Chapter Four
Ben Okri the Novelist: A Study of his Evolution, Thematic Concerns and Narrative Strategies

Any fruitful analysis or appreciation of a writer’s career and works must necessarily include his endeavours at evolving his unique way of apprehending reality. This often runs parallel to his evolution as a writer as well as his artistic preferences in matters of themes, characters and narrative techniques. Ben Okri, the nineteen year old amateur who wrote Flowers and Shadows has come a long way to emerge as a colossal figure in modern Nigerian fiction. The mighty pen that spawns awe-inspiring epic narratives and conjures up aquamarine visions of ravishing beauty has traversed deep into the undiscovered abysses of the human mind. Spread across an expanse of eight novels, two collections of short stories, two collections of poetry and a volume of essays, Okri’s creative genius has been sharpened and honed consistently.

Flowers and Shadows, published when its author was just twenty one, is more of a realistic work set in the urban landscape of Lagos. The protagonist Jeffia Okwe is the only son of an affluent couple and in the course of the book, he makes his entry into life
through a rite of passage. This is the only novel perhaps that Okri has written to date, which has a well-defined plot with a clear-cut story line and incidents culminating in the final nemesis. The dominant theme is corruption that eats away the lives of people like a mysterious plague. The theme of corruption and moral degradation is taken up in the next novel too, *The Landscapes Within* (1981) which is often clubbed with *Flowers and Shadows* as belonging to an early and amateur phase of the author’s career.

Whereas in the earlier novel Okri combines conventions of the European *bildungsroman* with modernist narrative strategies and a sprinkling of Nigerian English dialects as an attempt at social realism, in *The Landscapes Within* he develops a comparable mixture of realistic narration and modernist stream of consciousness by way of expanding his style to cater to requirements of the novel. Omovo, the protagonist, is like Jeffia, young and sensitive. But he is a lonely artist too. Like Jeffia, Omovo too suffers domestic tension and feels trapped in a morally corrupt and physically degrading environment. His coming of age as an inspired and socially committed artist forms the main concern of the novel.

Critics have hinted at the influence of James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, drawing parallels between the use of
the modernist stream-of-consciousness method and also the predicament of the solitary artist-hero. But Okri’s novel shows more affinity towards another great novel—that of the Ghanaian writer Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, as critic Abioseh Michael Porter points out. Armah’s protagonist is a man of integrity who refuses to be caught in the web of corruption that seems to embrace almost everyone else in the novel. Even though he rises above corruption, he lacks the courage to fight against it. He is too weak to be a real hero and hence shows no sign of development in the course of the novel. Although in the beginning Omovo behaves exactly in the same manner as Armah’s character, he demonstrates towards the end of *The Landscapes Within* that he has grown out of that sleepy and passive state—“he starts showing the need for more positive action—thereby exhibiting some evidence of growth” (Porter 203). Okri enlivens his description of this growth with references to art and painting reflecting on the nature and function of art, infusing the narrative with poignant imagery like that of the “scum” which is symbolic of the rotten nature of the society.

The greatness of Okri’s art lies in the way he uses and goes beyond a mosaic of literary sources to create his own masterpieces
as he has demonstrated through an intelligent use of the modernist tradition in his two early novels. Though these two novels lack the grandeur and brilliance of his later works, the stamp of Okri's creative genius is nevertheless perceivable at all levels. His next two works *Incidents at the Shrine* and *Stars of the New Curfew* mark a new phase in his artistic evolution. Okri himself has identified the importance of writing short stories as an apprenticeship for writing novels and the effort has truly paid off as the later novels certify. *The Famished Road*, which he wrote after the publication of these two collections of short stories, seems to vouch for this theory that writing short stories perfect the craft of a novelist.

Apart from serving as a training ground for writing his future narratives of gigantic proportions, the short stories mark a turning point in Okri's aesthetic development. It is in these stories that he started experimenting, breaking free from the restrictions of the realist form. The experimentation started in *The Incidents at the Shrine* (1986) began to flourish as dreams, visions and the spirit realm in the *Stars of the New Curfew* (1989). Okri was by degrees inventing a rare technique, infusing the magic of the mythical world with the adaptability of the western literary antecedents, exploiting
the potential of both to the maximum to suit his artistic requirements. Another radical shift noticeable at this stage of Okri’s writing is that he increasingly focuses on the collective experience of widely felt phenomena like civil war, corruption and moral degradation rather than exploring the subjective inner worlds of sensitive protagonists. *Incidents at the Shrine* is a slim volume of eight stories, each one a marvel. The stories are set in Nigeria during the Civil War, in London among the derelicts and the dispossessed and in dream-worlds suffused with an African sensibility. The characters in *Incidents at the Shrine* are average human beings who find life a difficult business—individuals striving to survive the violence and squalor that characterize their daily existence. They go on hawking, publishing trash, signing up for correspondence self-help courses and dabbling in the supernatural—all in an attempt to transcend the paltriness of their situations. In all this drama of futile struggles and petty accomplishments, blighted hopes and hollow dreams, there is something consistently cathartic about the way in which each of the characters lives out their multifarious crises. The narrative style often slips from social realism to fantastic writing but this shift is sharper and more frequent in *Stars of the New Curfew*. The stories in *Stars of the
New Curfew read like journeys made across the dark uncharted territories of the human mind. The deep abysses of consciousness yield visions of profound understanding as critic Maria Thomas remarks:

Okri’s skill is in taking the reader steady on, step by step as in matters of fact, a way of grounding the most bizarre takes. We are told of men who are arrested as accomplices to their own robberies, of cars that drive in the air over rain, of earth that bites like insects of towns where everything is upside down and backwards, of winged people who come out of trees. Typified by the palm-wine tapster of the last story, Okri’s heroes are not so much personalities as they are form of consciousness, thrown into regions where the outside world and the inner mate with unchecked energy in a waking dream. (Maria Thomas 13)

The stories capture contemporary economic desperation and social chaos in realistic terms. In “The City of Red Dust” for instance, Emokhai is reduced to selling his blood for money to buy drinks for the official celebration of the military governor’s birthday, while his girlfriend Dede, driven to distraction after being
raped by five soldiers, slashes her throat. In “Worlds that Flourish”, a man who is robbed is beaten up by the police and he gets trapped in a village of spirits where he sees his dead wife again. The title story “Stars of the New Curfew” depicts the story of a salesman of quack “cure-all” drugs getting nightmares about their effects upon people. He sells drugs that promise alchemy to the poor masses who cannot afford the services of a physician. On one hand, he uses pompous lies to market his wonder drugs and on the other, he is engaged in an eternal duel with his conscience. All the characters are representatives of the wretched of the earth who wallow in the squalor of their surroundings. The power of description heightens the intensity of their tragedies even as the protagonists are consigned to anonymity.

The third and most fertile phase of Okri’s creative genius finds manifestation in his later novels, especially the abiku series. The Famished Road, the first of the abiku trilogy came out immediately after Stars of the New Curfew. Published in 1991, the novel celebrates the unique style inaugurated in Stars of the New Curfew. Widely acknowledged as his magnum opus, The Famished Road marks the zenith of his writing career so far. With his magic wand, Okri electrifies the narrative and literally charges the mind of
the reader with images of rare beauty and power. The narrative momentum is maintained in the two succeeding novels of the trilogy as well though with lesser force. The crisis of democracy in Africa is allegorized with the help of the myth of the *abiku* and this political fable running to over a thousand pages across three books is without any doubt Okri's greatest artistic achievement.

