Chapter One

Dreams of a Dying Nation: Nigeria and the Novel

Literature reflects the spiritual life of a society. No literature can escape its “contemporariness,” an inevitable involvement with the surroundings, even while sporting a “universal” appeal. Literature can be held as the art of spiritual healing that the artist practices upon his community’s consciousness and he cannot excel in this art unless he has a strong and stable link with the community. A place to belong to, either actually or metaphorically, is all important for an artist. “Give me a place to stand on and I will move the world,” proclaimed the famous Greek mathematician Archimedes (qtd in Amadi 5). In this light, no analysis of a literary text is complete without some knowledge of the milieu, the social context that is responsible in shaping it.

African literature is a group where the relationship of the artist with the land is absolutely recognized and acknowledged. However, the term “African literature” is highly misleading and thoroughly inadequate to stand in for the diverse and numerous literatures of contemporary Africa. Africa is simply too large and
there are too many different ethnic groups with different cultures, languages and literatures that such a general term has no real function than attempting a mere geographical classification. Yet, for convenience, this thesis proposes to use the phrase “African Fiction in English,” even while taking into consideration the polemics of African identity and representation, and the need to refute a homogenized “Oriental” image of Africa.

Literature in the African continent has as its base, mainly the three traditions of South African, Francophone and Anglophone literatures. Apartheid and racial discrimination form the primary concerns of the South African tradition; while the Francophone tradition is chiefly preoccupied with an assertion of the inherent values of a distinctive African identity. African fiction in English, on the other hand, focuses on the tension between traditional and western modes of living and seeks to take the Africans' struggle against alien domination and exploitation in the right perspective. However, the sheer variety of life in Africa and the multiplicity of languages render it impossible to make a comprehensive study of the African novel in the true sense.

A major share of what has been written in the continent pertains to Nigeria, a nation with a rich and turbulent past. The
most populous country in Africa, Nigeria was an early twentieth-century colony that became an independent nation in 1960. A country of great diversity because of the many ethnic, linguistic and religious groups that live within its borders, Nigeria is also a country with a long tradition. The three dominant regional groups that inhabit the country are the Hausa in the northern region, the Yoruba in the south west and the Igbo in the south east.

The European slave trade that found roots in Africa as early as the late fifteenth century had a significant impact on Nigeria. Britain declared the slave trade illegal in 1807 and sent its navy to West African waters to enforce the ban. Britain’s action ultimately led to British intervention in Nigeria which had by then become a major centre of slave trade. European missionaries were bringing Christianity to the peoples of Southern Nigeria whereas Islam had been introduced along the caravan routes of Northern Nigeria.

To safeguard trade in palm oil, cocoa and other products, Britain established a colony in Lagos in 1861 and the Royal Niger Company was chartered for trading purposes in 1886. The British representatives extended their colonial activities to more regions and in course of time almost all of Nigeria was brought under their control using local rulers. British rule and economic and educational
development produced a rising nationalism that was reflected particularly in the organized labour movement and the emergence of various political parties during World War II.

Nigeria gained its independence on 1 October 1960, although the nation actually became a republic only on 1 October 1963. Unfortunately, the political scene was clouded by the trial of two leading politicians who were charged with conspiracy; and widespread political abuses and corruption caused the electorate to become disillusioned. The 1964-65 elections saw very low voter participation, followed by increasing violence that led to the death of as many as 2000 persons. After an abortive coup attempt in January 1966, the army took over under Major General Johnson Ironsi, an Igbo, and a Federal Military Government was formed. Ironsi's tenure was short-lived because northern officers staged a countercoup in July, in which Ironsi was killed and Lieutenant Colonel Yakubu Gowon, a Christian from the middle-belt area took control. Tension increased between the infantry, who were mainly of northern origin and the Igbo soldiers in the south. The conflict led to the bloody civil war of 1967-70 (also known as the Biafran War) that claimed the lives of about 2 million people.

Gowon, who intended his rule to be an interim one, preparing
for a return to civilian government, concentrated on economic
development. However, the economy suffered because of the 1972-74
drought and rising unemployment, as farm workers flocked into
the cities. Discontent increased and in 1975 military forces deposed
Gowon in a bloodless coup. They brought in General Murtala
Muhammed, who began demobilizing the military, cutting down on
the civil service, and creating new states in order to weaken
regional ethnic ties. Dissatisfaction within the military over these
measures led to Murtala Muhammed's assassination in 1976. He was
succeeded by his next-in-command, Lieutenant General Olusegun
Obasanjo, who concentrated on preparing the country for civilian
rule in accordance with the draft of the constitution, which was
promulgated in 1979, and the elections were held under it.

The resulting Second Republic lasted from 1979 to 1983 under
the civilian president Shehu Shagari. The weak political coalition
government, the end of the oil boom, the strain of recession, and
fraud in 1983 elections caused the army to step in again at the end
of December 1983 under Major General Muhammadu Buhari, who
sought to end the widespread corruption. The army removed Buhari
in August 1985, substituting Major General Ibrahim Babangida. The
Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC)—under the leadership of
Babangida and the support of his chief of army staff Major General Sani Abacha (who later became the Nigerian President)—ruled the country from 1985 to 1993. Babangida’s regime promised to restore democracy. However, despite initial indications of the military’s commitment to this goal, hopes for a swift transition began to fade by the end of the decade. The regime had to deal with issues of widespread corruption, declining economy under Nigeria’s Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), and violent clashes between Christians and Muslims on the issue of the imposition of the Sharia law. Babangida announced that the country would be returned to civilian rule, but after the presidential election of 1993, he annulled the results and refused to step down. Nevertheless, Babangida was made to resign and his defence minister Sani Abacha seized power again.

