Ben Okri is unmistakably one of the most talented and eclectic among the African novelists of the new generation. He adds at least one title to his credit every year. Still, Okri has been able to maintain a remarkable level of quality in his works with his inexhaustible fountain of African mythology and folklore that has enabled him to bring in more variety and meaning to his repertoire. Critics have variously identified his techniques with different schools of writing like magical realism, postmodernism and postcolonialism. But Okri refuses to be an exclusive part of any school and prefers to stand alone.

Though Okri spent more than half of his life in London, his loyalties evidently lie with his motherland, Nigeria. His consciousness is deeply rooted in Africa, which he considers a boon to writers. Okri vehemently asserts that reality in the African continent is so intense and immense that it is often mistaken for fantasy. Okri claims to be a realistic writer with no literary influences other than African folklore which is a sea of stories:
You see, I was told stories, we were all told stories as kids in Nigeria. We had to tell stories that would keep one another interested, and you weren’t allowed to tell stories that everybody else knew. You had to dream up new ones . . . and it never occurred to us that those stories actually contained a unique worldview. It’s very much like the river that runs through your backyard. It’s always there. It never occurs to you to take a photograph or to seek its mythology. It’s just there; it runs in your veins, it runs in your spirit . . . . And for me, it was only after I had made too deep a journey in to modernism, after I had begun to feel that my ambition was better than my craft, after a period of loneliness and homesickness, away from Nigeria, that slowly all those old stories came back to me with new faces and new voices. (http://emeagwali.com/nigeria)

We might as well believe him, since his writings are largely based on the culture and beliefs of Africa. The African cosmos embraces the simultaneous co-existence of multiple worlds and realms. The mindset of the African is habituated to complexities in a perpetual state of flux in all affairs. He is conditioned to
surrender the rational, critical faculties when he gets lost in the absorbing tales of one of the world’s richest mythological pantheon. The fact is that the people are so much used to living at several different levels or dimensions that no contradiction is perceived between the real and the magical. Just as the identity crisis experienced by the West is automatically extended to all its narratives in postmodernism, the multiplicity of existence and richness of experience in African life often gets replicated in a labyrinthine narrative.

The works of writers like Okri serve as a double mirror that captures the chaos of daily life and the rich texture of traditional beliefs and mythology. Okri, like his contemporaries, is very conscious of the post-independent realities of African societies and his works are often satirical and critical of the various political and economic crises that Nigeria has encountered. For example, his first novel *Flowers and Shadows* examines the problem of corruption and its devastating effects on a family. Okri’s collections of short stories also exemplify the political overtones of his work. Critics are of the opinion that the Nigerian Civil War that raged when Okri was just eight years old must have had a great impact on his young mind. This is particularly true of his short fiction and the Omovo novels. The protagonist of *The
Landscapes Within and Dangerous Love who struggles to make sense of the disintegration and chaos around him by the exercise of his artistic faculty owes much to his author who had first hand experience of the political violence during the Civil War (1967-70). The war became notorious for large-scale genocide practiced by the Igbo of the south-eastern provinces and also for the resultant terrible starvation in the war-bound regions. Stars of the New Curfew also is a highly evocative exploration of the aspects of the civil war. The historical and statistical details are less touched upon than the individual and civilian experiences of war and of death. The stories read like carefully crafted personalized narratives of characters who find themselves face to face with the terrible world of violence and death and who ultimately get themselves lost in the madness around them. In a powerful story, “What the Tapster Saw” included in the collection, a tapster has a dream that he falls from a palm tree and dies. The very next day he falls from a palm-tree and is presumable blacked out, for he has weird dreams in which he hears a voice repeatedly affirming that he is dead. The reader does not know for sure whether the tapster is actually dead or whether it is the voice of his worst fears. The uncertainty builds as the words “You have been dead for two years” (SNC 188) keep
mounting until they reach a crescendo: "You have been dead for six days" (SNC 193). Meanwhile the tapster sees and hears aspects of war, of nightmare and of his own past. At last he wakes up to find himself in a herbalist's shrine and the herbalist says he had been dead for seven days and that they were about to bury him. We conclude that the tapster has been wandering in a realm somewhere between life and death. Many of Okri's characters encounter such experiences more than once in their lives. Incidents at the Shrine—the other collection of short fiction—also develops nightmarish visions of nocturnal war-laden landscapes filled with bodies of spirits, living and dead.

Okri's vision is largely shaped by the reality of Africa where he spent his childhood. He was born and brought up amidst a host of stories and myths, in an atmosphere thick with otherworldly presences. Apart from this, Okri seldom reveals details about his childhood saying he would "rather reserve that for the complex manipulations of memory that only fiction can provide" (CA 337). But he has extensively commented on his literary influences and identified them as the African tales and legends his parents used to tell him; and the Western masters like Aristotle, Plato, Shakespeare, Dickens, Mark Twain, Ibsen, Chekhov and Maupassant, whom he read from his father's library. Okri's
nostalgic remembrance of his childhood has prompted him in his choice of a child—a spirit child—as the narrator of his longest and most important work, *The Famished Road*. A spirit child or *abiku* flits between the world of the living and that of the spirits. The children who die early are believed to belong to the spirit world as they return to their abode at the first opportunity. These *abiku* come back to torment their earthly parents, by returning to their mother’s womb in order to be born again, only to perpetuate this cycle of birth and death. Azaro, the narrator of *The Famished Road, Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches* is an *abiku* who has decided to prolong his stay on earth. His spirit companions try to persuade him to come back by making his life unbearable:

How many times had I been born and died young? And how often to the same parents? I had no idea. So much of the dust of living was in me. But this time, somewhere in the interspace between the spirit world and the Living, I chose to stay. This meant breaking my pact and outwitting my companions. It wasn’t because of the sacrifices, the burnt offerings of oils and yams and palm-nuts, or the blandishments, the short-lived promises of special
treatment, or even because of the grief I had caused. It wasn’t because of my horror of recognition either...

... It may simply have been that I had grown tired of coming and going. It is terrible to forever remain in-between. It may also have been that I wanted to taste of this world, to feel it, suffer it, know it, to love it, to make a valuable contribution to it, and to have that sublime mood of eternity in me as I live the life to come. But I sometimes think it was a face that made me want to stay. I wanted to make happy the bruised face of the woman who would become my mother. (TFR 5)

Azaro witnesses wild and bizarre happenings, but these are quite natural and normal in the spirit world. A spirit child is one who has not severed his links with the spirit world. All children on their arrival on earth cut off the threads that connect them to the wonderful land of dreams and this sudden separation makes them cry. In the spirit world there is no suffering or pain. It is a world of music, dreams and enchantment. Spirits do not like to be born into the world of human beings. But the more they become happy in the spirit world, the greater is their chance, to be born on earth. At the time of their departure they take a vow
that they would return to the spirit world at the earliest opportunity. Those who break the pact are assailed by hallucinations and haunted by their companions. Their earthly parents, on the other hand, induce them to stay with passionate ritual offerings. They try to destroy the spirit token which binds the child to the spirit world. The abiku children find themselves in a metaphysical dilemma and as tradition has it, most of them opt for a return to the spirit world since that is where their loyalties lie.

Many writers have fictionalized the popular myth of abiku. They highlight the cruelty and indifference of the spirit children to their parents. Their characteristic dislike of life on earth and their air of haughtiness make them unworthy of sympathy and affection. Soyinka has written a poem titled “Abiku” which is an impassioned appeal to the abiku. Okri has completely moved away from this practice in the treatment of the abiku theme. He makes his spirit child an adorable character, intelligent but innocent, loving and lovable. But more than that, Okri’s abiku is a being that comes to represent many universal truths which are at the same time real and fantastic.