Azaro is a spirit-child who keeps coming and going, “an unwilling adventurer into chaos and sunlight, into the dreams of the living and the dead” (*TFR* 487). Born and reborn into the relentless West African poverty, he has no idea as to how many times he had come and gone. But this time he decides to stay, not because of the sacrifices or pleadings but because he wants to make happy the bruised face of the woman who would become his mother. His spirit companions torture him and force him to change his decision. He often finds himself oscillating between both the worlds. Once while he is in the other world trying to reason with his spirit companions, his parents believe him to be dead and place him in a coffin. He cries and the great King of Spirits helps him get back into his body. He is named a second time, following his miraculous recovery. His name Azaro reminds us of Lazarus who is believed to have returned from the kingdom of the dead.
Azaro is a child of miracles to his parents. He rescues his family from the fire that breaks out in their compound. During that dark night, Azaro wanders through the terrain. He sees frightening apparitions and is entrapped by a cult of silent women who plan to sacrifice him. He escapes from the women but cannot find his way back home. A police officer takes him to his home, but there also he is held captive by the officer and his wife who believe that he is their dead son. Azaro’s mother seeks the help of a herbalist and releases him from the spell. They throw a party to celebrate Azaro’s homecoming which ends up in a fight. That night they get to know a person who is to transform their lives—Madame Koto.

Azaro’s life in the ghetto is slowly changing. His father struggles to find a job, to pay off the debts the party has driven them into. His mother goes on hawking all day in the hot sun. Once she nearly dies of malaria. Madame Koto helps them in their crises and takes a special interest in Azaro. She wants Azaro to come and sit in her bar for sometime. Madame Koto’s bar is a strange place where creatures with deformed features and spirits with menacing looks appear. She has secret powers and her bulk increases as her powers increase. She enters into an alliance with the Party of the Rich and becomes rich herself. The Party of the Rich and the Party
of the Poor campaign in the area for votes for the upcoming elections. The Party of the Rich distributes powdered milk free of cost, as part of the campaign. Azaro’s dad hates the Party of the Rich for their dirty tricks and throws away the milk. But others who consume it start vomiting incessantly. They soon discover the reason. The powdered milk distributed to them is rotten. When the van carrying the politicians of the rich party comes around for a second time, the crowd retaliates by thrashing them and setting the van on fire.

Meanwhile, Azaro is haunted by the strangest of visions. Madame Koto’s bar is full of spirits in the shape of human beings with borrowed eyes, feet and limbs. Politicians frequent her place and she becomes increasingly involved with the fortunes of the Party of the Rich. Azaro finds it difficult to sit in the oppressive atmosphere for long and he often ventures out into the forest. The forest, the mother of all mysteries and the harbinger of the dead, frightens him with mysterious happenings. Azaro encounters a two-legged dog, a man with his face upside down and even his own image in the forest. His spirit companions pursue him and send a three-headed spirit to bring him back. He is once kidnapped and taken to the spirit world when the great king again intercedes in his
favour. He continues to suffer blackouts, getting into the hands of messengers from the spirit-world. He goes on sleeping for days on end without the slightest sign of life. His parents spend a fortune on bringing him back from the spirit world.

Azaro's father dreams of becoming a champion boxer. He begins shadow-boxing and openly expresses his contempt for the Party of the Rich. The politicians unleash a reign of terror among the ghetto dwellers. They send thugs and hired boxers to beat up the villagers and burn their houses. Azaro's father's resentment grows as his ambition to reclaim his fame as Black Tyger, the boxer, soars even though he is beaten to death by the thugs of the rich party. One day as he is practicing his shadow-boxing, a big man steps out of the darkness and challenges him. There ensues a fierce fight in which dad wins. It is only after the fight that he realizes that he has beaten Yellow Jaguar, the dead fighter. He is frightened and soon falls into a state of delirium and passing insanity. He recovers with renewed energy and is soon, on his trail of victory over such famous boxers like the Green Leopard. He becomes quite proud of his powers and starts imagining himself as an important person. He makes a fool of himself before the people and tries of exhort them on matters which, he thinks, are very important. He
becomes obsessed with a group of beggars and thinks of forming his own party with the beggars as followers. Finally at a party celebrating Madame Koto’s initiation into higher powers, he fights with a monstrous man in white suit, winning the fight by a hairline. He falls into another delirium and dreams of building universities for beggars. As the novel ends, Azaro has hopes of returning to a normal life.

The sequel *Songs of Enchantment*, which appeared in 1993, is a more thematically structured book with neatly divided chapters and poignant titles. While *The Famished Road* is the story of a family—Azaro, Dad and Mum—as against the spectral powers of the universe, in *Songs of Enchantment*, this family almost falls apart making the story more of a socio-political allegory. In the first chapter of the book itself, they quarrel and Azaro’s mother is driven out of the house. The demonic presences in the atmosphere intensify and Madame Koto’s bar becomes the centre of all sinister operations. Whereas in *The Famished Road*, Madame Koto was a tavern owner who thought of improving her business, in the second novel, she becomes an ageless matriarch, a legendary figure whom no one sees, whose presence is felt through the elemental forces. Her limitless power is strongly felt in the village. She pretends to be
the saviour of the village and distributes provisions and milk to the villagers. But she cannot keep her secret for long. She murders those who turn against her. Her spirits take over the village and play havoc with the inhabitants. Death, destruction and the disappearance of dear and near ones intimidate the villagers and they begin to grow suspicious of one another. Each one of them fears that the other person is practicing evil magic to destroy his family. Madame Koto's legend has become so pervasive that she can no longer be given a human face. Her evil presence is polluting the atmosphere, killing goodness, love and peace of mind. She seeps into the lives of people, sucking away their dreams and sapping their vitality. The threat to her life, however, resides in her own body. Madame Koto is pregnant with three abiku children who refuse to be born. Fatigued by her swollen feet and fighting the crushing weight of her pregnancy, Madame Koto tries to avert her imminent death which finally happens in Infinite Riches. The Jackal-headed Masquerade is another source of the mystical powers which terrorize the villagers. The strict censorship during a military rule prevails in the neighbourhood. Murders are committed and a plague of violence breaks out in the ghetto. The whole village is subjected to terrible experiences; they get fleeting glimpses of the spirit-
world. The song of the enchanted women electrifies the village and the villagers go berserk, men running into the hands of death and women joining the forest spirits.

The final book of the cycle, *Infinite Riches* (1999) treats the period immediately preceding independence in which a traditional society with its herbalists and native medicine, animal sacrifices and magic, was being intruded upon by the arrival of electricity, cars and the exploitation of the forests by foreign multinationals. The novel continues Azaro’s erratic meandering between the real and the surreal worlds. The opening of the novel coincides with the impending elections and Nigeria is on the verge of independence. Azaro’s father is wrongly arrested for the murder of the carpenter whose corpse he buries. He is savagely beaten up in custody and is released only after his wife—a totally transformed woman—turns up for his rescue. The incident shatters his mental equilibrium and he slips into one of his fits of forgetfulness. The novel has a strong anti-colonial message to deliver. Azaro has visions of the Governor General destroying valuable documents related to the country and rewriting the history of the land obliterating every trace of native culture. The white man’s appropriation of Africa is a troubled love affair. While the colonist anglicizes African names, makes beliefs
and customs seem ridiculous, dismisses philosophies as crude superstitions and authorizes the rape of the land, the magic of the place and the people overwhelms him. An old woman is seen weaving a tapestry recording the infinite riches for posterity.

The much awaited pre-election rally finally takes places with a disastrous end. Nigeria is moving towards a new era but not before it lives through its share of confusion and chaos. The legend of Madame Koto comes to an end with the tragic death of the matriarch. As her funeral ceremony nears completion, the air of the ghetto gets finally freed from her intoxicating presence. Her transformation into a mythical figure coincides with the birth-throes of a new nation.

*The Famished Road* was followed by the publication of an anthology of poems *An African Elegy* (1992). The poems examine the plight of postcolonial Africa. Through apocalyptic images and metaphors, the poems foreground a picture of oppressed Africans striving to get out of the pit into which they have inadvertently been driven. The poet identifies himself with the sufferers and uses the first person plural to voice the cry of the continent. Many a time, his protestations are vehement and overtly political much to
the chagrin of his critics. The little poem of the collection was read out at the Booker presentation:

We are the miracle that God made
To taste the bitter fruits of Time
We are precious
And one day our suffering
Will turn into the wonders of the earth.