Corruption and administrative inefficiency as well as a harshly repressive military regime characterized Abacha’s reign over this oil-rich country, turning it into an international pariah. A UN fact-finding mission in 1996 reported that Nigeria’s problems with human rights were acute. During the 1970s, Nigeria had the 33rd highest per capita income in the world, but by 1997 it had dropped to the 13th poorest. The hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa in 1995 made the Abacha
regime one of the most unpopular in the history of Nigeria.

Abacha died of a heart attack in 1998 and was succeeded by another military ruler, General Abdulsalam Abubakar, who pledged to step aside for an elected leader by May 1999. The suspicious death of opposition leader Mashood Abiola, who had been imprisoned by the military ever since he legally won the 1993 presidential election, was a crushing blow to democratic proponents. In February 1999, free presidential elections led to an overwhelming victory for General Olusegun Obasanjo who had been imprisoned for three years for criticizing the military rule. Obasanjo's commitment to democracy and his anti-corruption drives initially gained him high praise but within two years, the hope of reform seemed doomed as economic mismanagement and rampant corruption persisted. In the 2003 elections, however, he was re-elected. Obasanjo set up an investigation into human rights abuses under military rule, released political prisoners and began a crackdown on corruption. But critics say he failed to halt the spiralling violence and religious and ethnic clashes.

Under the constitution, he was due to step down in 2007 at the end of his second term. His supporters wanted to amend the charter to allow him to stay in office for a third term, but their
attempt was blocked by the parliament in May 2006. Umaru Yar’Adua was proclaimed victor in April 2007 in a presidential election which, observers said, was not credible. Thus the first civilian-to-civilian handover of power is threatening to fall apart.

Despite positive developments in democratic transition, Nigeria’s democracy remains fragile. Particularly problematic is the challenge of economic rejuvenation in the context of years of corrupt rule, a massive external debt burden, as well as the complex issues of regional inequalities, and ethnic and religious tensions. The bloody riots and uncertainty in the political scene, with recurrent coups and unethical intrigues that the politicians engage in, have made the public by and large disillusioned.

The contemporary Nigerian writer shares the feelings of the community. He is different from his predecessors—the generation of Tutuola and Achebe—who could bask in the sunshine of ancient African glory whenever the colonialist aggressor questioned his identity. The contemporary writer is tormented with the knowledge that the real problems that beset the continent do not end with the end of colonialism. Colonialism in new forms continues to pose greater threats to a society falling back upon a crumbled foundation of decaying values. Corruption, bloody civil wars and gory massacres
have benumbed the conscience of the nation. The new generation novelist has infinite possibilities of artistic responses at his disposal offered by modern literary theories and schools of thought. It is up to him to hone his craft under the influence of such possibilities and yield his vision to such a refinement.

The literary movement now taking shape in Africa has two ideological compulsions that seem difficult to match. It is receptive of the latest innovations in fiction in other parts of the world, chiefly those of Europe, North and South America. It also professes to go back to the roots of the African tradition—to resolve the contradictions and dualities of human experience, that is, to achieve unity between the self and the world, between time and eternity etc. Unlike writers like Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiongo who profess better leadership, popular action and the like as solutions to the moral decay in the society, writers of the new age give a non-political answer as how to survive the chaos and rise beyond suffering, hunger and pain. The history of Nigeria is never complete without an account of Nigerian fiction that has seldom failed to record the apprehensions and predicaments of the average Nigerian citizen through the annals of history.

In 1952, Faber and Faber published *The Palmwine Drinkard*,
the first novel to be written by Amos Tutuola, a Nigerian writer with just six years of primary school education. The book relates the fantastic adventures of its narrator, an inveterate drinker of palm-wine who travels to the Land of the Dead in an attempt to retrieve his recently deceased palm wine tapster, the only person capable of tapping palm-wine to the drinker’s satisfaction. The book which is rooted firmly in the Yoruba folk tradition was a great success. Tutuola became the first African novelist to gain extensive exposure among western literary audiences. His style, marked as “amusing” and “quaint”, together with his use of English sprinkled with the Yoruba dialect grabbed the attention of western critics. The oral art of storytelling is clearly at the heart of Tutuola’s art—storytelling that borders on the dreamlike, the fantastic and the archetypal.

Nigerian novelists have always drawn upon the strong tradition of oral storytelling. Certain traditional narratives had already been published even before the advent of what might properly be considered the beginnings of the Nigerian novel in English. Tutuola’s novel is preceded by the works of D. O. Fagunwa, whose Yoruba narratives were published as early as 1938.

Tutuola went on to publish seven more novels, all of which
follow the same episodic and picaresque form. They have heroes or heroines who have supernatural powers. These novels often feature a journey and search for something important. Along the way the hero or heroine experiences several hardships, often passing through the other world. He or she must perform demanding tasks, combat various monsters and sometimes even must endure torture. In the end, these characters survive their ordeals and become better people, wiser and happier.

