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**Reflections from a Broken Mirror: Locating Lacanian Subject in Ben
Okri's *The Famished Road***

Abstract:

Nigerian novelist Ben Okri is one of the most distinguished and interesting voices that have appeared in the contemporary African literary landscape. His Booker Prize winning novel The Famished Road depicts the story of an abiku (spirit) child, Azaro - his birth, his struggle to survive in the world of humans, and consequently his triumph over the tortures of the spirit companions by being able to thrive in the human world. Amidst this bildungsroman tale of an abiku, Okri interweaves a dense and complex web of relationships that exists between a mother and a child, a father and his son, spirits and humans and so on. The duality in Azaro's thoughts and visions suggest a psychological dilemma that he faces and the manner in which he wades through his mental complications. The experience of Azaro could be comprehended in the light of Jacques Lacan's notion of the "Mirror Stage" and by way of situating the Lacanian subject in the context of the novel that exemplifies magic, mystery and mayhem. The paper undertakes an attempt to read Azaro as a Lacanian figure who's self is split between the "real" world of humans and the "irreal" world of spirits. The paper seeks to argue that like a Lacanian subject Azaro's existence is ridden with contradictions between the desires of the present ontological status and a deeper necessity to escape into the 'other' world of elusive spirits.

KEYWORDS: Lacanian Subject, Ben Okri, Azaro, Abiku, Mirror Stage, Spirit World, Real and the Imaginary.

Introduction:

The subject is never more than the supposed

- Jacques Lacan

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Ben Okri, one of the leading African novelists in the contemporary times, brings out several kinds of psychological complexities and mental turbulences in the portrayal of his

protagonists. His novels, especially *The Famished Road* [1991] - his most celebrated novel till date - foregrounds a juxtapositional matrix of two worlds; sane and insane, real and unreal, humans and spirits, and given existences and that which is outside of the given domain. The central character Azaro demonstrates diverse psychological edges, ranging from elusive vagueness of an aerial existence to that of identifiable concrete manifestations of the self. 'Road' an important imagery in the novel represents different journeys and transcendental pursuits, which are undertaken by Azaro. These transcendental journeys, most of the time, happen unconsciously. The 'unconscious' of Azaro acquires the status of an active agent and helps us identify the same with Jacques Lacan's theoretical postulates on understanding a subject. The Lacanian subject is not merely the subject of the linguistic statement, but it is something which stretches beyond the conscious subject or ego. Azaro moves from being a conscious subject towards the direction of the unconscious, which is the active agent in Lacanian psychoanalysis.

Azaro's visions and his frequent unconscious immersions, sudden transportations of the self into the world of spirits, depict a subject that Lacan describes in his seminal work *Ecrits: A Selection* [1977]. The fleetingness of Azaro's visions and his split-self qualify him to be termed as a Lacanian hero. Azaro's thoughts and perceptions as an abiku reflect a world which is full of glimpses of others and these glimpses in some sense represent the other's desires. The subject, that is, Azaro assumes a new position with respect to the other as language and as desire. The mirrors, which reflect various distorted images and vision of the real world, are actually experienced by Azaro in the world of the spirits. The unconscious here plays an important role in extending the road from the real to the imaginary. Locating Lacanian subject also leads to the identification of the Lacanian object in the text. The desires, language, intention and most importantly the surplus "jouissance" or object "jouissance", seem to be reverberating in the narration of Okri which is replete with the magic realistic visions.

1. The "famished subject": Lacan's perspective

According to Lacan, 'ego' arises as a crystallization or sedimentation of ideal images associated to a fixed, reified object with which a child learns to identify herself. There is a sense of ideal images as seen through the medium of mirrors. These images, which are

considered to be the ideal ones, are actually the inverted images or false images. The mirrors reflect the inverted images; that is, a right left reversal. In the novel *The Famished Road* Azaro's initial thoughts and ideas about the human world gradually change as he starts experiencing the world of humans replete with chaos and mayhem. The images that, are inscribed in his mind and memory, when he enters the cycle of birth- life- death cycle, as an abiku are the 'supposed' ideal images. In reality, these are actually the distorted images or the inverted ones.