Critic Giles Foden says, “It certainly made me feel uncomfortable, sitting watching the ceremony at home. And reading it now, I still don’t feel like a miracle that God made to taste, etc, and the poem can only seem embarrassing” (Foden 8). The comment may be undeserving, but the uneasiness and the indignation on the part of a western critic are but the natural and expected outcome of such a daring assertion. Both the bitterness in being shamelessly exploited and the infinite pride in being part of a rich and enduring world-view shine out from the lines of *The African Elegy*. The novels that follow the collection also do not fail in reflecting these stand-points of their author but their greatness lies in the fact that not one of these books stoop to the level of propagandist literature or political writing.
One need not therefore wonder why *Songs of Enchantment* is more political than its predecessor. While *Songs of Enchantment* unveils the extent of corruption in social life and the dirty cheap tricks that power-mongering politicians indulge in, *Infinite Riches* hints at the constant “rewriting of history” that the imperial masters have been practicing all along and the resultant loss of identity for average Africans. *Astonishing the Gods* (1995), which followed *Songs of Enchantment*, is a properly worked out fable that serves as a rite of passage for both the protagonist and his author. The spiritual quest undertaken by the invisible hero has some allegorical political significance. His expedition to make himself visible ends up in the realization that “invisibility” is in itself a blessing, a highly creative state that holds much potential. This is as much the realization of the author, for as his novels written henceforth testify, he grows out of the stage of vain protest and bitterness and seeks to explore the creative possibilities of existence.

Okri comes out of the tests of passage described in *Astonishing the Gods* successfully, even though the novel lacks much of the political engagement, experimental energy and complexity found in his earlier novels. The poor critical reception of
the novel is largely because of its skimpy development of characters and also due to a lack of the realistic dimension. But the novel triumphantly asserts the superiority of the soul and its ability to reach beyond the limitations of the temporal world. More than anything else, the novel celebrates the infinite possibilities of "being invisible", a condition that the Africans have for so long been struggling to escape from.

Between successive episodes of the abiku saga, Okri produced other works of fiction and non-fiction. In 1996, he published Dangerous Love, the revised version of The Landscapes Within written fifteen years ago which, he felt, lacked the craft and finesse of an experienced writer. Dangerous Love is a richly textured book about the artistic crisis of a familiar character Omovo, and the story is set in 1970s in a Nigeria that is a labyrinth of official corruption, and tribal rivalry. It is a love story with a subtle undertone of politics and artistic freedom. The protagonist Omovo is an artist who vividly recollects the horrible consequences of a civil war as a child. Omovo’s painting is confiscated by the authorities and he loses his job to a more influential candidate. His problem is compounded by his love affair with Ifeyinwa, a lady
married to and owned by an abusive bullying man of the neighbourhood.

Okri’s latest novel *In Arcadia* is an intriguing book. Inspired by a painting and financed by a mysterious benefactor, a group of ill-assorted people set out on a journey to find the real Arcadia. The journey starts of in ignorance and chaos, leading both the reader and the character through an adventure of superstition and myth, to harmony. The film crew are provided with only shadowy details with the promise that they will receive their instructions as the go along.

The story starts with Lao, who performs the narrator’s function. He describes in his sour mood the need that urges the fictional film-makers to accept the proposal of making this film. According to Lao, they all accept this offer in order to escape from their failures and frustrations. They had all lost something sometime in the past or even before, and now it was time to start their search for their private treasures—their own Arcadias. The novel brings together Okri’s ideas about different types of Arcadias into an eclectic tapestry, a fabric of life, inscribed with his philosophical and mystical thoughts. The journey in search of one’s Arcadia—an earthly paradise—could either be one of an escape or a quest. A close reading of the novel on the one hand will allow an
interpretation of the crew’s individual quests and on the other hand establish the link between Okri’s text and Virgil’s *Eclogues* and the notion of Arcadia that used to be the object of nostalgia in the Renaissance.

As the story is set in Europe and the characters are not openly described as African, Okri’s seems to be leaving behind the African subject matter in this novel. But we do realize by reading between the lines that Lao is African and his view of the world is impregnated with African knowledge. When he describes the mysterious malignant figure Malasso, he exemplifies it with his knowledge about the stories that are told in Africa regarding men who “once they shake hands with you, you never feel well again” (*In Arcadia* 26). Lao seems to be a *juju* man who can see all the invisible fears and frustrations that accompany each passenger. Lao’s bitter experience at the Paris Immigration Control impels Okri to spend four pages to voice his idea about the invisible lines that some societies have drawn to pin down people who are condemned at birth, because of a different sun. Although *In Arcadia* is also about universal worries and transcendental anxieties as many of his previous books, it cannot be viewed as a departure from the stand points that Okri vouches for.
The novel, in Africa, is a twentieth century phenomenon, a late arrival on the literary scene, trailing behind the two other literary genres, drama and poetry. The African novelists rely on the twin strategies of "cultural revelation" and "cultural silencing" in trying to make the novel feel at home in an alien land. While the writer deliberately "reveals" his indigenous culture by foregrounding African oral traditions, he advertently "silences" the European methods of fiction writing by allowing the traditional oral literature subsume western techniques, hence the glittering amalgam of folk traditions, legends, myths and fables in the contemporary African novel.

A problem of comparative aesthetics is at the heart of the difficulties encountered in appreciating an African work of art. Since there were no African critics, non-African literary critics who were the first to evaluate African writers applied western literary terms and they have, by and large, lost sight of the perennial springs of traditional African myths and folk-lore that give life and texture to literature. Apart from the inclusion of myths and folk-tales, the African novel is distinct in its thematic concerns as well as character delineation. For example, one could say that romantic love—a subject favoured by novelists world-wide—is largely absent
in African novels. Likewise, the isolated hero—always at war with an
oppressive society—also does not figure in African fiction, especially
those written by first generation writers. The African protagonist
finds himself in a close-knit natural world and tries to define a little
space for himself, whereas his western counterpart finds himself
marooned on a lonely shore despite being in the midst of a human
sea. The crisis of identity that becomes the topic for many a
European novel is an alien notion in the African cosmos which, with
its close-knit social fabric and well defined relationships between
the natural phenomena gives abundant protection and assurance to
all its members.

Whereas the earlier novels portray the initial exposure to the
West—the colonial occupation and the African’s confrontation with
the new religion—as in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* or Ngugi’s *The
River Between*, the later novels are more concerned with the
problems of adaptation to education and urbanization best typified
by Cyprian Ekwensi’s Lagos novels and the novellas by the *Onitsha*
writers. There are the novels of nation-building with the themes of
political leadership, corruption and the pangs of a newly
independent state, like Achebe’s *A Man of the People*. Other
principal themes that interest African novelists are the conflict
between individuals and families over marriage and relationships, city versus village, Christianity versus indigenous beliefs, fertility and reproduction, aspirations of young people, magic, corruption, intergenerational conflicts and the like.

Ben Okri is no exception. He shares all the concerns voiced by his contemporaries. Though there is no easy pattern or formula discernible in all his novels, one could say that in most of his novels the main character or narrative voice is often a sensitive young man who is a representative of the country's future. He discovers the brutality and social chaos in life and often finds himself in conflict with elder males, the fathers and husbands who are habitually unjust, brutal and immoral. A female character—often a lone sufferer as mother or lover—acts as a source of strength and support for the protagonist.