In 1958, two years before Nigerian independence, Chinua Achebe published *Things Fall Apart*. He soon became recognized as the most original African novelist writing in English. Achebe was able to build up a reading audience among his fellow Africans. *Things Fall Apart*, hailed as the first classic in English from tropical Africa, also became the first novel by an African writer to be included in the African secondary school syllabus. His other famous works are *No Longer at Ease* (1960), which is a sequel to *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God* (1964) and *A Man of the People* (1966).

Achebe has been recognized as a seminal figure in the growth of African literature because of the fact that his work was a genuine breakthrough in its direct confrontation with the phenomenon of colonialist aggression and also in its successful construction of an
oppositional discourse. Simon Gikandi writes: "Achebe was possibly the first African writer to be self-conscious about his role as an African writer, to confront the linguistic and historical problems of African writing in a colonial situation and to situate writing within a larger body of regional and global knowledge about Africa" (Gikandi 1987:5-6). Whatever the reasons, Achebe has become an inspirational figure in the generation of African writers who followed him. The impressive quality of his novels provides important aesthetic models for writing as his commercial and critical success has encouraged Africans to write for publication and publishers to publish the works of African writers.

After the Second World War, Onitsha, a place situated on the banks of the River Niger in Eastern Nigeria, became the unofficial capital of urbanized Ibo land. The printers in Onitsha discovered shortly after the war that the time was ripe for publishing indigenously written material. The newly literate, sophisticated, urban Nigerian preferred moderately priced short booklets, treating familiar Nigerian material with a local colour, to costly and imported foreign books running into hundreds of pages. Thus by 1967, there were over seven hundred titles out of which more than two hundred came under the category of fiction. It has been argued
that the characters and situations in Onitsha literature are not truly African but an attempt to conceptualize western life. Onitsha fiction is characterized by sensational and melodramatic tendencies—sex, violence, brutality, mystery and intrigue. But paradoxically enough, the novels tend to be didactic, with a lot of moralizing on the part of the writer.

The career of one writer who started publishing in Onitsha has expanded beyond that locale. Cyprian Ekwensi is probably the Nigerian novelist most widely read by readers whose literary tastes have not been exposed to the more complex writings of Achebe, Soyinka and other serious and skilled African novelists. His first published work *When Love Whispers*, which appeared in Onitsha in 1947, is also ranked as his best. *Jagua Nana* (1961) is another of his well-known works. It has a heroine of the same name, a woman of easy virtue, who eventually finds peace with herself after indulging in a series of casual affairs. Ekwensi has nineteen works to his credit which have made him one of the most prolific writers living in Africa. His novel *People of the City* (1954) fits into the class of popular literature, important in the way that all such literature becomes—a record of the values and predilections of a people, time and place but not possessing the qualities of style and expression
that distinguish serious literary achievement. Ekwensi’s plots deal
with social themes at the forefront of Nigerian experience—politics,
crime, business practices—usually set against the darker side of city
life. His characters strive to overcome the fear of failure and
poverty as well as the tensions that characterize modern Nigerian
life in the ever-changing social scene of Lagos.

Another important writer of fiction is Elechi Amadi, from
eastern Nigeria. His three novels—The Concubine (1966), The Great
Ponds (1969) and The Slaves (1978)—form a trilogy that represents
religion not only as part of social existence but also as the
foundation of human values and relationships without which
individuals and communities lack balance. Amadi projects a sense of
tragic loss in his description of the failure of individual human
relationships within an established community. Amadi’s writings
have been applauded for their lucidity and realism. At the same
time he has been criticized for his so-called merely sociological
interest in the ways the lives of local inhabitants have been
threatened by forces of imperialism, western education and
Christianity. His elegant restraint is perhaps easily mistaken as a
lack of profound and passionate concern.

Wole Soyinka is among contemporary Africa’s greatest writers.
He was the first African to be honoured with the Nobel Prize in literature in 1986. He is one of the continent’s most imaginative advocates of native culture and the social order it embodies. Soyinka is actively committed to social justice and he has been an outspoken, daring public figure, deeply engaged in the main political issues of Africa. He is perhaps Africa’s most versatile and eclectic intellectual, playwright, poet, novelist, critic and social activist. Soyinka has written two novels. The first is *The Interpreters* (1965), a complicated work which has been compared to the novels of James Joyce. The novel has six Nigerian intellectuals discussing and interpreting their African experience. His second novel *Season of Anomy* (1973) which is based on the writer’s thoughts during his imprisonment, confronts the Orpheus and Eurydice myth with the Yoruba mythology. *The Man Died: Prison Notes* (1972) and *Ake’* (1981), an account of his childhood, are purely autobiographical works.

Gabriel Okara is another notable Nigerian writer of fiction. He is more widely known as a poet. His novel *The Voice* (1964) is a poetic and hallucinatory quest that ends in self-sacrifice and death. The novel has a narrative voice that is pseudo-naïve which is the result of a self-conscious linguistic experiment. Okara is a writer
who has truly relied on the art of story telling. His voice has been broadcast far and wide across the continent through radio and television.

Festus Iyayi is one of the most politically committed African novelists. His novels include *Violence* (1979), *The Contract* (1982) and *Heroes* (1986) for which he earned a Commonwealth Writers’ Prize. His protagonists, representatives of the working class, begin as innocent individuals but become more informed and politically conscious as they try to resist the inevitable exploitation along class lines. Ultimately they become champions for the cause of the victimized.