In the beginning of the novel Azaro narrates his ideas about spirits, the spirit world and the world of the humans. His opinions change as he takes birth and establishes the unbreakable bond with his family especially his mother. Commenting on the birth- death cycle, Azaro states, "There was not one among us who looked forward to being born" [3]. And again he mentions how the spirit child fears the heartlessness of human beings and eagerly awaited their return to the world of spirits. To quote Azaro, "We longed for an early homecoming" [5]. But as he narrates these preconceived ideas, he also states the mystery, which surrounds the smile that he had on his face when he was born. Azaro gives reason as to why babies cry when they are born. He says,

There are many reasons why babies cry when they are born, one of them is the sudden separation from the world of pure dreams, where all things are made of enchantment and where there is no suffering. [4]

Azaro's ideas and ideal images that he had in his mind change as he feels the strong urge to survive in the human world. He decides to live in this world of turmoil, tumult and confusion rather than leaving it. Towards the end of the novel he mentions how his perception of life has changed and the approach towards life in the human world is no longer inverted or distorted. "I was a spirit- child rebelling against the spirits, wanting to live the earth's life and contradictions" [558].

The Lacanian subject might not be grammatically present in a statement, but it seems to bring forth a certain kind of hesitation, ambiguity or uncertainty into the utterance in which it appears. This gives rise to a complicated situation, which suggests that the speaker is denying the very thing that he is asserting. The speaker seems to be afraid of the very thing he claims to wish or wishes for the very thing that he seems to fear. As Bruce Fink, mentions

in his book *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*, “The speaker both wants and does not want the event in question to take place or the person in question to show up” [39].

The Famished Road, as seen in the light of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory exemplifies this ambiguity and certainty regarding the egoistic or conscious utterance and the unconscious desire. Azaro serves as a wonderful example of this conflict. The inner voice of Azaro, which tries to bind him to the worldly desires and sprouts a wish to live in the human world contradicts the unconscious voices, the torturous and tormenting voices of the spirit companions, who toil very hard to bring him back to the world of enchantments. This contradictory nature is reflected in Azaro’s language. Azaro narrates the prophecy of the herbalist who mentions him as “a child who didn’t want to be born, but who will fight death”. The herbalist had asked Azaro’s parents to perform a ritual, so as to sever all his (Azaro) connections with the spirit world. But the ritual was not performed due to the financial crisis his parents were going through. The following lines from the text explain Azaro’s happiness, “I was happy. I didn’t want it performed. I didn’t want to entirely lose contact with that other world of light and rainbows and possibilities. I had buried my secrets early” [10]. Azaro’s narration depicts a kind of contradiction, a certain amount of conflict that he is going through. The conscious self wants him to stay in the real world, the world of humans whereas, the unconscious lures him to the places and objects, which transport him to the “other” world, the world of spirits, magic and enchantments. He denies staying in a single world. His journey in the world of humans traverses, path of his mysterious venture into the spirit world.

The unconscious signifies a chain excluded from the conscious, in which knowledge of a certain kind is embodied. This is permanent and subsists throughout an individual’s life. And this unconscious as a chain is not the subject of the unconscious (Lacanian subject). The subject of the unconscious involves itself in daily life as a fleeting interruption of something foreign or exotic. Similarly in Azaro’s case he is bombarded with exotic and mysterious visions, which compel him to follow the enchanted road. These visions are permanent part of his life and they keep interrupting and disrupting his daily activities. Azaro learns to acclimatize to this situation where he lives with the dominance of both the ego and the unconscious in his life.