The novels, though they act as an indictment against the political oppression and corruption in Nigeria, deal with concerns of a more universal nature as well. Okri, being an artist himself, is convinced of the healing powers of words, music and painting on the gaping wounds of a nation. His novels, especially The Landscapes Within, The Dangerous Love and Astonishing the Gods examine at length the philosophical questions pertaining to the
secret of creative genius and artistic creation, the purpose of art and the dilemma of the artist.

Throughout his career, in almost all his works, Okri has acknowledged the responsibilities of a writer. An artist, he maintains, is a seer whose fertile imagination yields visions of a country's future:

With the hand bearing the shining sword of truth, he was pointing ever-forward to a great destiny and destination, never to be reached, because if reached the people and their journey would perish. He was pointing to an ever-moving destination, unspecified except in myth, the place of absolute self-realization and contentment which must always be just beyond the reach of the brave land, but not so much beyond reach that the people would give up in perfection's despair and set up tent somewhere between the sixth and final mountain. (AG 87)

He looks upon the artist as the harbinger of change. While ordinary mortals should reconcile themselves with their yolk, artists are endowed with the power to transform their destiny. They can redream the future of the nation and explore its fabulous
possibilities. The transforming power of dreams is asserted by many characters including Dad and Azaro. Azaro enters the dreams of other people like Madame Koto, the blind old man, the old woman and the Governor General. All those who dream create their realities and are in fact, prisoners of that reality. It is in their failure to transform their dreams that the tragedy lies. The true reason for the nation’s predicament also lies in such inability to have profound dreams. People whose dreams are mediocre and selfish create a dead and defunct state out of which nothing profound grows. Lack of vision is at the root of all failures. Azaro laments:

  The river of dreams was without direction. The dreams were too many, too different, and too contradictory: the nation was composed not of one people but of several mapped and bound into one artificial entity by Empire builders. The multitude of dreams became a feverish confluence of contending waters . . . . All those who dreamt the nation created as they dreamed—all those who wanted their gods to prevail, their tribes to rule, their ideas to become paramount . . . . All those who dreamt of such narrow dreams imprisoned us who
came later in their fevered steel webs of selfishness and
greed. (*IR 234*)

The artist is a juggler of dreams, a visionary who breaks out
from darkness to light the magic lamp of his soul so that it becomes
the fire and light of generations to come. His art is a tool that
unlocks the dormant realms in the viewer or reader. Every word or
stroke of colour on the canvas can sparkle with intuitions, visions,
memories and fears or evoke familiar realities. The act of painting
is likened to prayer by Omovo. He feels that the empty canvas has
infinite potential. It is in fact, a gateway into a landscape of
visions. Omovo is Okri’s artist-self and he shares the author’s social
commitment and sensitive nature. As an artist, he has clear ideas
about the purpose of his art:

He decided that in his paintings, he wanted to create a
simple vision, he wanted to start with what he knew,
and what had hurt him, what had hurt all the people he
identified with the most. He wanted his work to be fed
from as many dimensions as made up the human. In it
nothing would be too big or too small to include. He
wanted his works to awaken the emotions and the
inexpressible states that he felt, the states that fed into
streams, the streams that fed into great seas. He wanted the simple to contain the complex and the complex to embody the simple. Above all, with his increasing awareness that the artist is nothing but a higher servant, a labourer, a mediator, a carpenter of visions, a channel—above all, he wanted to be master of as many secrets of art as he was able. For he instinctively believed, and seldom questioned, that the highest function of art was to make people feel more, see more, feel more fully, see more fully. (DL 250-1)

The lack of vision or the inability to redream one's predicament is what Okri identifies as the malaise that is continually casting the nation into darkness. This powerlessness, impotence or failure can be compensated only by a plethora of dreams, the tradesmen of which being artists like Okri. They dwell on alternative realities that mirror their creative imagination. Oscillating between the truth as it is and the way it ought to be, they create narratives with a dream-like texture that mesmerize the reader at their fluent best. These narratives have a soothing effect on the reader, presenting before them the infinite possibilities of living and enabling them to feel all the pent-up
emotions and all the indefinable thoughts and sensations that the living world puts a restraint upon. Omovo hopes of expressing great things through art. He resolves to keep the mind open and clear so that no possibility of perception will escape him. He is not blind to the stark and painful realities of his time. Like his creator, Omovo too makes his art a blueprint of the reality around him. He records in his note-book: "I should do a painting of my friends—children of war—children of Waste—the war generation—lost in the cities—lost in offices—lost in traffic jams—trapped in the mazes of daily life—the maze of our history . . . ." (DL 191).

The very same resolve must have made Okri write the short stories in *Incidents at the Shrine* and *Stars of the New Curfew*. The civil war and the social turbulence of post-independent Nigeria must be relieved as part of the artist’s endeavour to transcend the trauma of violence. In *Songs of Enchantment*, as Dad carries the body of the carpenter to be buried, a feverish emerald mist encircles him, melting away his blindness. He cries out "I CAN SEE! I CAN SEE! SIGHT IS WONDERFUL! THE WORLD IS HOLY! EVERYTHING IS GLOWING (SOE 283)! In a flash, the entire community gets back their faculty of vision. They have been blind only on account of their unwillingness to acknowledge the corpse of the carpenter.
The amazing vision of truth should be preceded by the willingness to perceive and recognize the carcasses of the age. The artist must subject himself to the misery of seeing things in their true proportion. Omovo, the sensitive individual he is, does not understand the world. In the face of its many realities, he seems to have only bewilderment and morbid fascination. He becomes a true artist only when he brings himself to portray an image that has long been tormenting him—the image of the mutilated body of a girl—a horrible and revolting objective correlative for the darker side of the African life. The frenzy and the agitation nearly drive him mad, but in the end an ecstatic vision of truth in all its glory is what he is rewarded with.

The predicament of an artist is truly pathetic, considering the odds against which he must practice his vocation. In an age of ruthless and power hungry politics, no truth-telling is possible without some risk to one’s life. In his indignation at the military regime’s action of seizing his painting, Omovo fumes: “If you tell the truth you are in trouble. But if you see the truth and keep quiet your spirit begins to die. The position of the artist is a terrible one” (DL 118). Omovo allows himself to be overpowered by a rare vision that breaks down walls and expands the spaces within him into new
states of being. He gets a glimpse into the real state of things and realizes the mistakes and the lack of vision that has propelled his people into the long night of suffering that they are in:

Bursting in this state, he saw time enfission into every moment, into endless possibilities of life. Time was the sea—a million lights revolved on every crest—past met present, present met future. Quivering with excessive love, he had the vision of a terrifying and unfinishable portrait of humanity . . . .

He felt the purity of helplessness, the subversion of hope—he saw caves of unmeasured corruption, felt the burden of desperate prayers uttered, unheard—the prayers of slaves—the betrayal of ancestors—the treachery of leaders—the lies and the corruption of the old generation—their destruction of future dreams—they raped our past, we rape our future—we never learn our lessons—history screams and ghettos erupt with death and maddened youths—we burn for vision—clear, positive vision—for vision allied with action—for want of vision my people perish—for want of action they perish.

(\textit{DL 362})
Art, according to Okri, is a means for personal salvation as well as social correction. It channelizes the artist’s creative potential and imagination into new fruitful dreams about the future of the society. At the same time, it enables the artist to become one with the world outside him by bringing about a harmony between his own personality and the eternal enigmas that trouble his soul. One could say that art offers an answer to all the troubles of this world. It has immense power of healing over wounds thrown open by colonialist aggression and selfish power-hungry politics. By making an attempt to relive the trauma through his art, the artist perfects the role of a psychotherapist assisting his patient to come to terms with the bitter truths of existence.

The process of artistic production in a newly independent nation struggling to free itself from the quicksand of neo-colonial authoritarianism has to be political and such artistic responses cannot escape political overtones. Okri is no exception and his vehement and scathing indictment of profit-motivated politicians who make a mockery of governance is inescapable in all his fiction.