The ambiguous nature of Azaro’s existence has helped the author to explore the real and the spiritual worlds with equal
ease and authenticity. The *abiku* phenomenon ratifies the belief in the permeability of the membrane separating the spirit-world and the "real" world. Okri's intention to recognize and celebrate the African way of encountering and describing reality is made possible through Azaro's visionary consciousness which, at the same time, is in contact with both the worlds. He is keenly observant and registers all that come his way with amazing understanding.

Azaro's world teems with activity. Frightening events follow one after the other, crowding with an overwhelming speed. When magic, sorcery and witchcraft join hands with corrupt politics to persecute people, it is chaos that follows. Okri's *abiku* is a metaphor for Africa, a nation which must witness terrible things by virtue of its proximity to both worlds. The tales which Azaro narrates illuminate the life and vision of Africa. Africa's struggle to survive its political confusion is paralleled by Azaro's struggle to contain the simultaneity of earthly and supernatural events.

Okri's novels do not easily yield to categorizations like postcolonialism, postmodernism and magical realism. Okri is a postcolonial writer if the time of his writing alone matters. He is a postmodernist writer if unorganized chaos alone constitutes
postmodernism. And his writings belong to magical realism, if magical realism is all about seemingly supernatural elements incorporated into otherwise realistic settings. We see that Okri has much that is postcolonial, postmodernist and magical realist, but what makes him different from others is the fact that his theme, treatment and form are specifically African. He deals with distinctly African phenomena, like the *abiku*, and uses them as symbols and structures to authenticate his perceptions and make analogies. This he does by means of a string of dreams, fabulous incidents, myths, stories and proverbs—a formula used by the ancient story tellers of Africa. Reciprocity is established between the world of humans and that of nature. There is no fixed point of demarcation as both realms constantly interact and interplay. This technique of the novelist demonstrates the continuity between the realistic and mystical realms of experience that exists for Nigerians. Thus, we ought to believe him when he says that his fiction is essentially a mirror held up to the African reality.

Critics have located elements of modernism in Okri's writings since all his works develop unorthodox narrative strategies that attempt to break from the tradition of social realism practised by earlier writers like Achebe. Comparisons
have been made between *Flowers and Shadows*, *The Landscapes Within* and James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. In both of his novels, Okri makes extensive use of the stream of consciousness technique to explore the psyche of the protagonist—in both cases, a well-off sensitive young man who is representative of the future. True to the modernist tradition Okri makes most of his characters representative of the middle-class as well, in fact, the struggling victims of lower middle class complacency. While *Flowers and Shadows* develop along the lines of the conventional *bildungsroman* as Jeffia Okwe, the protagonist comes of age towards the end of the novel, *The Landscapes Within* traces the evolution of an artist and shows strong affiliation with the genre of *kunstlerroman*. Omovo, the protagonist, is a self-conscious artist pilgrim who explores inner worlds. He lives on multiple planes of existence and wrestles with weird experiences, ideas and images. To escape from these harsh realities, he withdraws into himself, but this self-absorption often leads to depression. Omovo’s self-reflexive depressed identity is paradoxically linked with his passionate involvement in all that he experiences. He believes that all experience—even pain—needs to be intellectually and aesthetically comprehended. Omovo feels that the artist must
synchronize the landscapes outside with the landscapes within him. He should be able to perceive everything as related to everything else, timelessly. This spring from the artist’s intellectual effort of ordering the universe which might ultimately gift him with a heightened state of consciousness. Like Stephen Dedalus of *The Portrait*, Omovo struggles to create an order and meaning in a fragmented world with the help of his art. The philosophical exploration of aesthetics is central to the novel which seeks the purpose of art and the process of artistic creation.

Omovo’s artistic response to the moral and political corruptions around him takes the shape of a painting aptly titled “Scumscape”, which is quickly censored and confiscated by the totalitarian government. Omovo’s earnestness in artistic creation and the metaphorical qualities of art remind us of the seriousness of intention and purpose of artistic production typical of modernist fiction. Art, considered as a unique and finished object authenticated by the artist and validated by agreed-upon current standards, is purely a modernist view. Many modernist works try to uphold the idea that works of art can provide the unity, coherence and meaning which have been lost in modern life, i.e. art will do what other human institutions fail to do. The same is
true about the preoccupation with the secret of artistic creation. In *Dangerous Love*, Dr. Okocha talks to Omovo about the secret of artistic creation:

The original experience must be the guide. But what you make of it, what you bring back from it, the vision, call it what you will, is the most important thing. What you forget returns in a hundred other shapes. It becomes the true material of invention. To learn how to remember creatively is to learn how to feel. But to paint that dream of yours will mean a long descent into your self. (*DL* 122)

Perhaps the most obvious feature of modernist fiction is the use of the stream of consciousness technique. But in Okri it is restrained as opposed to Joyce’s blatant disregard for coherence and continuity in narration. Okri’s prose is largely “realistic” as far as the linear progression of plot is considered, with occasional slips into dreams and hallucinations which read like incantative projections of the subconscious:

He had been asleep, he hadn’t been dreaming, when he suddenly woke up . . . . He felt he was floating on a black sea, he felt he was in a cave in a dark space on another universe, in a different, unrecorded time.
There were ghosts and shadows all around him, the humped figures of prehistoric rocks, of alien beings. He couldn’t think, couldn’t move. An invisible weight held him down. He tried to be calm. He tried to enter a state of prayer. The moment deepened. Something in him, a formless insurgent spirit, energy, the exact shape of his body, kept straining against the borders of his being as if it would burst out and devastate his senses, burst out in to flame, in to unbearable intensity. He breathed deeply. Then slowly. His mind freed itself. (DL 338-339)

Modernism, with its faith in the totality of experience and its reverence for myths of cultural and ethic origin, has influenced Okri to a great extent as his early novels testify. But as he himself attests, as the fabulous myths and tales of Africa came crowding upon him, he abandoned his modernist garb and plunged himself into the deep sea of stories.

Postmodernism, the dominant mode of literature since the 1980s is a style of thought that views with suspicion the modernist faith in universalized notions of truth, reason and the like. It developed as a result of an attempt to transcend the sense of exhaustion that affected all areas of cultural and artistic
consciousness because of the widespread disillusionment with the Enlightenment project of modernity. Critics have been able to find elements of postmodernism in Okri. Fragmented structures, mixing of genres and cultures, temporal disorder, intertextuality, mixing of myth, reality and fantasy, inclusion of anecdotes and stories, and the like are seen as distinctly postmodern.

Intertextuality, can be defined as an instance whereby a text depicts a reading of the antecedent literary corpus, thereby making the text absorption of and a reply to another text. In Okri, a discerning critic can find instances of intertextuality within the world of his fiction and outside it. To a large extent, it is in the form of an allusion to a myth or archetype, like that of the *abiku*. The definition given by M. H. Abrams provides the most apt pointer to intertextuality in Okri. According to him, intertextuality is a creative means used to:

. . . signify the multiple ways in which any one literary text echoes, or is inescapably linked to, other texts, whether by open or covert citations and allusions, or by the assimilation of the feature of an earlier text by a later text, or simply by participation in a common literary codes and conventions. (Abrams 1981: 200)
There is no disputing the fact that Okri does include sentences and ideas which appear in other writers. The very first sentence of *The Famished Road*—“In the beginning there was a river” (3)—parodies the first sentence in John’s Gospel: “In the beginning there was the Word”. There are also other instances of intertextuality in the novel. The title of the novel is taken from Soyinka’s poem “Death in the Dawn” in which there is a reference to a famished road: “The mother prayed, child / May you never walk/ When the road waits, famished” (Soyinka *Early Poems 6*).