Another prolific Nigerian writer who attacks political corruption and injustice is Femi Osofisan. A radical and a proclaimed leftist, Osofisan has generated some controversy by asserting that the literary traditions of his contemporaries and his predecessors including his mentor Soyinka, are too rooted in the past. He takes a departure from their style and seeks new aesthetic forms. His only novel *Kolera Kolej* (1975) is enough to earn him a place among the prominent writers of Nigerian fiction. The book deals with corruption among students and faculty at a university. Osofisan has also published more than a dozen plays and two
volumes of poetry.

Ken Saro-Wiwa, writer of satirical novels, political activist and television producer, filled the news columns all over the world as protests raged after he was hanged for defending the rights of the Ogoni people, in November 1995. Saro-Wiwa's first novel, *Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English* was published in 1985. This antiwar work is written in "pidgin English". It is about a young man who serves as a soldier during the Biafran war. The title means "The Soldier Boy". Saro-Wiwa wrote an extremely popular series created around a character called Basil for the humorous television series "Basil & Company". The series, which was cancelled by the military dictatorship, ran to more than 150 episodes. Saro-Wiwa criticized the military dictators of Nigeria and condemned the nexus of the British companies and the Nigerian Government in exploiting the Ogoni people. In a letter written in prison he stated: "The most important thing for me is that I've used my talents as a writer to enable the Ogoni people to confront their tormentors. I was not able to do it as a politician or a businessman. My writing did it. And it sure makes me feel good . . . . I think I have the moral victory" (<http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/saro.html>). And it is for that victory that he is best remembered.
Flora Nwapa is often credited with being the first African woman to publish in English. She began her career as an author with the publication of *Efuru* in 1966. Her other novels include *Idu* (1970), *Never Again* (1975), and *Women are Different* (1986). Although Nwapa repeatedly denied being a feminist, many of her works do address questions of tradition and transformation for women. She portrays women succeeding outside the traditional roles of mother and wife while reaffirming the Igbo culture.

Kole Omotoso belongs to a group of writers who have been critical of the first generation of African writers. These writers claim that African literature should be focused on the contemporary social reality and not on the black-white stereotypes. Rather than trying to explain Africa to the Europeans, literature, they feel, should explain Africa to Africans. Omotoso has experimented with literary styles and techniques to achieve his aim of reaching ordinary African people. He has tried allegory (his novel *The Combat*, 1972), and experimented with the detective novel (*Memories of Our Recent Boom*, 1990). A critic in his own right, he is perhaps best known for his column in *West Africa* during the 1980s as a remarkable literary forum.

Buchi Emecheta belongs to that generation which serves as a
link between the pioneers and the writers of the ’90s. Her works deal with the portrayal of the African woman in all her glory. She examines the question of femininity and looks upon motherhood as the only way to define and express womanhood. *In the Ditch* (1972), *Second Class Citizen* (1974), and *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) are her well-known works. Emecheta’s most critically acclaimed work is remarkably different from her earlier novels—*The Rape of Shavi* (1983) is a philosophical novel about the encounter between Africa and the West.

After Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta, Ifeoma Okoye is the most important Nigerian woman novelist. She has written three major novels *Behind the Clouds* (1982), *Men Without Ears* (1984) and *Chimere* (1992) and a number of children’s books. *Behind the Clouds*, from a feminist perspective, questions the certainty in African culture that women are to blame for childlessness, a myth to which Flora Nwapa subscribes to in *Efuru* and *Idu*. *Men Without Ears* depicts the human greed of the Nigerian oil boom of the 1980s and in *Chimere*, a detective novel, a young woman who is mocked by students for being fatherless, sets out in search of her father against her mother’s will. The best prose stylist among Nigerian female writers of fiction, Okoye has a language that has delicacy,
vigour and confidence. Her stories are compelling and their conflicts convincingly resolved. *Men without Ears* was declared the best fiction of the year in 1984 by the Association of Nigerian Authors.

African fiction from Nigeria can indeed be described as flourishing. Its scope broadens and techniques vary, reflecting the diversity and multiplicity of the African experience. The new generation of writers appears promising and daring in their vision of the African continent. While the earlier novels depended on the twin stereotypes of the savage African and the civilized European, the creative writers of the new age are experimenting with new genres and techniques to fictionalize the new global situation.

Following the footsteps of Ben Okri, a number of writers of amazing calibre have emerged on the scene of fiction-writing in Nigeria. Like Okri, most of them though, born in Lagos or other major cities of Nigeria, have been brought up abroad or have been educated in western universities. Almost all of them have travelled extensively, especially across the African continent, and hold at the forefront of their writings, the predicament of their nation. They feel that the audience for fiction has been numbed by too much of “revolutionary” fiction—art snapped under the weight of ideology—that it is now time to try to reawaken the senses of the reader, to
bring him back to the Africa that is the land of wonders and give him an art that is at the same time beautiful and truthful.

It is worthwhile hence, to have a look at the worthy contemporaries and successors of Ben Okri before embarking on a study of his works. The most promising of them might be Helon Habila whose *Waiting for an Angel* published in 2002 received the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize in 2003. His latest novel *Measuring Tune* (2007) gained critical acclaim soon after its publication. *Waiting for an Angel* is the story of Lomba, a young journalist living in Lagos under Nigeria’s brutal military regime. His mind is full of music and ideas for the novel that he is writing. Yet, when his roommate goes mad and is beaten up by the soldiers, his first love is forced to marry a man she does not want, and his neighbourhood erupts into a riot, Lomba realizes that he can no longer keep his fingers crossed.