The episodes of the fake currency notes dropped from the helicopter and the rotten milk powder distributed among the public stand as perfect metaphors for the rotten state of affairs in Africa.
Towards the end of *The Famished Road*, Azaro's Dad re-dreams the world in his state of delirium. He sees a world order in which black people always suffer:

He saw our people drowning in poverty, in famine, drought, in divisiveness and the blood of war. He saw our people always preyed upon by other powers, manipulated by the Western world, our history and achievements rigged out of existence. He saw the rich of our country, he saw the array of our politicians, how corruptible they were, how blind to our future, how greedy they became, how deaf to the cries of the people, how stony their hearts were, how short-sighted their dreams of power. He saw the divisions in our society, the lack of unity, he saw the widening pit between those who have and those who don't, he saw it all very clearly. *(TFR 492)*

The petty politicians who parade as the protectors of the people show their true colour during elections. The Party of the Rich and the Party of the Poor are no different when it comes to terrorizing the people. Night runners of both the party invade the spaces, spreading terror and curfew, killing people and burning
houses. The perfect paradigm for corrupt politics appears in the shape of a Jackal-headed Masquerade, an apparition that enters the lives of the villagers in *Songs of Enchantment*, as an instrument to instill fear in their minds to make them submit their wills to the Party of the Rich. The people find the frightening figure stationed at Madame Koto's bar. It is a creature of many hermeneutical heads, a confluence of many minds. At first, the masquerade is seen as a tool to spread terror among the villagers. Soon it takes on symbolic overtones. The masquerade stands for the naked aggression and brute political will of totalitarian power, which spreads itself through everything with the same intimidating menace. It unleashes violence in the village during many nights. The very sight of the Masquerade is capable of mesmerizing the population with horror:

The Masquerade had the head of a jackal, with fiercely protruding jaws, and it had the twisted horns of a ram—but it had human eyes. The eyes kept looking at us, turning in this socket, regarding us with intense hostility . . . . At first I thought they belonged to the blind old man. Then I thought they were Madame Koto's. But none of these seemed likely. And as our speculation
increased, so did the palpable malice in the eyes of the red colossus. (SOE 98)

The Masquerade fills the night spaces with terror. Many mask heads and night runners dominate the air, damage houses, wreck huts, kill people and mutilate their bodies. The Jackal-headed Masquerade is blood-thirsty and it grows on the sufferings and fear of man. The Masquerade's unholy union with Madame Koto explains the clandestine liaison between the spirit-world and the politicians—the root cause of all misery. The offspring born out of such a union will spell doom to the universe. The dual potencies of their inheritance will destroy the world beyond repair. Azaro senses the danger in this alliance and he dreams of Madame Koto's body having great waves of soldiers walking backwards. "The Head of State, a General, barked out orders and they lifted their guns and shot down all the living dreams of the nation" (SOE 43). The philosophy of the Masquerade is simple "Dread for those who oppose, protection for supporters, nightmares for the silent" (SOE 112). Worse still, Okri maintains that the Masquerade is a universal phenomenon. "Each land has its own kind of Masquerade, some more refined that the others, the principle the same" (SOE 113). He expresses his anguish and concern at the crippling state of his
nation in the words of Dad who cries: "Poverty everywhere, wickedness, greed, injustice all over the place, goats wanting to lead the country, cows running for elections, rats scheming to become governors. This could be the great garden of the earth, but it is now a backyard" (SOE 126).

Politicians act like warlords and thugs. They yell out hollow promises during the elections and use cheap tricks to appease the crowd by bribing them with money and food. They stoop, even further, to threatening and blackmailing. Supporters and rowdies of the political parties station in the village and beat up those who refuse to vote for them. The election, itself is a farce, as the words of a land-lord turned politician reveal:

It's simple. All you have to do is press ink next to this name. A simple matter. My party will bring good roads and electricity and water supply. And remember this: we have people at the polling station who will be watching you. We will know who you vote for. Whether you vote for our man or not we will win anyway. But if you don't vote for him there will be trouble. (TFR 198)

The great pre-election rally—much awaited and celebrated in the first volumes of the abiku series—when it finally occurs in the final
book, turns out to be the biggest hoax. The very first speaker announces arrogantly:

WE WILL CONQUER THIS COUNTRY! . . . VICTORY IS OURS ALREADY. WE HAVE WON. WE BRING POWER TO THE PEOPLE. WE BRING WEALTH AND SATBILITY. THOSE WHO VOTE FOR US WILL ENJOY, THOSE WHO DON'T WILL EAT DUSTBINS. (IR 261-262)

The insignificance and paltriness of the common crowd is apparent in the way the politicians behave at the rally:

We heard things that insulted our hunger, and derided our patience. We heard them call us fools for trying to exercise out right to democratic choice, for trying to be discriminating . . . . And they all spoke as if we were not particularly important to the results of the elections. It soon became clear that—for the speakers—we didn’t exist. We, the crowd, were the ghosts of history. We were the empty bodies on whose behalf the politicians and soldiers rule; we were not real. We could not communicate our desires save by the intensity of our cheering or hissing. We were shadows in the world of power; the mere spectators of phenomena, the
victims of speeches. We were meant only to listen, never to speak. (IR 262-263)

The rally deteriorates into sheer pandemonium and the crowd turns violent. They go on an insane fit of destruction wrecking everything they come across. The fury of the crowd is such that Azaro witnesses a metamorphosis, a mass transformation. He sees men turning into bulls and jackals, their skins bristling, aflame in the night. Their relentless poverty, hunger, humiliation and despair whip them into action, but unfortunately such action lack direction and aim. They battle with one another senselessly, like men possessed by the god of madness and chaos. No meaningful or solid act of political resistance can come out of such sheer mad violence.

Okri is harsh on the massive degree of corruption rampant in the society. Corruption has become almost a way of life as a number of scenes in his novels reveal. Okri’s very first novel is about the dangerous consequences of corruption and moral degradation. There are many occasions in Flowers and Shadows that establish corruption as an inseparable part of the entire system. The examples of Sowho and Cynthia’s father show how manipulation can victimize people and destroy their lives beyond repair. Even seemingly trivial scenes, like the one in which Jeffia has to bribe a
policeman to escape arrest for failure to produce his driving license, reveal how unashamedly people indulge in acts of corruption. In *The Famished Road*, corruption has become almost a cult. In the house of the police officer who holds Azaro a captive, he witnesses a strange ritual. Sitting around a hurricane lantern and the image of a feathered goddess, seven men chant, take oaths of allegiance, drink potions and produce the money they had collected as bribe. The whole ceremony is conducted in such grave solemnity reminiscent of a religious practice:

The seated figures broke into a frightening chant. When they stopped, the first man, sweating intensely in the hot room, broke off a bit of Kaoline, chewed some, and marked his forehead with the rest. In a tremulous voice he said that if he had betrayed his oath in any way he should be run over by a lorry. He made a guttural sound. He consecrated his statement by drinking of the potion in the calabash. He brought out the money he had collected and placed it on the table. Then he sat back into the semi-darkness, and became a figure again.  

(TFR 22-23)
Corruption, almost a cult in the society, is most shamelessly manifest in the politicians. Through his fiction Okri has emphatically asserted that the real reason for Nigeria's collapse into economic, social and moral chaos is its lack of a coherent vision.