A man of desire, of a desire that he followed against his will into ways in which he saw himself reflected in feeling, domination and knowledge, but of which he, unaided succeeded in unveiling, like an initiate at the defunct mysteries, the unparalleled signifier. [Lacan 306]

The above lines very well explain Azaro's situation and his complex existence. The duality which is reflected in Azaro's speech, desires, action and most importantly his thoughts, is due to the existence of the split or divided subject. The subject is split between the ego and the unconscious, between an ineluctably false sense of self and the automatic functioning of language in the unconscious. The Lacanian subject can be simplified as nothing but this particular split which Lacan terms as "split subject", "divided subject" or "barred subject". The splitting of the, I into ego (false self) and unconscious bring into being a coin with two faces: one, which is visible or exposed and the other that is hidden. In case of Azaro, the obviously exposed side is his existence in the human world and the hidden one is his connection with the spirit world. The spirit self is the one that takes the psychological journey. This unconscious self is present in harmony with the real world (human world), which is symbolized by the ego. This harmony creates a kind of condition where the visions and unconscious thoughts converge to generate magic realism in *The Famished Road*.

2. "Jouissance" and the Desire for the Other

The Famished Road is a tale of an abiku, who constantly keeps floating in the realm of the real, and the imaginary, the ego and the unconscious, the false self and the real self. Amidst the chaos and tumult of the ghetto, Azaro is able to see the strange and exotic visions, which are at times bizarre and disturbing for him. Azaro feels that the world is full of "other's glimpses" which denote their desires and thoughts. For example, when he is carried away by mysterious women to be used as a sacrifice to an occult goddess, he realizes that the visions that he experiences are a result of the other's desire to make him see them and come under their enchantments. This suggests that Lacanian concept of the Lacanian subject and the "Other's desire" run parallel to the events taking place as the novel advances.

For Lacan, self's desire to be desired by the 'Other' exposes the Other's desire. As he further explains, a child likes to be the sole object of his mother's affections, but her desire

almost goes beyond the child. Similarly, in Azaro's case, he comes to the world of humans with the intention of leaving it and resuming the birth- death- life cycle. But as he observes his mother's helpless face, her love for him, her desire to see him survive, he abandons the idea of leaving this world of humans. In fact, he decides to undergo the trials and tribulations of this world and forego the comfort of the other world. He mentions in one of the chapters of the novel that, the mothers' experience a greater degree of pain during parturition, when the same spirit child is born to her again and again. Azaro decides to exempt his mother of this painful process and stay with her throughout. To quote Azaro, "In not wanting to stay, we caused much pain to mothers. Their pain grew heavier with each return." [5]. Azaro, who feels for his mother is drastically a different self.. This change in his perspective is a result of the desire that his mother displays. Azaro's desires are conditioned by his mother's desire.

Lacan presents to us the idea of "jouissance", which consequently arises as a solution to the mother- child separation or alienation. As Bruce Fink says,

Jouissance is thus what comes to substitute for the "mother- child unity", a unity, which was perhaps never as united as all that since it was a unity owing only to the child's sacrifice or foregoing of subjectivity. [Fink 60]

The sacrifice that Lacan talks about can be related to Azaro's sacrifice for his mother. Young Azaro, decides to stay in the world of the living and sacrifice his happiness which he experiences in the world of spirits. To establish a strong bond which results in the unity of Azaro and his mother, he is ready to suffer in the hands of his spirit companions, who torment him. He defies the law of the spirit land to make his mother happy. This happiness that he experiences is pleasurable to him. There is a mixed feeling of both pleasure and pain in his decision to stay back in the human world. This is precisely the "jouissance" that Lacan talks about.

The traversing of fantasy involves the subject's assumption of a new position with respect to the 'Other' as language and the 'Other' as desire. Azaro, assumes a new position as he comes across different people in his life, who influence and leave a deep impact on him. The medium of influence being the language of Madame Koto, his (Azaro's) father, his mother, Ade - an abiku and many other spirit companions. The desire, which brings in the change can be attributed to Azaro's mother, whose painful and tormented face compels him

to change his decision to leave the world of living. The trauma of Azaro's mother inculcates in him the feeling of compassion for the humans especially mothers who suffer the most during child- birth and more if it is an abiku. In his view, "I sometimes think it was a face that made me want to stay. I wanted to make happy the bruised face of the woman who would become my mother" [6].

