forest, collecting rusted padlocks, green bird-eggs, abandoned necklaces, and ritual dolls" (143). But the bush is teeming with fantastic beasts and other odd creatures, that represent Azaro's nightmares and hallucinations. He is both frightened and enchanted by these visions:

I saw a tiger with silver wings and the teeth of a bull. I saw dogs with tails of snakes and bronze paws. I saw cats with the legs of a woman, midgets with bright red bumps on their heads. [...] There was music everywhere, and dancing and celebration rose from the earth. And then birds with bright yellow and blue feathers, eyes that were like diamonds and with ugly scavenging faces, flew at me [...] (245).

Animals are ever-present in *The Famished Road*: insects, lizards, snakes as well as birds, cats and dogs, lions and jaguars; monsters and hybrids embody the motif of the metamorphosis and reveal the richness of the *abiku's* fantasy. The destruction of the forest clearly implies the collapse of the imagination, while a sense of wonder opens new possibilities of spiritual growth in the forest. Azaro's duality of vision mirrors Okri's double perspective: states of hallucination and alienation conveyed by Okri's impressionist prose reinforce the sense of physical transformation of the landscape. The narrator's voice establishes his participation in the collective consciousness of his society (Cezair-Thompson 1996: 39). The contemporary predicament of Nigeria is a critical preoccupation in Okri's narrative: it is a matter of survival and renewal, of replacing the unstable existence of the *abiku* with a more stable status. The apparently contradictory yet fluid discourse of *The Famished Road* explores conflictual relationships between colonial and postcolonial representations.

Okri draws on ancestral traditions and points to the ecological and also economical issues of the shrinking forest. His language belongs also to the technological present as the annihilation of the biodiversity is the outcome of machines cutting down titanic iroko:

In the distance I could hear the sounds of dredging, of engines, of road builders, forest clearers, and workmen chanting as they strained their muscles. Each day the area seemed different. Houses appeared where parts of the forest had been. Places where children used to play and hide were now full of sand piles and rutted with house foundations. There were signboards on trees. The world was changing and I went on wandering as if everything would always be the same (104).

This passage clearly focuses on the change that is happening in the nearby area, so immediately affecting Azaro's life. The forest and the trees are replaced by roads and houses; the children's playground is taken from them. Deforestation is represented in anthropomorphic terms: the trees scream and cry out, while their branches drip blood. Azaro reaches the edge of the forest:

I heard trees groaning as they crashed down on their neighbours. I listened to trees being felled deep in the forest and heard the steady rhythms of axes on hard, living wood.

The silence magnified the rhythm. I found a branch which seemed perfect. I broke off the long wood of the forked ends, lacerating myself on the splinter and bled (137).

The plants' groans are coupled with the pain Azaro feels when he is wounded by a branch. By acting as an unwilling torturer of a tree and suffering its pain, Azaro becomes a double of the vegetable beings that are being murdered in the woodland. The damaged nature is embodied by the trees of the forest, whose fragility questions their ancient existence. They seem great and strong but they are very easily destroyed. The bloodiness of the act of deforestation is emphasized when Azaro envisions the clearings: "In places the earth was red. We passed a tree that had been felled. Red liquid dripped from its stump as if the tree had been a murdered giant whose blood wouldn't stop flowing" (16).

Trees are personified and sap becomes blood. By identifying the various trees of Nigeria's rainforest and suggesting their diversity and density, Okri pays homage to the richness of his earth's vegetation, while at the same time denouncing its apocalyptic downfall. Okri's aesthetics is clearly rooted in the Yoruba homeland of Southwest Nigeria. This scenery, set in the 1960s (the time period of the novel), has proven true: Nigeria has the world's highest rate of deforestation, losing 55% of its primary forests between 2000 and 2005, and in Southern Nigeria, nowadays, only 4.9% of land is still covered by rainforest (Butler 2006). The spreading deforestation exposes the national inability to restore a sustainable harmony with its environment. Jonathan Highfield (2012) notes that there is a strong connection between deforestation and the lack of food portrayed in the novel: although deforestation usually means more spaces for agriculture, the situation has been different for West Africa because "a great deal of agriculture in West Africa was agroforestry, in which cultivated crops were grown alongside a variety of tree species" (144).

Okri's insistent images of deforestation spread through the novel exemplify Rob Nixon's "slow violence" and reveal a real problem of contemporary Nigeria which faces many big environmental problems due to colonialism and global capitalism (2011: 257). In addition, according to Okri's novel, the crisis is not only ecological but also cultural: the wood-cutters ignore the spiritual and magical dimensions of the forest, and the animist beliefs of indigenous people. Like their mythical counterparts, modern roads demand immense sacrifices. While the modernisation of the country is supposed to enhance progress, Okri insists on the endless repetition of a historical injustice: "I recognized the new incarnations of their recurrent clashes, the recurrence of ancient antagonisms, secret histories, festering dreams" (Okri 1002: 194). Conflicts remain unsolved. The famished road of the title of the novel does not lead to a new world but repeats colonial ways of destroying the native soil:

I heard the axes and drills in the distances. And every day the forest thinned a little. The trees I got to know so well were cut down and only their stumps, dripping sap, remained [...] Sometimes I watched the men felling trees and sometimes the companies building roads (143).