There is absolutely no rational model for behaviour beyond the immediate satisfaction of greed and fears. There is no statesman of true moral caliber, internationally reckoned as the spokesperson of the country. The politicians who steer the country themselves lack vision or direction. They wallow in immorality and have no bigger aim than the satisfaction of their urge for power and pleasure. The visionary child of Okri, Azaro, is quick to sense this:

Twenty miles away, the future rulers of the nation slept in peace. They dreamt of power. They dreamt of bottomless coffers to steal from. Houses in every famous city. Concubines in every major town. Power removing them from the consequences of their own actions, which we suffered in advance. And suffered for long afterwards. (IR 11)

Okri's diagnosis proves right and like Soyinka, he recognizes the necessity for an individual moral vision as the beginning of renewal.
Closely allied with the theme of corruption and exploitation is the theme of violation of nature which figures most in *Infinite Riches*. Okri’s protagonists are all people who share a sacred bond with nature. They find a kindred spirit in nature—a confidant and a most reliable companion, and it is no wonder that the most profound thoughts come to Jeffia or Omovo, when they sit in close communion with nature. One must not forget the ecstatic joy Omovo experiences when, at last, he sheds all his doubts and inhibitions to become one with nature. The nature that appears so benevolent in the early novels is at the mercy of man in *Infinite Riches*. The spirits that dwell in the woods must flee following the destruction of their abode. The colonizers and the western elite among the colonized have no qualms about destroying the dense forests for their selfish gains.

The forest is almost a character—a potent force—in the fictional expanse of Ben Okri. It is a fiendish maze, powerful and dark like the subconscious mind. The moment a character enters the forest, the reader experiences the fragrance of the herbs, the intoxicating aroma of fertile earth and the dense odour of crushed leaves. Azara’s words are extremely potent:
Birds cawed overhead flying around in widening circles. I re-entered the forest. The sun's rays were sharp like glass. The blue shadows of green trees blinded me for a moment. The shade was cooling and the air smelt of fine aromatic herbs and bark. Patterns of light and colours danced on the forest floor. Flowers which I didn't see scented the dense and tender breeze. I listened to the fluted sound of birds, the murmurings of a distant stream, the wind in the somnolent trees, and the pervasive concert of insects. (TFR 242)

The forest often reminds us of something other than itself. It is true that the abiku novels are not explicitly meant to be an allegory on political Africa. But it is also true that meanings can be read into the phenomena that appear therein. For example, the forest is the centre stage of all the mysteries that happen in the ghetto. As trees are felled for the construction of buildings, the forest grows dangerous and wild. The word goes out that the spirits of the forest have turned vengeful. The forest becomes a place of spectral sighs and songs. Female voices are heard singing from the forest. There are stories that a beautiful maiden in the shape of a tree is hiring people. Women begin to disappear and the haunting music of
multiple female voices reminds men of broken pacts and shattered dreams.

In Okri's mythical expanse, the huge panoramic stage of the forest can be the consciousness of man, interspersed with regions of darkness, clearings, marshy places, phosphorescent lights, spaces of silence, and dwelling places of ancestral spirits. Even though Madame Koto's bar is a haven for both evil spirits and political thugs, it is the forest which is the abode of all the strange phenomena that govern the universe. The felling of trees can be seen as the violent uprooting of notions and principles of ideology that have grown deep into the soil of the African consciousness. The trees are fast disappearing and their ghosts wail their loss, disturbing the sleep of men:

At that same moment the explosion, quaking the earth and the seas, disturbed the forest and woke a giant spirit from its long slumber. The spirit woke up, and found that it had been made homeless. Confused, it began to wander through the forest looking for its familiar abode, its great baobab tree with its moss and serene lianas. And the agitation of the wandering spirit started a wind which blasted Mum back as she entered
The fall of a mighty tree is at once pathetic and frightening to Azaro:

I stood swaying before the most beautiful ancient god of a dead tree that I had ever seen. . . . I gazed in awe at the magnificent tree. It was the length of ten elephants and its flowers were in full bloom. Bird nests were scattered around and silver eggs broken on the red earth. (IR 113)

The large-scale felling of trees has grave consequences. The ecological crisis is well beyond anybody's reckoning and the open wounds of the earth are hard to heal. The voice of the wind reveals to Azaro the extent of damage done:

The voice told of the many beings left homeless and unprotected with the death of trees. It hinted at the rage of the spirits at the disturbance of their centuries of dreaming. It whispered about the trees which had grown magnificent in particular places in the forest. Places where the earth's lines of vital forces met. Acupuncture points of the land. The voice talked of
trees that were like the essence of a civilization, masterpieces of sculpture and survival, with future destinies coded on their trunks. The voice spoke of the tree of mysteries which grew up into the three realms—the earth, the ancestral plane, and the sphere of higher spirits. (IR 111)

The violation of nature and the crumbling of hierarchy and balance of the natural phenomena could be seen as a direct offshoot of colonialism. The unscrupulous haste in urbanization and the scope for easy money has prompted the colonized as well as the colonizer to ravish nature shamelessly. The colonizer has the additional burden that he has taken upon himself to change the look of everything, to put the stamp of civilization on everything. The portrait of the Governor General burning significant papers in Infinite Riches is significant. He spends seventeen days burning important documents related to the country. He redraws the map of the nation altering the boundaries and rewrites its history so that it begins only with the arrival of his people on the shores. He deprives the people of history, civilization and even humanity. The resultant loss of identity is alarming:
And as the Governor General rewrote time (made his longer, made ours shorter), as he rendered invisible our accomplishments, wiped out traces of our ancient civilizations, rewrote the meaning and beauty of our customs, as he abolished the world of spirits, diminished our feats of memory, turned our philosophies into crude superstitions, our rituals into childish dances, our religions into animal worship and animistic trances, our art into crude relics and primitive forms, our drums into instruments of jest, our music into simplistic babbling— as he rewrote our past, he altered our present. And the alteration created new spirits which fed the bottomless appetite of the great god of chaos. (IR 127-128)

Perhaps one cannot find a more scathing and sharp indictment in African fiction against the white masters. The Governor has been living on the continent for fifteen years but he did not have the slightest idea about the true nature of the place. Out of a moment of sudden and spontaneous feeling, he even etches out, the true African identity—their touching obedience, infinite capacity for forgiveness, preference for myth over reality, endurance and naivety, though soon after he finds the idea alien to him as that
unique mood leaves him. Trapped in his own selfish world, the Governor General is troubled with hallucinations and strange visions. He often comes across as a pitiable figure, caught in the maze of history. And history itself has a dubious status with administrators altering it according to their whims and fancies.

Another significant theme Okri propounds is his contention that all phenomena repeat themselves in striving for perfection. Many characters including Azaro, Mum and Dad go through regions between life and death before they start their life afresh. The past is the shaping factor which determines the significance of the present. The past repeats itself in an attempt to attain perfection. This cyclic process is never-ending and this partly explains the phenomenon of the abiku whose predicament is shared by the nation:

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. They keep coming and going till their time is
right. History itself fully demonstrates how things of the world partake of the condition of the spirit-child. There are many who are of this condition and do not know it. There are many nations, civilizations, ideas, half-discoveries, revolutions, loves, art forms, experiments and historical events that are of this condition and do not know it . . . . They all yearn to make of themselves a beautiful sacrifice, a difficult sacrifice, to bring transformation, and to die shedding light within this life, setting the matter ready for their true beginnings to cry into being. (TFR 487)

Just as the past, present and future mingle freely in Okri’s fictional world and as there are multiple deaths within a single birth, Okri’s characters must live multiple lives simultaneously. They find themselves being alive at different zones of existence. One might wake up to different zones of existence. One might wake up to find oneself in another world. Azaro comes across his own image in the spirit-world. There he meets a number of people whom he knows in the real world including the blind old man and Madame Koto. Even though Dad has none of the superhuman attributes of Azaro, he too meets and holds talks with spirits and other-worldly phenomena.
Such experiences often baffle him and he exclaims "How many worlds do we live in at the same time? . . . My son, I feel as if I have just died and yet I have never felt more awake" (IR 6-7).