Another talented young novelist is Chris Abani, a Nigerian living in political exile in the U S. He has penned two famous novels *Masters of the Board* (1985) and *Graceland* (2004) which won the 2005 Hemingway Prize and the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize. As a teenager, he was imprisoned by the military regime when his debut novel was labelled as a threat to national security. His poetic
novella *Becoming Abigail* (2006) is about a fiercely independent Nigerian girl forced into prostitution by her family. His latest novel *The Virgin of Flames* (2007) follows the trials of a haunted artist searching for his identity.

One of the literary phenomena of the past two decades is the rise of female writers. Flora Nwapa was followed by Buchi Emecheta and Ifeoma Okoye in the '70s and '80s. The '90s saw the arrival of a number of talented writers like Sefi Atta, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Helen Oyeyemi. Chimamanda Adichie is the writer heralded by *The Washington Post Book World* as the 21st century daughter of Chinua Achebe. Her masterly novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) recreates a seminal moment in modern African history—Biafra’s impassioned struggle and the chilling violence that followed. With astonishing empathy and the effortless grace of a natural story teller, Adichie weaves together the lives of three characters swept up into the turbulence of the decade. As Nigerian troops advance, they must run for their lives; their ideals are severely tested as are their loyalties to one another. Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) won her the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize. It was also short-listed for the Orange Prize, John Llewellyn Rhys Prize and the Booker Prize.
Sefi Atta, short story writer and novelist, is the winner of Pen International’s 2004-05 David T. K. Wong Prize. Her debut novel *Everything Good Will Come* was awarded the inaugural Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature in Africa.

Helen Oyeyemi, born in 1984, is the author of the highly acclaimed novel *The Icarus Girl* which she wrote while she was still at school. Oyeyemi was nominated for the 2006 British Books Decibel Writer of the Year Award. *The Icarus Girl* was nominated for the 2006 Commonwealth Writer’s Prize and featured on the BBC Page Turner Programme. For a first novel from someone who was still at school when it was written, the novel is an astonishing achievement.


Nigerian literature expresses the struggles of a country that has survived the exploitation of colonialism as well as the devastation of civil war and authoritarianism. Given the turmoil in Nigerian history, it is inevitable that the post-colonial Nigerian artist is preoccupied with the pangs of a nation in the making. The
writings of Ben Okri are no exception.

Ben Okri, novelist, short story writer and poet is a master story teller, whose magic with the written word resembles the hallucinatory spirit-realm he depicts. Born in Minna, Northern Nigeria, Okri moved to England at the age of nineteen. He studied literature at the University of Essex, and was poetry editor for West Africa and was elected Visiting Fellow Commoner in Creative Arts, Trinity College, Cambridge. Okri wrote his first novel *Flowers and Shadows* (1980) when he was just eighteen. This was followed by a literary output that has been at the same time prolific and rewarding.

Commonwealth Writers’ Prize for Africa for *Incidents at the Shrine* and the *Paris Review* Aga Khan Prize for fiction.

Okri’s novels are all books of wonders in which the living and the dead, spirit and substance, dream and reality merge and run together. The imagined and the perceived phenomena are inseparable and unrecognizable in Okri’s fictional universe. Ben Okri does not employ the fantastic for its own sake. In his hands, the fabulous and the mythical become tools for redefining and reinterpreting the contemporary African situation which is extremely problematic.

During the colonial regime, writers like Frantz Fanon assumed that it was their duty to recover the natural and holistic entity called “African Culture” which has been, according to them, subjugated by colonialism. National consciousness got adequately reflected in literature and drew its strength from an ideal of African culture which was more or less an invented one, a homogenous national identity which was abstract and elusive, an excessively romantic vision of “the real Africa” which lived only in dreams and books. Nevertheless, the writers were successful in projecting and asserting the legitimacy of the African nationhood and culture; and literature during that period was essentially a narrative of
liberation—a literature which was intensely nationalistic in tone and treatment, with a specific intent of rescuing the nation and its innate culture from the disfigurement it may suffer at the hands of the colonizers. The supreme example of this kind of nationalist writing is Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon made a thunderous proclamation that Africans need not try to catch up with the West. According to Fanon, African writers should resist their obsession with Europe and instead, conceive an Africa based on the present and past realities of the continent. He wanted them to relocate the cultural centre from the assumptions of the master discourse and place the nation as the focal point so as to address its specific problems and challenges. The leaders of Pan-Africanism and Negritude like Aimé Césaire, Senghor and George Padmore also brought about a cultural renaissance which attempted to create a strong African cultural identity. Ripples of that renaissance were felt in literature too. Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* is a good example which presents an age-old society falling apart when pitted against the incursions of the New Religion.

Soon after many African nations gained independence, in the late 1960s and '70s, the African writers were forced to reappraise their stance. Their ideals of freedom and cultural revival were too
idealistic and unrealistic; and the very fact that all the colonial structures and institutions continued to exist, even though colonialism had disappeared, disillusioned them. Africa was plunged into a condition of inexpressible corruption and squalor, from which it is still struggling to escape. This phase in the history of African literature is characterized by disillusionment and despair. The dissenting post-colonial intellectuals unleashed their severe indictment upon the neo-colonial elite. Ngugi wa Thiongo’s *A Grain of Wheat*, Chinua Achebe’s *A Man of the People*, Wole Soyinka’s *Interpreters* and Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* are good examples of this kind of fiction. The bloody coups and the tiring shifts between military regimes and occasional trysts with democracy made them cry out, “we have lost our way completely” (Armah, *Two Thousand Seasons* 130).