At a certain point, Azaro envisions how the world will be in a modern, urbanised future:

Skyscrapers stood high and inscrutable besides huts and zinc abodes. Bridges were being built; flyovers, half-finished, were like passageways into the air, or like future visions of a time when cars would be able to fly (113).

This passage reveals much about the process of development in the construction sector in an urban environment, showing us the progress of the road through its many stages and variations as well as contrasting the new and the old, the skyscrapers and the huts. It is noteworthy that Okri describes these developments as half-finished and half-constructed, which emphasizes a transitional period for his country.

The forest loses its war against progress: it seems that the trees, feeling that they are losing their battle with human beings, simply walk deeper into the forest:

I heard the great spirits of the land and forest talking of a temporary exile. They travelled deeper into secret spaces, weaving spells of madness round their arcane abodes to prevent humans from ever despoiling their transformative retreats from the howling feet of invaders. I saw the rising of new houses. I saw new bridges span the air (457).

The real damage is made by the contemporary modernisation much more than the previous colonial exploitation. Although Okri sets the action of the novel in the period leading to the independence of Nigeria, he reads that past from the vantage point of postcolonial disillusionment.

The new political class is clearly considered as responsible for the ongoing environmental disaster. African politicians are ruthless in their violation and abuse of the environment; the fact that they are extremely deceptive is also revealed when some of them distribute milk that cause food poisoning. It is not a case that food is involved in this process of degradation. Food is scarce and the new nation is always hungry. The replacement of the forest by infrastructures causes the decline of agroforestry and robs local people of vital resources. Food and medicine practices disappear.

The road represents the unequal balance of trade that defines African economies. It is through the character of Madame Koto that the transition from the forest to the road is captured and the allure of the global capital is represented. Her bar becomes the preferred hangout of politicians and then the food she offers changes, from peppersoup to Coca Cola; she also sells beer rather than palm wine (Costantini 2013: 97). Showing the replacement of traditional food with consumerism, Okri denounces Nigerian submission to the imperatives of the marketplace. Throughout the novel, food products originated from the forest have a positive connotation, such as dongayoro to treat illness (Highfield 2012: 150). References to alimentary practices abound in *The Famished Road*, whose plot is informed by the dynamics of feasting and fasting, nutrition and malnutrition.

The *topos* of the road which changes while crossing natural places is a symbol of the myth of progress viewed from a Yoruba perspective (Mahmutovic 2010: 5). The road embodies the obsession for modernity, technology, greed and the consequent destruction of nature. But, at the same time, it is the path into the wilderness built by Western invaders, so that it

exposes the environmental, economic and cultural damages produced by the previous colonists' penetration into Africa. Also the narrative of the "King of the Road" is included into Okri's text: it is the story of a fabulous giant that develops a monstrous appetite as a consequence of deforestation. He devours human beings and then people offer him poisoned food in order to kill him. He eats himself up until only his stomach remains, then this organ is washed away by a torrential rain (Okri 1992: 258-261). This hunger embodies colonial voracity but also the Africans' responsibility in starving their countrymen after decolonisation.

At the end of the novel, Azaro reiterates the problem of deforestation: "the forest was sleeping badly, the trees were wondering which one of them would become ghosts tomorrow" (297). Thus, the novel definitively demystifies the human history of progress that is a history of dominating nature. Through deforestation "the world became darker" (264).

In conclusion, Okri exposes the political aspect of environmentalism, and his novel not only acknowledges nature's overwhelming power but also shows a connection between environmental degradation (deforestation, floods, hurricanes, poverty, violence) and the recklessness of Nigerian and African leadership. Against such a darkening background, Okri suggests that a new awareness is needed, that seeing the world anew is indispensable. This is the last sentence of *The Famished Road*: "A dream can be the highest point of a life" (Okri 1992: 500). History is nurtured by dreams, and dreams construct reality. Azaro's artist-like vision shows that the forest in postcolonial Nigeria is disappearing, and this disappearance is not only connected with the destruction of local ecology but also with the forgetfulness of tradition, and, most of all, the loss of human imagination. Finally, what is at stake is human imagination. And the mythopoetic and visionary quality of Okri's main character is crucial. In this way, *The Famished Road* is a metaphorical act of reforestation, the reinvention of a forest of the mind.

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