Both Soyinka and Okri draw on a Yoruba prayer which translates literally as follows: “May you never walk when the road is hungry.” Soyinka’s road is a path from one place to another on which accidents can take place owing to the hunger of the road. But in Okri, the road is a motif in the form of a perilous journey of life in all its moral, psychological and social ramifications. It is also significant that while the road kills the traveller in Soyinka’s poem, Azaro survives because of the unflagging determination springing from his deep affection for his parents.

The greatest example of intertextuality in Okri is his use of the myth of the *abiku* as a metaphor for the multitude of
problems facing the African Continent and in fact all the postcolonial nations. The *abiku* keeps on dying and coming back to his mother. With each return, each new birth, the pain grows heavier. No other myth or archetype can give such powerful representation of the existential pangs of Africa—struggling for an identity between cycles of oppression and self-government. In Okri, the reader encounters codes and allusions from different sources, including the Bible. But the most noticeable intertextual references are those within his fictional world—sharing dreams and experiences. What the young Omovo experiences in the bustle of Lagos, finds its poetic expression in the letters and poems written by his estranged brother Okur. Dr. Okocha, the painter tells Omovo “it’s always a duty to try and manifest whatever good visions we have . . . in dreams begin responsibilities” (*LW* 119). The same words echo in his consciousness when Omovo gets a glimpse of the pinnacle of artistic revelation. The child-hero of the story “In the Shadow of War” (*SNC*) reappears as the grown up protagonist of *The Landscapes Within* and *Dangerous Love* and his reminiscences of frightening visions of war-ridden landscapes resonate with similar experiences related by other characters figuring in the short stories, “Laughter Beneath the Bridge” (*IS*) being one such story.
Okri is not consciously bringing in references to give his works the look of transnational novels. The African oral tradition, from time immemorial, expresses a sense of a shared phenomenal world, both ordinary and extraordinary, to which there has always been a communitarian claim. The shared heritage of folktale is always open to artists for creative refashioning and this has been the main preoccupation of many writers like Soyinka and Okri. The intertextuality in Okri is the intertextuality between oral and written folktale. The *abiku* theme and the notion of the famished road are very popular with the Africans. These themes undergo artistic transmutation in Okri’s hands and come to represent the larger and more enduring reality.

The phenomenon of cultural hybridity is often attributed as a sign of postmodernity. Cultural hybridity or cultural polyvalence can be best described as the harmonization of alterities, a synthesis of foreign and local elements in a work of art or literature. In Ben Okri, cultural hybridity is detectable at two levels. The extensive use of the oral tradition—popular myths and legends of different tribes of Africa—itself offers great scope for hybridity. Besides, the historical circumstances of slavery and imperialism have made the African people experience
cultural hybridity—that is, the state of simultaneously belonging to more than one culture and this dichotomy is extended to most narratives of the postcolonial period. The culture of the colonizer that is imbibed through colonial school education, religion, mass media, etc and the indigenous culture absorbed through the oral traditions co-exist in the African cultural space. The novel is an imported genre—a twentieth century phenomenon in Africa. To make it feel at home in an alien land, contemporary African novelists like Ben Okri rely both on the European modes of writing and the African oral narratives and hence the glittering amalgam of realist fiction and the traditions, legends, myths and folktales of the people in the contemporary African novel. No author aware of two or more literary traditions can remain unquestioningly content with the conventions of any one of them. Contact with another culture and literature helps create for writers a sense of the character and limitations of their own, encouraging a pursuit of alternatives and possibilities of innovation and change. For writers anywhere, awareness of cultures other than their own encourages, the self conscious questioning, reshaping and coalescence of forms characteristic of postmodernism.
There is a radical internationalism emerging in the work of authors like Okri, Caryl Phillips and Rushdie for whom a complex cultural identity necessitates making a new imaginative relationship with the world. They are 'migrants' with a deep awareness of styles and possibilities from beyond as well as within their country of domicile. In their deepest selves, strange fusions occur and such fusions and relationships contribute to the novels a renewed vitality and disposition for change, experiment and progress.

In Okri, the shift from the conventional verisimilar description of things to the mythopoeic description of the “other reality” is astonishingly swift and effortless. There are passages in the abiku novels which show Azaro’s ability to respond to “real” world and the “other” world as he deftly bestrides both realms:

And because Dad said nothing to me, because he made no attempts to reach me, did not even attempt a smile at me, I listened to what the three-headed spirit was saying. ‘Your parents are treating you atrociously,’ he said. ‘Come with me. Your comrades are desperate to embrace you. There is a truly wonderful feast awaiting your homecoming...’
Dad got up from his chair and stood over me. His breathing manifested itself as a heavy wind in the world in which I was travelling. ‘Don’t fly away,’ the spirit said, ‘If you fly away I don’t know where you will land. There are many strange things here that devour the traveller. There are many spirit eaters and monsters of the interspaces. Keep on the solid ground.’ Dad coughed and I tripped over a green bump on the road. (TFR 326-327)

The postmodernist concern with the past is yet another discernible feature in Okri’s fiction. But what Okri does is reconstructing the past or still better, reliving the past as against the postmodern ideal of “revisiting” the past. Often, in postmodern texts, the protagonist has an ironic voice as he speaks of his past or the past of his nation. Rushdie is an excellent example whose novels mimic much of what is history in India, in an ironic vein. Okri does not resort to such a mockery of the African past. On the contrary, he makes it look profound and valuable.

Another marked feature of postmodernism is a tendency towards reflexivity or self consciousness, about the production of the work of art. The work of art calls attention to its own status
as something constructed. The urge to experiment and rework the existing piece of work is displayed by the characters as well as their author. Omovo's act of radically changing the painting after years is repeated in Okri's rewriting of the novel The Landscapes Within as Dangerous Love:

I was twenty one when the novel was finished. I poured my heart in to the book; but the heart alone isn't enough, in art as well as in life . . . . The many things I wanted were too ambitions for my craft at the time . . . . Many years passed before I took up the raw material again and from that grew this new work. Dangerous Love is the fruit of much restlessness. (DL 401)

Postmodernity embraces a culture that is anti-essentialist and anti-elitist. It celebrates the marginalized and fringe elements and involves a radical shift of focus from a universal order to local, contingent and group concern. This entails infinite epistemological freedom which discards all totalizing patterns of perception. Realism which had claimed to represent reality objectively was in fact a discursive strategy employed to control reality by perpetuating the Eurocentric viewpoint. Postmodernism, on the contrary, stresses the hybridity of reality
and this fragmentation of reality accords the writer the freedom
to erase those boundaries of form and meaning arbitrarily thrust
upon literature. It could very well be said that Ben Okri makes
good use of such freedom to shatter the temporal and spatial
boundaries in the panoramic world of his fiction. This also
accounts for the fragmented narratives in Okri, interspersed with
epic dreams, folktales, anecdotes and adventures. Traditional
discourses woven around particular centres promote definite
interpretations of texts. Postmodernism does not heed such
discursive structures, but would rather seek to highlight the
spaces and silences which such discourses deliberately hide. The
bourgeois novel practiced linear literary realism of closure which
consisted of the empirical and the fictional—to the exclusion of
ghosts and such supernatural beings. Though modern man
disavows such superstitions, the embers of the ancient creeds
smoulder beneath his thin varnish of culture and civilization.
Whenever things go beyond the comprehension of the faculty of
reason, the presence and power of the supernatural is
acknowledged with awe, at least in private. What Ben Okri does
is to legitimize such unexplored vistas of the human mind and
bring them under the purview of realistic fiction.
Okri repeatedly refers to certain motifs throughout the expanse of his writing. Just as a spirit-child becomes a paradigm of the African continent in *The Famished Road* and its sequels, the mutilated body of a girl—a ritual murder—that haunts Omovo’s consciousness, stands for the violated body of Africa. The repetitive mode is not limited to the literary motifs. It extends to Omovo’s frenzied mind as well:

... for want of vision my people perish—for want of action they perish—in dreams—in dreams begin responsibility—for we have become a people of dream-eaters, worshipping at the shrines of corruption—we can’t escape our history—we will dwindle, become smaller, the continent will shrink, be taken over, swallowed, pulped, drained, by predators, unless we transform—in vision begins—in vision begins responsibility—and even as we die, and shrink, and are taken over, reduced, seen as animals, as invisible, even as the streets spill over with the poor, even as we dance our lives away, and celebrate the powerful, worship like servants at their vulturous shrines, we can utter psychic decisions and set forces
into motion that could change our lives forever-in
vision begins action . . . (DL 362)

Ben Okri is often grouped among the leading practitioners of the literary mode of magical realism. Magical realist works are a growing corpus of literary works that draw upon the conventions of both realism and fantasy or folklore, yet does so in such a way that neither of these two realms is able to assert a greater claim to truth than the other. The capacity of the author to resolve the tension between two discursive systems usually thought of as mutually exclusive, as well as the real purpose of bringing in the supernatural or the magical must constitute the starting point for any enquiry into magical realism.

Magic realism allows the writer to utilize realism when it suits him, and simultaneously relativize and undermine it by allowing the supernatural, the mythical, the bizarre and the grotesque to intrude without explanation or rationalization. Magic realism has found its expression in literature in two different modes of perception; the former seeks to interpret the "magic" in magical realism culturally as an expression of particular belief systems or ways of seeing the world. In such cases, the non-rational in the magical realist text is the product of a world view in which no clear line exists between what
western ontology insists on referring to as natural and supernatural. Instead of discrediting all established notions of reality, such magical realist texts expand the conventions of realism in order to create space for cultural perspectives other than the hegemonic western worldview. Okri's writings, especially the *abiku* trilogy, belong to this kind of magical realism that thrives upon faith as opposed to the latter perspective, which sees magical realism as akin to a form of epistemological skepticism or irreverence. Salman Rushdie's novels, which are examples of the latter, manifest an idiosyncratic, politically aware form of meta-fiction. Gabriel Garcia Marquez strikes a different note by bringing in overt political overtones in his writings. Marquez uses the techniques of magical realism as a platform to express his political views and to explicitly comment on the mistakes that are being repeated in history.

Okri's situation seems similar to that of Gabriel Garcia Marquez whose Latin America has a highly volatile and vibrant history like that of Okri's Africa. The totalitarian evil is eating away the heart of both Continents. But Marquez is basically a myth maker. He invents myths, creates legendary figures and builds up a fictional world in which reality is magical, an illusion
in terms of time and place. Okri does not invent myths. He makes ample use of the existing ones and persuades the reader to make a fresh reading of those myths. There are other features which make Okri's texts distinct from Latin American magic realist novels. In Okri's own words:

The difference is this: the Latin American writers—let's be quite honest—are largely European Latin American writers. Their writing has, as it were, come through the journey of symbolism, surrealism and then come right around to the reality of that particular place. That's very different from what I am saying. Whereas in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude there's a scene in which the woman flies, in my book you'd have an effect where the kid sees spirits. If you accept the basic premise that this kid is an abiku, a spirit-child, it's not unnatural that he would see spirits. If all the characters were to see spirits that would be pushing it a bit, as far as Western thinking is concerned. But from the kid's point of view, it's completely natural. (CA 337)
A literary mode, rather than a distinguishable genre, magical realism aims to seize the paradox of the union of opposites. It is characterized by two conflicting perspectives, one based on a rational view of reality and the other on the acceptance of the supernatural as prosaic reality. Magical realism differs from pure fantasy as it is set in a normal world with authentic descriptions of society at large. Hence the "magical" or the "primeval" element always exists in conjunction with European rationality. The purpose of magical realism is the establishment of a deeper and true reality than conventional realist techniques would illustrate.

Magical realist works involve issues of mixing and change. Since it operates on the conflicting polarities of the rational and the irrational, magic realism is often illustrated in the inharmonious arenas of such opposites as urban and rural, or western and indigenous. Often terror is employed as an instrument to heighten the effect. Sheer helplessness and despair on the verge of frenzy are the emotions evoked as a result of the terror unleashed in the magical realm. Since majority of magical realist texts deal with timeless and universal phenomena like political aggression, violence and dictatorship, time is perceived as cyclical instead of being linear. What happens now is destined
to happen again and there is no real end to the trauma. Another particularly complex theme in magical realism is the carnivalesque. The concept of carnival celebrates the body, the senses and the cultural manifestations in the form of dance or music.

Okri's works incorporate several characteristics of magical realism such as the blending of opposites, time as cyclical, terror-laden landscapes and carnivalesque elements. The voluptuous Madame Koto and the innumerable processions, the great political rally, ritual dancing, and festivities that feature in the abiku novels exemplify the carnivalesque element, while the terrible things happening at an overwhelming speed in the mythical world spell terror not only to Azaro but to the entire community:

We woke up that morning to find the innards of a dog stamped on our door . . . . Parts of animal bodies hung from the branches of trees. Houses had been broken into, properties smashed. We saw the corpses of lizards floating on the debris of the streets. There was rubbish everywhere, flung against the clothes we had left out to dry, in our kitchens and toilets and house fronts . . . . Overnight our street had become a
fetid rubbish dump. Dead frogs were all over the place. When we stepped on them accidentally, we were horrified by their popping sounds. We wandered the street and saw live fishes wriggling on the rubbish. Toads had been squashed into the ground by metal hooves. The overwhelming smell of fermented palm-wine rose from the earth as if the rain had drenched us in an infernal libation. (SOE 149-150)

Such horrid visions continue to haunt the inhabitants of the ghetto. For example, the new myth of creation as revealed to Azaro is frighteningly ominous, as it reveals the secret agony of the ill-fated Continent. The passage is yet another perfect instance of magical realist mode of writing:

... I saw the baby growing and it saw me and stared at me ... And when I looked I saw the baby impregnate itself: it grew into a man-woman, and struggled for many generations trying to give birth to itself, to its own destiny ... Everything was still. The man-woman had delivered several babies who were joined at the hips ... Unable to escape one another, growing at incompatible rates, some dying as others grew fatter ... And I saw them, with
their unnumbered legs, their multiple arms and heads, seldom thinking together, suspicious of one another, condemned to wander as one, to build as one, to destroy as one, yet always trying to be separate from one another, always failing, for they were all of one body, one ancient and forgotten ancestry their destines linked— in union or division— forever. (SOE 91-92)

The long incantatory sentences, characteristic of Okri’s style and the grotesque and bizarre things that happen in his novels are looked upon as sure signs of magic realism. Even though Okri’s writings bear close resemblance to magic realism, he is a writer who has no allegiance to any particular school of writing. Okri’s novels censure the political set up in his country in most severe terms because of the destructive politics there—preying and feeding on corruption. All that looks fantastic and magical, all the incidents narrated in connection with the spirit-world or the “real” political world are part of the everyday reality in Africa.