Okri seems to celebrate the warmth and protection that family offers in sharp contrast with the chaotic world outside. In all his novels, family proves a refuge to characters who find life difficult in a hostile world. This is especially true about Azaro’s family. At the end of each of his wanderings when Azaro gets home the coziness of the cleanly swept room welcomes him. He relishes the aroma of the warm pepper soup cooked by Mum. Dad might be sitting on his three-legged chair smoking a cigarette. The family shares their food and their experiences during the day. The talk invariably ends in a story or an anecdote narrated to explain the mysteries of existence. Azaro curls up on the mat and falls asleep peacefully while wars are being waged outside the door. Even with the outside world growing dangerous and the spirit-world encroaching upon them, the family survives on account of their unflinching devotion to one another. In Songs of the Enchantment it nearly falls apart but soon reconciles and continues its sail against the turbulent waves of life. They continue to suffer, but their suffering only makes them stronger and more forbearing.
Suffering is almost a character in Okri’s novels. The central myth of *The Famished Road* is of a hungry road and it is the hunger that makes it powerful and fearsome. Okri maintains that one cannot write about Nigeria truthfully without a sense of violence, tension and suffering. The fury of hunger becomes people’s principal source of power, whether as individuals or as a nation. To suffer is to live life fully. Strange as it may seem, the African people equate pain and suffering with the summit of life—joy and pain at their extremes make life meaningful and worth living. Black consciousness admires life for its own sake, the pure joy of living, the pure vital force and the enthusiasm of possessing life, no matter if one is rich or poor. This explains why the black people have an infinite capacity to endure sufferings and why at the same time, they are too sensitive, sentimental, forgiving and religious. The Black culture does not see man in the light of the Nietzschean man—“the will to power”—or the Freudian man of sexual instinct or the Kantian man of pure reason. All these fragmented views of man have produced anarchy in the realm of thought, action and behaviour. The black cultural symbol is vitality—life and more life. That is why Azaro’s father recalls it while calling his son back from the spirit world:
We are the miracles that God made to taste the bitter fruits of time. We are precious and one day our suffering will turn into wonders of the earth . . . . Do you not see the mystery of our pain? That we bear poverty, are able to sing and dream sweet things . . . we bless things even in our pain . . . I too have heard the dead singing. They tell me that this life is good. They tell me to live it gently, with fire and always with hope, my son. (TFR 338)

Okri has declined to talk about his childhood or parents or how people known to him have influenced his fiction. But he has to his credit certain finely drawn characters with memorable traits. Most of his men are strong and righteous. The father figures are sturdy and strong and from Flowers and Shadows onwards, they improve considerably. Jonan, Jeffia's father is an out and out practical person, at times even to the point of being ruthless. The tragic thing about Jonan is that he is a man driven by an idea of success that is empty. He has deliberately obliterated that part of his being which is capable of feeling. He despises Jeffia's attachment towards his mother and his artistic inclinations inherited from her and sharpened under her loving guidance. He
considers it unmanly. Omovo's father too feels shut out and left alone as his sons desert him soon after the death of their mother. His failure in comprehending Omovo's artistic apprehensions and insecurity stands in their way for a more fruitful relationship. Omovo yearns for his father's recognition and senses a similar urge in him too, but the gulf between them is too wide for a meaningful reconciliation. The father-son relationship in most of the novels is strained and difficult and the only exception is perhaps the relationship between Azaro and his father. Azaro is all tenderness and love for his Dad whom he looks upon as a real hero. He admires Black Tyger who grows to the proportions of a majestic opponent to the dark forces of sorcery and witchcraft. Dad is perhaps Okri's best of men. His eloquence, while he rages interminably about injustice and his earnestness and vigour in resisting the machinations of the Party of the Rich, are unmatched. The character of Azaro is yet another proof of Okri's brilliant characterization. Azaro is a child full of wanderlust. His curiosity and depth of perception is amazing. He chooses to stay in the impoverished world of reality rather than return to the ethereal world of spirits. He is the untiring chronicler of the daily life of his small community and his narrative is relentlessly objective.
Okri’s women are all virtuous and devoted to the family, with the only exception of Blackie, Omovo’s stepmother whose clandestine connection with Tuwo, a man of loose morals proves fatal to her. All the other women are shadowy figures who are doomed to live a life that they do not deserve in any manner. Though endowed with a fine artistic temperament and a poetic turn of mind, Okri’s female characters—Ifeyinwa, Cynthia, Jeffia’s mother, Omovo’s mother, and Azaro’s mother—all live in a constant state of neglect and self-inflicted punishment. Their predicament often drives them to the point of a nervous breakdown and most of them are victims of infidelity and domestic violence. But strangely enough, these female characters are the main source of inspiration and support to invariably all of Okri’s protagonists. The warmth, the protection and the affection that the father figures fail to provide them are liberally offered by the women in their lives. Some of these female characters are really worthy counterparts of the main characters. Omovo’s fire is kept alive by Ifeyinwa whose very presence is motivation enough for him. Ifeyinwa’s original is Cynthia—Jeffia’s only link back to life.

The most memorable portrait of a woman is undoubtedly that of Azaro’s mother whose saga of life is spread across three books. It
is significant that she does not have a name, for she is every African woman. Being the mother of an *abiku*, anxiety and worry are her second self. Unhappiness for the mothers of *abiku* stems from the child's constant sickness, erratic behaviour and sudden death. Azaro's mother is the one force that keeps the family together. She has to be on the heels after a mischievous wandering spirit-child. And with a husband who is forever picking up quarrels with mighty politicians, thugs and sorcerers, trouble is always after her. In the scorching heat of the ghetto, Mum struggles to keep the family alive by hawking petty wares from morning to night. She is the submissive loyal wife of Black Tyger in *The Famished Road* and her ruling passion is her devotion to her family. In *Songs of Enchantment*, she grows wearied and disillusioned and strays out into the world of spirits. Towards the end of the novel, Mum is more like a passive onlooker in the plight of the family. In *Infinite Riches* she once again assumes majesty. On hearing that Dad had been arrested, she sets out in a rage invading police stations and releasing prisoners. Her singlemindedness and magnetic quality gains her followers among harassed undernourished women who join her in her fight against the evil establishment. Through Azaro's words about his Mum, Okri pays a glowing tribute to the average African woman:
I heard amazing stories of Mum addressing crowds of bewildered women. She spoke in six languages. She spoke of freedom, and of justice, which she said was the language of women. She spoke of Independence and of an end to tribalism. She spoke of the unity of all women who have to bring children into this world made difficult by selfish men. She spoke of all the things she had always been silent about. She talked of the special way of African women, their way of intervening, their way of balancing, of turning hatred into friendship, their talent for redemption, their long memory for histories and secrets that men too quickly forget, their gift of nourishing, of healing, of making good things grow, their secret ways of undermining, their great love of humankind. (IR 36-37)

The fabulous Madame Koto is the most colourful character in the *abiku* novels. Vain, corrupt and generous, she appears in *The Famished Road* as a local bar-owner and literally swells up to dominate the novels. Like Azaro, she exists in both realms; as a power broker with a retinue of thugs, prostitutes and praise-singers and as the priestess of a degenerate sect. She is the one who
introduces electricity in the locality. Her new car and the rally and pageantry that she conducts on behalf of the Party of the Rich, all add colour to an otherwise grim atmosphere of the novels. Madame Koto’s impending delivery of the three spirit children, conceived with the Jackal-headed Masquerade leads to the destructive climax of the third novel. Even after she is dead and gone, the residents of the ghetto, reeling from her terrible ways, cannot escape her oppressive presence:

. . . our neighbours who had been traumatized by Madame Koto’s relentless domination, by her almost mythic tyranny, by the way she had disturbed our sleep with her infernal powers, the way she had sucked energy from us, and poisoned our days and filled our nights with inscrutable terror. (IR 379)

Okri considers himself as a universal spiritualist. His books are the fruit of a personal transformation through fire and suffering. He admits to a period of bereavement, when his mother Grace died in 1996 (an “appalling, emptying experience”) and his father Silver Okri, in 1998. But long before that, as Ben was going through a tough time in London in the 1970s after his Nigerian scholarship dried up, he made a pact with himself: “It seems you have nothing—
no money, no friends . . . . but at the edge of the abyss, you find you have a choice; that life isn’t a given, it’s a choosing” (http://books.guardian.co.uk/review/story). He willed himself to keep writing and by the age of twenty one, had published *Flowers and Shadows*, his first novel. By thirty-two, he had won the Booker Prize.