The present African situation is even more complex and writers are no longer able to account for the loss of a national identity by putting the blame on colonialism or neo-colonialism, for, in the neo-colonialist capitalist set-up, the colonizer and the colonized are in a fluid state, their positions being interchangeable and complex. The “nation” is no longer a stable system which offers an identity to the individual. Very often the nation functions
as a repressor, because the national interest in the political sense need not always be in the interest of the individual. Moreover, in Africa, national or cultural identity is something that goes beyond political and territorial claims.

The new global situation thus requires narratives that can adequately represent the ambivalences of the situation. African writers of the new age are increasingly realizing the inadequacy of the notions of betrayal and the failure of nationalism. They are developing new strategies to recognize and celebrate the African way of encountering and describing reality. The colonial discourse must be replaced with a language adapted to their indigenous culture. In fact, for a new discourse to be built a new identity must be constructed and in the process, the very act of writing becomes a means of self-realisation. The way in which Ben Okri manages to achieve this effect and how his novels encapsulate a critical stage in the history of Africa form the objective of this study.

Okri's effort in this regard is exceptionally brilliant. His works focus on life in modern Nigeria. His tales depict the problems that have beset his homeland—poverty, squalor, famine and corruption. He turns away from an overtly political examination of the system and focuses on a general meditation upon the relations of power
and the tensions of history and their repercussions on the individual. For this, he draws upon a variety of well-known modes of narration including modernism, postmodernism, post-colonialism, magic realism and even psychoanalytic theories.

Okri resembles Virginia Woolf and James Joyce in his creation of narratives revolving around a central character. His restrained use of the stream-of-consciousness technique and his exploration of familial relations are also reminiscent of Woolf. Okri's protagonists are mostly lonely representatives of the middle class who struggle to connect the scattered threads of existence to some discernible pattern. Their assaulting visions break down walls within them—expand the landscapes within—into new states of being. The tragic view of the misery and squalor of the African life also has an unmistakable modernist element. As for the postmodernist element in Okri's work, one has only to look at the subversion of the imperialist versions of history, and the merging of myth, reality, fantasy and dreams in his novels. The intertextual elements and the abiding concern with the past are also pointed out as sure signs of postmodernism. But Okri's postmodernism is uniquely African in that it draws from a creative extension of African folklore rather than being a derivative imitation of foreign literary techniques. The
post-colonial concern with remembering and reviving the cultural past is unmistakable in Okri. The grotesque and bizarre things that happen in his novels, the sheer power of his description and the brilliance of his poetic imagery, make Okri’s technique akin to that of the magic realists. Okri is equally comfortable with psychoanalytic theories. He is surely speaking of a Jungian collective unconscious when one of his characters says: “the whole of human history is an undiscovered continent deep in our souls” (TFR 498). Thus Okri untiringly pursues artistic perfection, an art that can contain African reality in all its enormity and magnificence, in a style that is best suited to the intensity and multiplicity of the African experience. To this end, he combines western literary techniques with elements of traditional African folklore and myth.

Okri’s vision of modern Africa is simultaneously powerful and compassionate. His novels display a helpless anger, a frustration and an anxiety bordering on despair, at the plight of his nation. In Okri, much that is legendary and mythical springs from the reality of everyday life. Okri exploits the rich texture of African mythology and his own fertile imagination to capture the nuances of life in Nigeria which are disconcerting as well as overwhelming. He establishes reciprocity between the world of man and the world of
nature and effectively makes use of symbols which translate the predicament of the continent, using the language of myth. For example, we frequently come across a hungry road in Okri’s fictional world which is perfectly in tune with his pessimistic view of the trajectory of human life, a road which will ultimately swallow the unknowing pedestrian. The central character in his abiku novels is the spirit child Azaro. In Yoruba mythology, a spirit child is one who dies and revisits his mother’s womb to be born again, only to die again. The African continent, struggling to find an identity of its own, trying to escape the alternate but never-ending cycles of freedom and enslavement, finds a powerful representation in the character of the spirit child. This is just one example of how Okri skillfully incorporates the Yoruba myths and the African reality.

In 1980, at the age of twenty one, he published his first novel Flowers and Shadows. Following this novel, Okri has published seven novels, two volumes of short stories and two collections of poetry. Okri’s literary output has been profuse, but its eminence lies in the fact that each of these volumes can be ranked as a masterpiece, a stylish experiment proclaiming the author’s vision of life.

Okri’s first novel Flowers and Shadows recounts the growth of Jeffia Okwe into adulthood. Jeffia is the sensitive son of a corrupt
and ruthless businessman and a woman who becomes a walking tragedy after the death of her husband. Jeffia discovers the nature of his father's business. This brings him in contact with the participants in this human drama, particularly Juliet, his father's former mistress. The pathos of these characters is all the more effective for its understatement. Jeffia falls in love with Cynthia, a young woman whose history is unknowingly interwoven with Jeffia's. The novel enacts the biblical message that the sins of the father are visited on the son. But in this tragic soil, the flowers of Cynthia's love survive and the novel ends on a note of triumphant optimism.