For example, in Stars of the New Curfew, a politician is seen dropping money from a helicopter on to the voters. Crowds jostle for the falling currency and they are hurt in the event.
After the life-and-death battle for money, the ink washes off the fake currency notes in the rain. This is a perfect metaphor for all the vanities of the politicians which lie exposed before the public. The nightmarish scene may disguise the fact that it actually took place during Nigeria's 1983 election campaign. The helpless anger of the novelist stretches his imagination and renders his language powerful, fertile and violent. Sometimes the passion and energy overflows and the novelist gets carried away by his description. Western critics are especially critical of this weakness which, most of the times, becomes a treat to the eye and the ear in Okri. Michael Gorra, critic, for instance, is impatient with the author for not speeding up the incidents in the plot:

The great pre-election rally that was in the offing for the last half of the previous book hasn't happened by the end of Songs of Enchantment. So when, after 600 pages spread between the two volumes, Azaro sees "the sight which was to bring terror into our lives," I almost shut the book for good. Terror hadn't been there before? (Gorra 24)

This piece of criticism foregrounds the fundamental schism between Western and African interests in fiction. Most of the
Western readers have plot as their top priority. They think and judge a book incident-wise, looking for clues in the narrative which connect incidents and thus give them their relevance and contextual meaning. Without a proper ordering of the events they have difficulty in reading a text, in establishing relationships and forming a judgement. But the African and the Asian readers, accustomed to long epic narratives which are part of their ancient literatures, seem to enjoy getting themselves lost in a world in which time slips unnoticed. These narratives bring them closer to their indigenous modes of storytelling, and to the past of their respective nations.

Okri is accused of indifference to dramatic development in his novels. But the fact remains that his books receive their verbal momentum not from a story element but from their poetic diction and novelty of incident. As Okri points out in one of his interviews, the world is not readable like a text. It is more akin to music or tidal waves. Much of that is in the world do not yield for a cause and effect analysis based on reason, especially if one is dealing with a fertile and well-stocked reality like that of Africa. Strictly sequential narration is not a virtue in Africa. So when Azaro’s Mum complains to her husband, “Your story isn’t going anywhere,” she gets the reply that is as much the
perception of the novelist himself, “A story is not a car . . . . It is a road, and before that it was a river, a river that never ends” (SOE 266). This is to say that the novel is moving towards infinity. Even this contention is true as far as Okri is concerned. If Azaro, Mum, Dad, Madame Koto and the blind old man have extended lives, births and deaths to come, what is the point in rounding the tale off with a construed beginning and an end? A story, in such a situation, is an arrow shot to infinity and to end it would mean violation of perceived reality.

Even as techniques vary, so will each magic realist text have its own reasons for wanting to naturalize the supernatural. These reasons will only become clear when background factors such as cultural context, political agenda and literary influence are taken into account. Okri’s magical realism needs to be understood in the light of what the author himself has to say. He rejects the label magical realism and consistently asserts that he is not trying to generate “strange effects” in his works. Rather, he is, through his fiction, attempting to give voice to a putative African identity. He is only trying to trespass the boundaries of realism that set limitations upon his imagination and the cultural viewpoints that he wants to share. Branding Okri as an out and out magical realist would be too much of a sweeping
generalization, springing from a failure to recognize and acknowledge the local differences, traditions and cultural currents that flow through his works which cannot be easily accounted for, by such totalizing theories.

Just as he has been called a magic realist writer, critical attempts have been made to locate his writings within the purview of postcolonial literature. Postcolonialism is an elusive term which designates at one and the same time, a chronological moment, a political movement and an intellectual activity. It is generally accepted as a movement in political, academic and intellectual spheres of activity starting with the end of colonialism. Certain critics view postcoloniality as not denoting an abolition of forms of oppression, but a reconfiguration of the earlier forms of hegemony and domination. Yet another group of critics have responded to postcolonialism as a rallying point for a fresh assessment of the interaction of class, race and gender. However, postcolonial literature and postcolonial criticism have finally developed along the lines of an academic discipline foregrounding the tension between the imperial centre and the colonial space with special reference to issues as divergent as nationalism, economy, political orientation, geographical distribution, social class, race and gender.
The concepts of “the marginal” and “the centre” have given postcolonial literature a radical and revolutionary dimension of “talking back.” This revolutionist garb is ill-suited to a writer who has so far preferred to be silent on the “self” and the “other”—the binary notions that are central to postcolonial criticism. At the same time he does not shrink away from the responsibility of a writer writing about a nation which is not yet freed from the shock of a colonialist onslaught. It is true that he has distanced himself from the school of Pan-Africanism popularized by the writers of the sixties and seventies. He is more interested in speaking about the age-old African world-view that is a fully developed and sophisticated system of benevolent ideas. The Europeans, unable to comprehend the depth and universal range of this philosophy, take upon themselves the task of “educating” the savage Africans. The irony of the situation is heightened by understatement in the story that Azaro’s mother tells him:

When white people first came to our land . . . we had already gone to the moon and all the great stars. In the olden days they used to come and learn from us. My father used to tell me that we taught them how to count. We taught them about the stars. We gave
them some of our gods. We shared our knowledge with them. We welcomed them. But they forgot all this. They forgot many things. They forgot that we are all brothers and sisters and that black people are the ancestors of the human race. The second time they came, they brought guns. They took our lands, burned our gods and they carried away many of our people to become slaves across the sea. They are greedy. They want to own the whole world and conquer the sun. *(TFR 282)*

The greatness of Okri’s vision lies in the objectivity of his argument. His authorial stance against colonialism is essentially different from those of his predecessors. Long before the publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), the inevitable outcome of which was the origin of postcolonial criticism, a movement called Negritude had sowed the first seeds of postcoloniality. The term “negritude” was first used in a newspaper published in Paris by black students in 1934. Senegalese writer and political leader Senghor advocated the term and championed it as a movement in opposition to the European attempts at the erasure of black cultural identity. Many of the writers belonging to the negritude movement were
deeply concerned with questions of the estrangement of the “self” under the colonialist attempts at “civilizing” the African people. The movement upheld the abiding power of “blackness”, an awareness of being black, an acceptance of it and a celebration of the black history and culture. The concept of cultural identity and the sense of the “self” find the most triumphant expression in Frantz Fanon. He manages to combine a vigorous defence of culture and a militant strategy of resistance. Fanon’s writings are distinctly political and revolutionary in nature. He exposes the historical and geographical specificity and political bias of human culture and recognizes the most elaborate form of culture in national consciousness. Fanon anticipates Aijaz Ahmed who defines postcoloniality in terms of the global struggle of the working class against the capitalist forces. By fusing the ideals of postcoloniality with those of Marxism, Ahmed tries to give it a sociological dimension.

A development similar to that of Negritude—which was primarily against the French colonialist policies—occurred in the British colonies of the twentieth century as Anglophone criticism. The writers who supported the cause like C. L. R. James and Wilson Harris stress the need to transcend oppositions and arrive at what they describe as “cross culturalism.” This is
fundamentally just the opposite of what negritude foregrounds—the black essence. Anglophone criticism is about universalizing the “African” and in that way overcoming the limited and limiting views that the European has, of Africa.

Ben Okri’s postcoloniality is radically different from the revolutionary stance of Fanon or the Marxist ideology of Said. True to the postcolonial tradition, he is concerned with the loss of identity and the erosion of the “self” as the direct outcome of the colonialist invasion. Even though this phenomenon is a felt reality to almost all his characters, it is Azaro, Okri’s visionary spirit child who gauges the depth and gravity of the problem in *Infinite Riches*, the final part of the *abiku* trilogy. He has visions of an imperialist Governor General effacing every trace of “Africanness” in the country. Okri examines the danger of manipulating history by distortion of facts. The Governor General’s rewriting of history runs to several pages and the author makes it central to what happens afterwards—the furious and frustrated crowd breaking into a rage and wrecking everything they came across.