Okri’s early childhood was spent in Peckham and at the age of seven, following the expiry of his father’s scholarship to study law, the family had to shift back to Nigeria. Lagos was both a shock and delight to little Okri: “I saw it was possible to be human being in a totally different way. It was like going into a multi-dimensional world. That gave me my aesthetic matrix, where a sense of alternatives became natural. There was no one world-view, but as many worlds as there are ways of seeing” (http://books.guardian.co.uk/review/story). When he was eight, the Biafra war broke out for which the Igbo people were blamed. The family had to move constantly, having to hide Okri’s mother who was from a half-Igbo royal family. The trauma and the perpetual fear of persecution along with the chilling experiences of the war left a lasting imprint on the mind of the eight-year old. Okri reminisces, “I am very slow
to deal with these things; it took me seventeen years. I am
crammed full of painful things I witnessed” (http://books.
guardian.co.uk/review/story). Like Azaro’s Dad, Okri’s father
occupied a respectable position among the residents of the ghetto
where they lived. The family was accustomed to having people bring
their grievances to Silver Okri—who was a representative of the
residents—seeking justice. Okri’s sensitive young mind was naturally
upset watching the agony of helpless men, exploited tortured and
trampled upon by powerful landlords, factory owners and political
things. The pain never really left him; instead it began to grow in
proportions. Fascinated by the religion and worldview of his
ancestors and disillusioned with the ways of his fellowmen, Okri was
becoming increasingly aware of the potential of writing. In his own
words, “It was a seriously revolutionary moment in my life—though
it took time to filter through. I realized you cannot evoke a place
truly till you find a tone, a narrative, in tune with the dimensions of
that place. You can’t use Jane Austen to tell stories about Africa”
(http://books.guardian. co.uk/review/story).

Okri’s parents separated when he was still a teenager and he
moved between Lagos and his father’s home in Warri. His father had
a library of ancient Greek, French, English, Russian and Chinese classics and Okri made good use of it. He also read Achebe, Soyinka and Ngugi and moved to England at the age of nineteen to do a course in Comparative Literature at Essex University. The degree was abandoned following the expiry of his scholarship. Life became a matter of day-to-day survival for Okri. In 1981, he landed in London with the manuscript of his first novel in his suitcase, amidst a spate of race riots that spread all over the deprived urban areas of England. The novelist dexterously fused the new experience with the images of the Nigerian Civil war and the resultant product was a powerful collection of short stories.

The greatest virtue of Ben Okri as a novelist is his language, simple but powerful. His achievement with the written word is exceptional. Like a magician who charms his spirits into his captivity, Okri makes the words dance for him. It is a synaesthetic experience—visions, odours, music and tastes. It is a world of kola nuts, fried plantains, bush meat, pepper soup and palm-wine; the yellow spirits, the gigantic Masquerade, the emerald-eyed cat; the smells of corpses, rain, rotten meat, incense; the grating music of the blind old man's accordion and the loud thunderous music blaring
from the gramophone. Okri is no doubt a novelist of the senses, as the following passage exemplifies:

I walked for a long time, the street burning, my soles, my throat dry, my head sizzling, till I reached the market. There were stalls of goods everywhere. And filling the air were the smells and aromas of the market place, the rotting vegetables, the fresh fruits, the raw meat, roasted meat, stinking fish, the feathers of wild birds and stuffed parrots, the wafting odours of roasted corn and fresh-dyed cloth, cow dung and sahelian perfume, and pepper-bursts which heated the eye balls and tickled the nostrils. And just as there were many smells, so there were many voices, loud and clashing voices which were indistinguishable from the unholy fecundity of objects. Women with trays of big juicy tomatoes, basins of garri, or corn, or melon seeds, women who sold trinkets and plastic buckets and dyed cloth, men who sold coral charms and wooden combs and turtle-doves and string vests and cotton trousers and slippers, women who sold mosquito coils and magic love mirrors and hurricane lamps and tobacco leaves,
Okri has a penchant for details and his writing gives one "a feel of Africa"—the smells, the clamour in public places, the jostling in the buses, the traffic jams and the scorching heat. By using native expressions instead of their English equivalents, Okri lends his passage a rare African flavour. The poetic quality of his utterances is exceptional. Never at a loss for the right word, Okri captures the full depth and gravity of all the metaphysical experiences that his characters go through. Some passages excel in the celebration of the pure bliss of existence. Azaro’s quasi-human nature subjects him to rare visions, the immensity of which is felt through the narration:

One night I managed to lift myself out through the roof.
I went up at breath-taking speed and stars fell from me.
Unable to control my motion, I rose and fell and went in all directions, spinning through incredible peaks and vortexes. Dizzy and turning, swirling and dancing, the darkness seemed infinite without signs, without markings. I rose without getting to heaven. I soared
blissfully and I understood something of the inhuman exultation of flight. *(TFR 188)*

The sheer ecstasy of spirituality as experienced by Azaro is akin to what is described as “Nirvikalpa Samadhi” by Indian sages:

I heard soft voices singing and a very brilliant light came closer and closer to the centre of my forehead, an eye opened, and I saw this light to be the brightest, most beautiful thing in the world. It was terribly hot, but it did not burn. It was fearfully radiant, but it did not blind. As the light came closer, I became more afraid. Then my fear turned. The light went into the new eye and into my brain and roved around my spirit and moved in my veins and circulated in my blood and lodged itself in my heart. And my heart burned with a searing agony, as if it were being burnt to ashes within me. As I began to scream the pain reached its climax and a cool feeling of divine dew spread through me, making the reverse journey of the brilliant light, cooling its flaming passages, till it got back to the centre of my forehead, where it lingered, the feeling of a kiss forever
imprinted, a mystery and a riddle that not even the dead can answer. (TFR 229)

Just as Okri celebrates the bliss of living, he is adept at capturing the dangers that lurk to pounce upon the innocent. The terror-laden landscapes of his short stories are good examples of this sort of writing. The frenzy of the characters is extended to the feverish narratives. The wild manifestations of the spirit-world, the hallucinations, and the nightmarish occurrences in the ghetto—all evoke panic and dread in the reader. The darkness, the murderous cries and ritual chants of wild men, the whisperings of the spirits—all charge the atmosphere of the ghetto. Even in Dangerous Love, written in a fairly realistic mode without the intrusion of the spirit world or mythical happenings, the protagonist gets lost in a maze. The labyrinthine narratives that depict the struggle of the characters to get out of a maze are a regular feature of most of the novels.

One great virtue of Okri’s novels is that they show how to survive chaos and rise above the poverty and vulnerability of the African situation, looking forward to the new sunlight and serenity beyond the chaos. His novels abound in profound utterances that
bring hope and are full of wisdom. Such passages, like the following words of Azaro’s Dad, have a soothing effect upon the soul of the reader:

We are the miracles that God made to taste the bitter fruits of time. We are precious, and one day our suffering will turn into wonders of the earth. The sky is not our enemy. There are things that burn me now which turn golden when I am happy. Do you not see the mystery of our pain? That we bear poverty, are able to sing and dream sweet things . . . . There is wonder here and there is surprise in everything that you cannot see. The ocean is full of songs. The sky is not our enemy. Destiny is our friend. (TFR 338)

Okri’s fiction voices the strong conviction that all is not lost, that there will surely be light at the end of the long dark tunnel. It is perhaps this unfailing optimism that makes him a radiant presence in modern African literature.