Okri's next novel *The Landscapes Within* (1981) is also the story of a young man, a solitary painter named Omovo, whose artistic vision leads him into conflict not only with his family and friends, but also with the state. His art derives its strength and content from the corruption and moral decay prevalent in the Nigerian society. He finds his soul-mate in the wife of a neighbour but she dies a tragic death after leaving the township. Omovo suffers a psychological set back and in the last scene, he is seen walking in to the darkness, alone.

The next two volumes are collections of short stories. Okri's
stories are terse and poetic accounts of poverty and deprivation. The stories are either set in the bars and discos of Lagos or in the baleful wastes of London. *Incidents at the Shrine* (1986) has some brilliant stories like "Converging City", "Masquerades", "The Dream Vendor's August", "How to Fight Witches and Wizards", etc. All the stories abound in a wealth of language that is simple but powerful. The distinction between the Lagos stories and the London ones is revealing. Those set in Africa are the more complex and fertile ones. The second collection of stories—*Stars of the New Curfew* (1988)—is again an artistic achievement for the author. The title story, "Stars of the New Curfew", tells the story of a civil war in the town W, evoking the fear of nothingness and fantasies of flight. The most effective story is perhaps "In the City of Red Dust" which is a relentless tale of exploitation and degradation. While most of these stories deal with the brutality, corruption and injustice of contemporary Nigeria including the horrors of the Nigerian Civil War, some is set in England or in non-African locations.

*The Famished Road* (1991) is the most challenging work Okri has written. It is a haunting 500-page journey into the African spirit-world. The journey is continued in its sequels *Songs of Enchantment* (1993) and *Infinite Riches* (1998). This trilogy is the most engaging
and interesting part of Okri's work to date. It tells the story of the spirit child Azaro, who is reluctantly born on earth again and again—and this time, into the family of "Black Tyger". The family intrigues him; "tired of going and coming", he breaks his pact of returning to the spirit world at the first opportunity and decides to stay. His fellow spirits torment him but he perseveres. Azaro’s earthly father is a hardworking labourer who tries to make money through boxing though he is often badly beaten. His mother is a hawker by profession and she struggles hard to make both ends meet to keep her family together. The family finds that the human journey is another "famished road." They find themselves dumbfound before the riddles of life, the riddles only "the dead can answer" (TFR 32).

Azaro maintains his ties to the supernatural world. He can see the invisible, grotesque demons and witches who prey on his family and neighbours. All is not well in the African ghetto where Azaro lives. While political factionalization shatters the community’s cohesiveness, the prodigious bar owner Madame Koto, chief exponent of the "Party of the Rich", alternately exudes portentous magical power and erotic force. Azaro, a silent witness of all that happens to his family and community, relates the oppressive events with surprising control and understanding. Even though there is a
significant continuity between *The Famished Road*, *Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches*, the sentient reader must be very careful not to reduce *Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches* to mere sequels. The narrative structure is simpler and more rigorously edited and hence it is easier to read and understand these novels. But at times this ease of access is paid for by a reduction in lyrical grandeur and philosophical complexity.

*An African Elegy* (1992) is Okri’s first volume of poetry. Okri has a preference for short lines, which makes his poems look like pronouncements. He uses the African oral poetic convention of “we” that is both personal and collective. But critics are of the opinion that the novelist in Okri is more gifted than the poet. His second collection of poems *The Mental Fight* is a song to the millennium. Hoping to induce mental liberation in the mind of the reader, he takes a whirlwind tour of humanity. His deeply spiritual voice addresses directly to the power of the mind and of thought.

*Astonishing the Gods* (1995) is another of Okri’s experiments in fiction. It is a short parable of one man’s spiritual quest, his realization that he is invisible. The novel tells the story of a boy who grew up in the light of history. When he learns to read, he discovers that he and his people are invisible because they do not
appear in the history books he is given. So he goes on a quest for visibility. The island of the Invisibles is a mysterious place made “of light, of air, of feelings” (AG 16). Dreams, hallucinations, myths and imagination coalesce here to give a rare effect of beauty and awe.

Okri’s sixth novel *Dangerous Love* (1996) is the portrait of an artist as a young man. Omovo makes his nightmarish way among beggars, drunkards and prostitutes and all the abandoned souls of modern Lagos. Omovo lives with his father and Blackie, his father’s wife. It is a joyless family but, nevertheless, not without the tenderness and tension of a difficult father-son relationship. Omovo is “dangerously” in love with Ifeyinwa, the wife of a neighbour. Omovo tries to forge the conscience of the nation, reeling from the shock of its civil war. He seeks to rebuild the country’s spiritual infrastructure, but is unbearably alone in this task. Among Okri’s heroes, Omovo is closest to his author. Okri’s latest work, *In Arcadia* (2002), is about a spiritual exploration—the fundamental quest for enlightenment that every person must make sooner or later in his life.

Okri is a story teller who can express the intricacies of emotional conflict and the drama of life in a manner which reflects the core of African life. In dealing with fable, fantasy and magic,
his writing oscillates between dream and reality. Okri takes liberties with perceived notions of time and place, but one should remember that the African notion of time has never been in conformity with the scientific understanding of time. For an African, time has to be experienced in order to make sense or to become reality. In keeping with the Black cultural views about life, history, time, movement, event and destiny, Okri writes about Nigeria. Each of his novels deals with an aspect of life in Nigeria—distorted and painful memories of the civil war, the hunger for power, and the obsessions, prejudices, hopes and fears of the simple and exploited masses. His characters are market women, hawkers, prostitutes, witches, drunkards, insane and cruel politicians, soldiers and representatives of the masses, victims of an age of political confusion. It is a world turned in upon itself and thriving against all the laws of reason.

Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* is his “*magnum opus*” that seeks neither to glorify the African past nor to push the cause of nationalism too far, though it achieves both beautifully and without much deliberation, like any other true classic. Okri does not bother to present the details of African culture and social life or to argue for the preservation of the same. He is more interested in capturing
the African reality which has its roots strongly embedded in African philosophy and belief systems. This reality, as he claims, is fascinating and overwhelming. It has many levels and faces; it operates in different realms and is hence incomprehensible if one is to exercise one’s intellectual faculty alone. It can be understood and appreciated only by making an open-hearted pilgrimage through the spiritual, mythical and fantastic world where human beings join hands with spirits, where destinies are being made and destroyed. Okri’s novels offer such a journey—a journey into the African mind—without making any big claims of unravelling the “hidden Africa”.

Okri’s use of surrealism, fantasy and fragmentation, to explore complex inner subjective worlds, has earned him the label of a magic realist. His sudden shifts between realistic and mythical worlds, his violation of the notions of time and place, the transformations and transferences of life and death which occur in his fictional world, the simultaneous co-existence of many worlds and levels of experience are pointed out as evidence enough to prove Okri’s techniques as a magic realist. In his description of experiences, Okri slips easily from the realm of the real to the super-real. All substances—human, animal, plant and spirit—metamorphose and slide into one another through graphic
exaggeration. He pushes the bounds of belief and creates his real, super-real world. All realms merge and run together, space is shattered and time is pushed back to the beginnings of all folklore. The fantastic and nightmarish experiences which occur in Okri’s fictional world remind us of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the greatest practitioner of magic realism. But Okri declines claims of that sort and asserts that there is little magic in what he writes. Even though it might be said to be a progressive departure from Western realism, Okri’s writing is radically different from that of Marquez, Rushdie or Toni Morrison. He remarks:

... what seems like surrealism or fantastic writing is not fantastic writing, it’s simply writing about the place in the tone and spirit of the place. I’m not trying in the slightest to produce any strange effects. All I’m trying to do is writing about the world from the world view of that place so that it is true to the characters. (Okri, CA 337)

Okri claims that the supernatural elements in his writings are simply realistic representations of the Nigerian experience. The Nigerian reality itself is fantastic and different from the European worldview. Okri describes a month in Nigeria as comparable to five
months anywhere else because of the intensity of the experience: “You experience so many different states and so many different life times . . . there is so much happening” (Okri, CA 340-341). The African cosmos is vibrant with strange and mysterious elements. The richness and power of the African vision make Okri’s writings surrealistic, mystical and enigmatic. But it is all part of a worldview which recognizes visible and invisible phenomena as equally natural and possible. It cannot be helped, therefore, if it looks bewildering. Okri confesses this fact when he says:

I happen to think that human beings are largely composed of the world view that they have inherited; in other words, we see the world through our belief systems . . . . I am looking at the world in The Famished Road from the inside of the African world view but without its being codified as such. This is just the way the world is seen, the dead are not really dead, the ancestors are still part of the living community and there are innumerable gradations of reality, and so on. It’s quite simple and straightforward. I’m treating it naturally. It’s a kind of realism, but realism with many more dimensions. (Okri, CA 337-338)
The reader is left to decide whether or not to take the author's stance at face value. It must be remembered that Marquez also has claimed that he does not write anything but what is real. Yet, Okri is more sincere and convincing, since his is a genuine attempt at fictionalizing the African perspective about reality. The average reader, however, feels that there is more to it than a simple statement of the author's interpretation of the African worldview. It is rather an artistic response under the shaping influence of African philosophy. Perhaps it is true that the author's anguish, concerns and anticipation regarding the collapse of ordered life in Nigeria has prompted him to go back to the reality which is all too familiar to him—the reality of the African experience. Or it must be that he is simply drawing a parallel between the chaotic and confused political situation of Africa and the disorganized realm of myths, dreams, visions and reality.

Okri's major concerns, as depicted through his writings, can be identified as corruption, moral decay, the twin evils of power and greed, the absence of love and faith, the lack of self-esteem and confused identity as the direct consequence of colonialism, the rewriting of history by the colonial masters, the unscrupulous exploitation of nature, to name a few. Even though his settings are
unnamed locales in Third World countries, especially African towns and villages, the fates of his characters transcend the immediate human situation and intersect with those of spirit and mythological figures. The novelist's vision is thus not confined to Nigeria or even Africa. It is a sad and wistful vision of the whole of the Third World which is struggling to shake off the destructive and cancerous corruption that is eating away its heart. Okri's imagery links the tragedy of this human drama to the larger universe and this gives his story telling a unique power and beauty.

This thesis proposes to undertake a study of the panoramic world of Ben Okri's fiction. Attempt is made to trace elements of modernism, postmodernism, magical realism and certain theoretical aspects of post coloniality that figure in his works followed by a study of the age-old propositions of African religious thoughts which form the foundation for his fiction. The principal concerns which figure in Okri's novels as well as their peculiarities of characterization and language are analyzed. In short, this thesis offers to make an impassioned study of the peculiar ways in which Ben Okri refashions the modern literary techniques and the tradition of story telling to achieve a rare effect in capturing the African reality in all its pathos and grandeur.