But unlike his predecessors of the Negritude movement, Okri does not put the entire blame upon colonialism for the plight of his nation. He is equally harsh upon his countrymen who
dance like drunken fools to the tunes of vile politicians. He is not blind to the widespread corruption, immorality and the unholy liaison between religion and politics rampant in the country. Okri rightly presents politics as a profitable business for rowdies and thugs like the Green Leopard “one time robber, now a proper party man, rehabilitated into the mould of bouncer, bodyguard and canvasser of votes” (*TFR* 393). Okri’s Africa is a wasteland of squalor and suffering. His contention is that any society, deprived of its essential identity and the systems of thought is like a rootless plant, dead and decaying. Azaro’s father is repeatedly beaten almost to death and his body, torn and severely bruised in a series of boxing bouts is almost a symbol, an allegory of post-independent Nigerian history. As Azaro’s dad re-dreams his life, drifting between the realm of the living and the dead, appealing to his ancestor for the redemption of Africa, the novelist is trying to re-dream the history of Africa, drawing his power from the magical heritage of its myths. Like the *abiku* child who wishes to break his destined cycle of death and rebirth, Okri’s Africa struggles to free itself from the cyclical enslavement of colonial and neocolonial forms of oppression.

Writers belonging to the group of Achebe and Elechi Amadi had a nationalist optimism, a belief that all that was necessary in
order to forge a national spirit and vindicate a denied culture was to dig back into one's roots. But with changing neo-colonial equations, writers have by and large recognized that they should transcend the simplistic moral privileging of Africa over the West and the binary opposition of exploited Black Africans and exploiting white westerner. Lack of uniformity in indigenous cultures is one reason that accounts for this change of mind. The problematic relations in the neo-colonial era, the fluid and ever-changing positioning of the exploiter and the exploited transcending geographical boundaries and cultural stereotypes also compel the writer to take cognizance of the other discourses and dynamics of gender and class in which the African is not just a victim but an active participant.

Neocolonialism refers to a form of contemporary economic imperialism wrought by modern capitalist business involvement in the developing world. The economic control inherent to neocolonialism is akin to the classical European Colonialism and is mostly felt in underdeveloped or developing nations that are former colonies. The United States could be rightly called a neocolonial power because it can exert control over less powerful or third world nations by its economic authority exercised through its control or pre-eminent influence on such agencies as
the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Neo-colonialism mainly involves activities belonging to the field of economy like preferential trade treaties, exploitation of resources, conditional aid and imposed defence treaties.

Though the concept of neo-colonialism was developed by Marxists and has mainly economic import, the variants of neo-colonial theory suggest the existence of cultural colonialism. The control exerted by the wealthy nations over the values and perceptions of colonized nations through culture means such as media, language, education and religion. This cultural colonialism has ultimately economic ends and it with the natives beginning to associate power and success with the foreigners’ ways. The foreign lifestyle and values are held in a higher esteem than the indigenous cultural presumptions and are consciously or otherwise given prominence. The most serious effect of relentless exposure to and transmission from the culture of the centre has been excessive desire for the material objects of the “centre”. Money becomes the determinant of all values and the closest means of appropriating the new affluent culture. The neo-elite class elevates their status in the eyes of their countrymen through the possession of Western symbols of social distinction like the car.
The central metaphor of Armah’s *The Beautyful Ones are Not Yet Born*, a work that anticipates Okri, is “the gleam” of the powerful spotlights of the façade of the Atlantic Caprice Hotel. The gleam and its artificial brilliance stand for a life-style and a false sense of power and prestige associated with it. In Okri, the material pleasures of life have a corresponding degenerating effect upon the essential values of life. The car that gives Madame Koto a distinction among the dwellers of the ghetto turns out to be instrumental in her destruction as well. Likened to a coffin at many instances both by the author and a diviner in the novel, the car is pictured as undesirable and unpropitious. In Armah’s other novels also, the car, associated with power, sex, and speed appears as the symbol of average man’s lust for material possessions.

The capitalist system that places stress on individual achievement destroys collective cohesiveness. In the African social fabric which views every being in connection with a network of relationship with other fellow beings and accords respect to a person for fulfilling his duties and responsibilities set apart for him by the society, individual life and material achievements hold little value. Madame Koto, the true representative of the neo-elite class begins her life as an ordinary
tavern owner. She is widely respected for her power of speech and is looked upon with awe. Her acquisition of material items like the car, the gramophone and the electricity sets her apart from the rest of the ghetto and she is no longer a member of the community. Madame Koto’s thirst for power and her association with the political thugs antagonizes people and strife arises.

One of the most serious consequences of cultural and intellectual colonization is the cultivation of a dependent cast of mind conditioned only to imitate. Hair-styles, clothing, make-up and speech are all adapted as a means of de-Africanizing personal appearance and to construct one’s personality in accordance with the styles of the west. Fanon is highly contemptuous of the neo-elites who have an incurable wish for identifying themselves with the culture of the west. He calls them “parasitic”, “unimaginative” and “lacking in initiative”. (Fanon 140-154).

The act of taking on a foreign name can be read as part of the attempt to authenticate a superimposed identity. African names are meaningful epithets that speak of some qualities or specialties of the individuals that they stand for. Losing one’s name therefore implies losing one’s identity. The Man of The Beautiful Ones contemplates wishfully: “Whatever happens to
the soul of a little African child who grows up thinking of himself as Mike?” (Armah 121). Okri resonates a similar fear through his spirit child when the imperial Governor General starts renaming African things.

The select few, in the neocolonialist set up, who are privileged and in control of power and therefore of information dissemination impose their values on the larger community. The colonial government maintained ideological control by ensuring that mental alternatives to the prevailing reality did not arise. The post independent elite leadership inherited control over the same tools of communication to impart its ideological hegemony on society at large. Control of the media has always been a powerful ideological weapon of “truth” construction and suppression. The International Photographer Jeremiah is beaten up and pursued for taking pictures of parties’ victimization of the public. In *Infinite Riches*, after the disastrous rally which ended up in a bloody riot, it was written in all newspapers with supporting photographs that the rally had been a huge success, “the only sign of trouble being the spontaneous ovation, the tremendous enthusiasm of the crowd, demonstrating their overwhelming support for the party of the Rich” (*IR* 344-345). Another example of the distortion of truth affected by the media
is the way obituary notices for Madame Koto appeared in all the newspapers, expressing condolence and deep regrets at her passing away.

Okri uses Lagos as a pervading metaphor for the insecurity, neglect and anonymity that accompanies a neo-colonial era. He maps the otherworldly spaces of the neo-colonial city, its compounds and outskirts as a phantasmic occult phase of alienated social beings. The city has been used as a symbol of Nigeria’s growing pains. Lagos is a vast laboratory of helter-skelter expansion, of confusion and frenzy perhaps unequalled anywhere else in the world. The city has witnessed a boom in population and in the number of vehicles and buildings. A tiny minority of the inhabitants lives extremely well in villas or plush apartments and they go to work in gleaming skyscrapers that sit awkwardly next to traditional market places. A large number of people live in appalling slums, where open sewers may run under disintegrating floor-boards. Many of these people have no work at all, unless they embark on a life of crime. They have their representatives among Okri’s characters who figure in his short stories. The Lagos that they live in is, in fact, a tiring maze, with its endless roads and streets, the massive wave of human
populace moving to and fro, the scorching heat and the endless traffic jams.