Lacan mentions about a further separation, which happens after the mother- child unity. The Other's desire, that brings a change in the subject's perception and assumption of a new position, is in some sense internalized, subjectified and made 'one's own. This paradoxical move by the alienated subject to become his/ her, own cause is the traversing of fantasy. It is the process by which the subject subjectifies trauma, takes the traumatic events on himself and assumes responsibility for the jouissance.

3. Azaro's mirrors: Lacan's "Mirror Stage"

Azaro's visions, which reflect his imagination and notion about the real and the unreal are actually assumptions by him. His mind which, has been infested by the songs and enchantments of spirits, acts as a combination of parallel mirrors that reflect virtual images. These mirrors demonstrate the mirror- stage of Azaro, where he learns to associate with the virtual images initially and then gradually relates to the real world. Lacan exemplifies this notion of mirror- stage through an example of the graph, where it approaches the zero but never actually reaches it. Similarly, the self- concept will never actually match to his, own being. As Raymond Tallis opines,

The theory of the mirror stage is regarded as the cornerstone of Lacan's *oeuvre*. It has excited an enormous amount of interest among his followers and the essay he devoted to it was written and rewritten over a period of thirteen years. It appears at the head of the English translation of his major papers, and its conclusions are alluded to or presupposed in nearly all the papers, which follow. [9]

In Azaro's situation, his visions about the real world are actually not real. The blurred line of demarcation between the real and the imaginary actually exist in his perception. As it is

described in the text, the real and the imaginary seem to exist in the same space. Ro quote from the text,

That was the first time I realized it wasn't just humans who came to the market places of the world. Spirits and other beings come there too. They buy and sell, browse and investigate. They wander among the fruits of the earth and sea. [19].

This magic- realistic vision also brings forth the proposition given by Lacan that, something (a mirror) outside him is having an effect upon him without his understanding. The voices and visions as heard and seen by Azaro, are external agents that are having a profound impact on him. These visions provide him with an illusionary world where he wanders.

As Elizabeth Wright puts forth, "The alienated relationship of the self to its own image is what Lacan calls the domain of the Imaginary" [124].

Conclusion

The multidimensionality of *The Famished Road* lies in the twin metaphors of its title. The road is one of the novel's central images, recurring on various levels of narrative structure. Sometimes it is a literal road, where characters travel or lose their way. Sometimes it becomes a mythical creature, the Road King, eternally hungry for victims. It represents the psychological journey of Azaro. At times it is a river, echoing the powerful fluidity of the narrative, as well as its characters. Okri's concept of hunger is similarly flexible. It is the literal hunger of families struggling to survive, but it also is the greed of the powerful and the deprivation of the powerless. Both hunger and the road function in the novel as versatile metamorphic symbols, carrying the text's structural and philosophical complexity. All these events also take place in a psychological space, where Azaro struggles to relate to the absolute truth. The road takes him through a psycho- spiritual journey, where he comes to face reality by staying in the real world, the world of the living. Lacan deliberately sets out to achieve incoherence by speaking the language of the unconscious. Terry Eagleton, in his influential book, *Literary Theory* writes,

[...] for Lacan all discourse is, in a sense, a slip of the tongue: if the process of language is as slippery as he suggests, we can never mean precisely what we say, or say precisely what we mean. Meaning is always in some sense an approximation, a near-miss, a part failure, mixing non-sense and non-communication into sense and dialogue. We can certainly never articulate the truth in some 'pure' unmediated way: Lacan's own notoriously sybilline style, a language of the unconscious all in itself, is meant to suggest that any attempt to convey a whole unblemished meaning in speech or script is a pre-Freudian illusion. [169]

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