The traffic jam is a fact of life in Lagos. Such traffic jams occur in *Flowers and Shadows* and as Jeffia puts it, it is possible to buy things sitting in one's car, from hawkers who stroll by. The trip between downtown Lagos and the airport has been known to take half a day when things are at their worst and accidents are a major menace. Virtually every attempt to solve the problem ends in frustration and failure. The completion of a belt of highways around the city seemed to help for sometime, but soon the congestion returned. One official restriction permitting only cars with odd numbered license plates on the road on odd numbered days and those with even numbered ones on even numbered days was easily rendered meaningless. Resourceful but thrifty citizens arranged to have two sets of licence plates; the wealthier people simply bought an extra car. Seemingly no one is immune from the outrages of Lagos traffic. In the story “Converging City” in *Incidents at the Shrine*, The Head of State gets trapped in an intractable traffic jam and barely escapes from being shot. This is perhaps the fictional representation of an incident in which general Murtala
Muhammed, head of state after the military coup of 1975; was shot and killed by rebel soldiers while stuck in a Lagos go-slow.

The city tops Nigeria’s crime charts and is notorious for its increasing number of street murders and political assassinations. An astonishing number of handguns and other weapons are in private possession in Lagos—a characteristic that makes it quite different from most other African cities. In the smuggling that thrives in the harbor and at the airport, the weapons trade is one of the most successful and growing business. Many of those weapons fall into the hands of gangs of brigands and outlaws, who rob and terrorize the entire neighbourhood.

But it is Lagos, with all its problems, which has somehow come to symbolize Nigeria for outsiders. Few cities can handle gracefully the strains that have been put on Lagos. Originally established as a fishing station by a powerful Yoruba chief, the village later became a slave-trading centre for the Portuguese. The British established themselves in the nineteenth century and because they made it clear that they would grant protection to freed slaves, thousands of people who were looking desperately for their old homes in West Africa or fleeing inland tribal wars flocked to Lagos; so did European traders and missionaries. At first Lagos was administered as a separate British colony, but it
was proclaimed to be the capital of Nigeria in 1914. The government later on transferred its capital to Abuja and explained the move citing Lagos as a city of perennial traffic jams, intolerable congestion, chaotic sanitary situation, inadequate social amenities, and an alarming crime rate.

Lagos, in Okri hands becomes a tool for communicating the sum total of individual and collective memory of the post colonial experience. The story “A Hidden History” (IS) is about a city in ruins. The inhabitants leave the city which is being effaced from memory, is soon taken over by rats, dogs, ravens and crows. The street in which the narrator lives becomes a big hump of rubbish with garbage from all over being dumped there. Disintegration sets in and with the arrival of an apocalyptic figure, the List maker and a bunch of new explorers, the process of demolition is complete. They recover parts of the body of a woman from the rubbish heaps and try to fit them into a coherent shape.

He brought out a bloodied leg; its toes were big and blue-black with a strange rot of the feet. He brought out an arm chopped off at the shoulder, dangling a sticky mess of blood vessels and nerves. Then he brought out the head of a black woman,
roughly hacked, the eyes open and bloated, the nose cut like a harelip that had repeated itself (IS 89).

The dilapidated and disfigured body of the woman is Africa lying in bloodied bits among the rubbish heaps of her cities. The decay and the breakdown suggested throughout the story are the most marked characteristics of post colonial African cities.

Since the post-colonial cities, in their advancing state of decay, with their increasing violence and their clumsy mixing of traditional and modern are the new sites for the production of the “post-colonial”, it is there that we just look for the new urban rites and languages, the multiple memories and a rediscovered identity. These are to be found in the apparent “chaos of everyday” produced by all the numerous forms and means of urban survival: small traders, peddlers, artisans, shoeshine boys, windscreen washers, neighbourhood markets, smuggling, recycling and looting. It is in this polymorphous and apparently chaotic post-colonial city that Okri searches for the new “rules of chaos” and seeks the signs and codes for expressing the new urban identities in formation. In this context, it is very significant that two very important characters in his celebrated *abiku* series Azaro’s Mum and Dad are a street hawker and a head load worker.
Okri's work could be analyzed from the point of view of Homi Bhabha, a great critic of postcolonial theory. Bhabha's work is distinctive for its attempt to move beyond the analysis of colonial relations in terms of the systems of binary oppositions. For him, the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized is more complex, nuanced and politically ambiguous. He projects the zone of the "hybrid," the area in between the dominant and subordinate cultures across which a majority of identifications occur. In *The Location of Culture* Bhabha attempts to shed light upon the "liminal" negotiation of cultural identity across differences of race, class, gender and cultural traditions:

Liminal space, in-between the designations of identity becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue the constructs the difference between the upper and lower, black and white . . . the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at the either end of it from settling into primordial polarities. The interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy.

(Bhabha 4)
Postcolonial representations of liminality have generated considerable interest among contemporary theorists. Many of them, like Bhabha, consider liminality as a defining feature of postcolonial artistic practices. Bhabha names this in-between, liminal site of enunciation the “Third Space” and views it as a product of the clash of cultures occurring in the colonial and post-colonial periods. In the fictional landscape, there is much that can be ascribed “liminality.” The spirits and supernatural phenomena certainly belong to the category of “liminal persona.” The transformations—both physical and spiritual—that the characters undergo the presence of the forest as the mysterious threshold between the real and the supernatural and the crossing of the boundaries between life and death are sure signs of liminality. But the truth remains that post-colonial trope of liminality need not necessarily be predicated on the clash of dominant and sub-ordinate cultures. It can be traced back to the symbolic ideations of pre-colonial cultural discourses. The world of Okri’s fiction is necessarily an interstitial landscape, one which paradoxically exists in a mythopoeic space somewhere between the Nigeria of 1950s and a contemporaneous spirit-realm, a syncretic site where “traditional” and “modern” worlds tentatively converge. The “liminality” in Okri has little that is
postcolonial in it since it has its roots in the metaphysics of the Yoruba’s ancient oral culture.

Okri constructs his narratives around an interconnected series of autonomous episodes and fragments many of which he appropriates from the Yoruba’s expansive corpus of myths, folktales and religious lore as well as from their extensive use of riddles and proverbs. These episodes often deal with the solitary and perilous journeys undertaken by certain characters, which bring about radical changes in their lives and outlook. This is especially true about the *abiku* trilogy in which characters including Azaro, Mum and Dad are impelled by circumstances to abandon family and community to go on a pilgrimage of the soul. It might be either as a journey deep into the dark forest or a pilgrimage undertaken by the consciousness without the participation of the body. But invariably these characters return home endowed with newly acquired magical powers and enhanced knowledge.

The notion of the “journey” is an important organizing symbol in Yoruba religious thought. It signifies both a physical movement and trajectory through the landscape and an ontological journey that engenders a transformation in the individual’s understanding. It is worthwhile to remember the
journeys undertaken by the participants in the initiation rites to sacred spaces in the bush. These journeys are symbolic representations of regeneration and rebirth. Okri makes them look like ritualistic performances that denote initiation into a new life or form of identity.

Another principal signifier of ontological transformation in Okri’s narratives is the numerous physical transmutations his characters accomplish, either willingly or without their knowledge or wish. Changing shapes or Anthropomorphism is a regular feature of Yoruba folktales and mythology. Azaro the spirit-child witnesses a lot of such transformations. The blind old man, Madame Koto, the old woman in the forest—are all people who use their magical powers to change into birds, lizards, etc. The numerous transformations that occur in Okri’s novels problematize notions of individual identity which privilege autonomy and fixity within an immutable universe. In the place of an immutable conception of the Self, Okri employs fluidity, transformation and heterogeneity.

The division between the physical world and the spirit-realm is wrought with the positioning of a mysterious forest—the boundary between the settled community and the world of the spirits and the dead. This division is analogous with a conceptual
dichotomy in the textual space between the real and the esoteric, the secular and the sacred. The characters who cross the boundary of the forest enter the interstitial realm—the threshold to the land of the dead. These ontological journeys take the form of ritualized initiations and are analogous to the symbolic frameworks of the rites of passage, when individuals undertake a ritualized transformation from one status, or form of identity, to another. All rites of transition are marked by the three distinct phases of separation, transition and re- incorporation. These phases could be conceptually defined as the pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal phases. Between each phase is a powerful border or threshold which the initiate must negotiate by observing certain prescribed ceremonies or rites. During the intervening liminal period, the state of the ritual subject is ambiguous as they pass through a realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state of being. Victor Turner made a detailed study of the symbolism attached to, and surrounding the “liminal persona” during performances of rites of passage ceremonies in traditional African cultures, in his book *The Forest of Symbols* (1967). He describes the symbolic characteristics of an initiate’s liminal persona as being twofold:
They are at once no longer classified and not yet classified. In so far as they are no longer classified, the symbols that represent them are, in many societies, drawn from the biology of death, decomposition, catabolism and other physical processes that have a negative tinge . . . . The essential feature of these symbolizations is that the neophytes are neither living nor dead from one aspect and both living and dead from another. Their condition is one of ambiguity and paradox, a confusion of all the customary categories . . . . We are not dealing with structural contradictions when we discuss liminality, but with the essentially unstructured . . . and often people themselves see this in terms of bringing neophytes into close connection with deity or with superhuman power, with what is in fact, often regarded as the unbounded, the infinite, the limitless. (Turner 96-98)

The characters in Okri who journey into an ambiguously charged space are akin to initiates, of uncertain status. The passage through this realm of liminality between "neither living nor dead" and "both living and dead" identities brings those who
undertake the journey into close connection with the normally unseen world of supernatural beings, the ancestors and the gods. They eventually emerge from this ambivalent liminal realm having experienced a fundamental transformation in their status and identity. The theory of liminality is applicable in Okri to the extent that in his fiction there is the exploration of the interstitial spaces between fixed designations of identity. But we should also remember that the liminality in Okri is silent on the dichotomy of cultural models and the questions of hierarchy.

There is no negotiation of cultural identity or representation of "difference" which is essential for the production of the postcolonial hybrid that Bhabha envisages. Okri’s fiction goes beyond dichotomies such as between native and foreign traces, local and universal, past and present. The past comes back in order to actualize its relevance for contemporary happenings. The future is a treasure that has to be taken care of and constructed day by day. The task at his hand seems to be striving for a "beyond," to go beyond fossilized discursive positions, travelling from one space to another, from one temporality to another, making all of them simultaneous.

Even though Okri refuses to sport the garb of a truly revolutionary postcolonial writer, his fiction displays
postcoloniality for a number of reasons. The focus on the colonized subject and his experiences perceived as universal truths makes it postcolonial beyond any doubt. Besides, Okri's novels are all stories of survival—a survival often lived on the threshold between life and death. Another good reason is Okri's practice of colonizing the western literary antecedents and the imperial language to suit the needs of his artistic purpose. The rewriting or rescue of the "other" History, the silenced one, which does not appear in official historical accounts, is another feature of postcolonial writing. In Okri there is unmistakably the irresistible need to retell, to write the counter history, showing that the centre cannot—and should not—hold fighting for the re-inscription of one's memory, silenced for too long.

Okri's fiction can best be described as a "dream voyage" that could be subjected to fruitful psychoanalytic examinations. The myths that are woven into the fabric of a novel could be described as primordial images or archetypes, part of "the collective unconscious" that Carl Jung emphasizes. Myths are in some sense the dream thinking of the people and they preserve the unconscious preoccupations of the infancy of the race. These archetypal images and ideas lay buried deep in man's psyche beneath the suppressed or inchoate memories belonging to the
Azaro’s father voices this aspect when he says, “The whole of human history is an undiscovered continent deep in our souls” (*TFR* 498). The bizarre happenings in Okri’s dream narratives could very well be the manifestations of his characters’ aberrant psychic behaviour. Psychoanalytic critical analysis could likewise reduce all of Azaro’s metaphysical experiences as the hallucinations of a nine year old. Such a possibility cannot be ruled out as is apparent from a conversation between Azaro and Jeremiah, the International Photographer who comes back to the ghetto after a long period of absence:

‘Madame Koto has been going mad. There was a mighty evil wind with rain and earthquakes which destroyed people’s houses. Dad went blind because of the dead carpenter. Madame Koto’s masquerade rode a white horse killing spirits. The political thugs came and stoned our windows. Soon there is going to be a great rally where . . .’

‘I know about the rally,’ he interrupted.

‘Will you come?’

‘Of course.’

He was silent for a moment. Then he spoke again.
‘You are the strangest child I have ever met,’ he said.
‘No one mentioned anything about a masquerade on a white horse killing spirits, or a dead man walking. Are you well?’ (IR 77-78)

The very same doubt is raised by other characters as well. Okri seems to be leaving the choice to the reader. But there are certain other elements that Okri invests with profound psychological significance, the forest being one.

In Okri, the forest—the rich homeland of the spirits—is also the site of dreams and nightmares. The giant trees are the deep-rooted convictions of the unconscious mind which when mortally wounded, cry out in agonized voices. His forest also stands for the universe, inhabited by obscure forces to which man stands in a dynamic, moral and spiritual relationship and with which his destiny is involved.

Yet another theory that has some bearing on Ben Okri’s fiction is Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of “dialogism” or “polyphony”—of competing voices within a given work. Bakhtin’s concept of polyphony or “multi-voicedness” and his associated ideas of dialogism and the position of the author are applicable in Okri. According to Bakhtin, a polyphonic novel is one in which the author enables, or sets the stage for dialogue between different
voices. The author does not disappear. Instead, he or she creates a world in which many disparate points of view may enter. It is quite possible to imagine and postulate a unified truth that requires a plurality of consciousness.

Conceived as dialogic, the narrative becomes an intersection of different accents and voices which are fundamentally ambivalent in taking on meaning in relation to each other, rather than some absolute point of reference. The fictional world of Okri is accommodative of the multiple claims of the real and the spirit voices and hence dialogic to some extent.

The theories that seek to explain the fragmentariness and the fantastic in Okri are essentially part of an imperial critical pantheon that takes it upon itself the task of determining the “intrinsic” literary value of the literature from the margins. They are to confer legitimacy from the “centre,” on the literature of the “periphery.” The imperial centre operating through the innumerable critics and jury, attach tags like “magical realist” and “fantastic writing’ to writers who attempt to explore new vistas of expression. The value of their writing as an international commodity depends, to a large extent, on the exotic appeal it holds to an unfamiliar metropolitan audience. They thus risk becoming complicit with the cultural imperialism they denounce.
Okri is to be trusted when he says that the African dilemma is situated beyond the moral injunctions and theoretical explanations offered by theories perfected and practiced under alien circumstances. This dilemma is best explored through the technique that Okri employs—a double-edged design with religious, philosophical, political and social rhetoric for its literary substance on the one hand and orality and story-telling for its fictional strategies on the other, which seem to cause fragmentariness that challenge the traditional method of narration with simple temporal linearity. In the process he might have been influenced by the myriad potentialities out there, open to writers of fiction. But it is not a matter of borrowing techniques but of working new strategies out of possibilities suggested by older books that highlight Okri’s skill as the master literary craftsman of modern times.