Fantastic Subversion of the African Postcolony in *Songs of Enchantment*

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Summary

This article explores the elements of the fantastic in Ben Okri's novel *Songs of Enchantment*. The novel has received little critical attention on its own terms. In contrast, this article demonstrates that *Songs of Enchantment* contributes to African cultural renaissance by questioning the politics of Nigeria in particular and the African postcolony in general. This article argues that through the spirit-child, Azaro, *Songs of Enchantment* not only renounces the notion of African history as repetitive; the novel itself is also made up of fragments of stories whose apprehension of reality is equally fragmented in order to partialise literary/narrative accounts and critical interpretations of politics in the African postcolony. The figural tropes Okri uses include deployment of the fantastic elements embedded in classical realism, folk tale, dreamlore, and the cautionary tale imbued with parabolic qualities. These literary strategies enable Okri to fundamentally fracture the unbearable tyranny of the *abiku cycle* and replace it with the dialogical notion of history that anticipates an open-ended reinterpretation of African liberation. Therefore, the novel's originality is based on its symbolical break with the archetypical myth of the *abiku cyclic* tradition.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel ondersoek die elemente van fantasie (die denkbeeldige) in Ben Okri se roman *Songs of Enchantment* Alhoewel die roman as sodanig weinig kritiese aandag geniet, demonstreer hierdie artikel dat dit 'n bydrae lewer tot die kulturele renaissance in Afrika deur die Nigeriese politiek in die besonder en die Afrika-postkolonie in die algemeen te bevraagteken. Volgens die artikel verwerp *Songs of Enchantment*, deur die kindgees Azaro, die idee dat die Afrikageskiedenis herhalend van aard is; die roman self bestaan uit storiefragmente wat die werklikheid as net so gefragmenteer beskou, om sodoende die literêre en narratiewe weergawes en kritiese vertolkings van politiek in die Afrika-postkolonie te verstrooi. Okri gebruik figurale trope soos die ontplooiing van denkbeeld-elemente wat ingebed is in klassieke realisme, volksverhale, droomoorlewerings en waarskuwingsverhale met elemente van gelykenisse. Hierdie literêre strategieë stel Okri in staat om die ondraaglike tirannie van die *abiku-siklus* in wese omver te werp en in die plek daarvan 'n dialogiese idee van geskiedenis te vestig. Só skep hy die verwagting dat die bevryding van Afrika op nuwe, oop maniere vertolk kan word. Die roman se oorspronklikheid manifesteer daarin dat dit wegbreek van die argetipiese mite van die *abikusiklus*-tradisie.

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Introduction: Fetishing and De-fetishing Orality and the Written Word in the African Postcolony

Unwarranted perceptions have congealed into authoritative trends in the critical discourse on the relationship between "orality" and "literacy" (Gunner 2007). The very terms "oracy" and "literacy" mistakenly naturalise the power of the false (Mbembe 2002), reducing literacy to the skill of writing and not to the consciousness contained in the verbal signifiers. The description of the unwritten literature as orality and the written as literacy wrongly implies that the written is historically the inside of an outside (Wa Thiong'o 1982) crust of an oral culture (Ong 2002). This view claims for orality a certain entitlement to authenticity that the written is viewed as not possessing. Representing orality and the written word as parallel narratives that never meet either in the same narrative or in some different cultural sites such as outside the novel fails to imagine that the confluence of the two and their textualisation constitute the text whenever these are found in literary experience and historical context. As Gunner puts it, "orality needs to be seen not simply as 'absence of literacy' but as something self-constitutive, *sui generis*" (2007: 67).

Whether outside or inside the novel form, orality encourages readers to experience the fracturing of unitary identities facilitated by the "built-in principle of instability that identifies cultural narratives as always "open and mobile ... perpetually recreated, modified as the occasion demands, and given new accents from one instance of its realisation to another" (Irele 2007: 81). One can unwittingly promote a wishful thinking based on the assumption that the spoken word as well the written is internally controlled by a principle of unified signifiers within each of them. And yet, neither the oral nor the written contains self-evidential and inherent knowledge. The process of telling creates new knowledge that is constantly revised in every act of contextualised utterances (Vambe 2004).

Okpewho notes that as such there is "hardly any translation that does not show some elements of stylisation" (2007: 86). Because every act of cultural enunciation rejects attempts at slavishly mirroring (p. 86) past narrations even of the same told story, little is gained in uncritically claiming a privileged status for orality. Rather, as Harold Schenb has stated in his approximate understanding of the role of the artist's temperament in composing a story, "[t]he storyteller breaks through the force of the linear movement of the story to move the audience to deeper and more complex experiences" (2007: 96). Every story, whether it uses orality as a palimpsest on the written format or is constituted in the narrative as both the message and the medium in which it occurs, is ultimately mediated.

The theoretical brash sketched above is germane to the project of decolonising African literature (Chinweizu & Madubuike 1987) by debunking romanticised approaches to orality and the written word (Julien 1997).

The challenge can also allow us to specify where, how and why that decolonising project has been "arrested" (Okpewho 2007) and manipulated to achieve "alternative hegemonies rather than counter-hegemonies" (Lazarus 2007: 343). However, the patent denial of the instrumentality of African orality in giving a unique form to the shape of the African novel (Obiechina (2007: 125-339) is as simplifying as the avid and unreflective assumption that orality "naturally" subverts, "totalising, rationalistic progressivism upon which the discourse of realism [is] theorised" (Lazarus 2007: 342). Quayson (1997) has observed that during the run towards African independence African nationalists used orality to inscribe a rationality that was meant to oppose, but did not in all cases necessarily succeed in challenging the logocentrism of the medium of written fiction. In fact, the mere use of orality on its own account or through other mediums does not necessarily liberate the oral sign into polyvalence.

Kwame Anthony Appiah picks up on the above point and insightfully suggests that an author may seek refuge in orality invoked through the figures of numinous spirits embedded in the narrative interstices of the novel as a way of hiding from the failure or pre-empting or shielding potential criticism likely to be brought into questioning the creative contribution of that author, particularly when there is evidence of lack of newness in innovation with orality within the novel. Specifically commenting on *The Famished Road*, by Ben Okri, Appiah questions Okri's talent and motive in inscribing the supernatural in his novel. After commending Okri for experimenting with "spiritual realism" (1992b: 146-148), Appiah detects in *The Famished Road* a nostalgic "tension" "linked to [Okri's] exile's passion for the project of Nigerian national politics" (pp. 146-148). This tension is based on a contrived imposing of "spiritual realism, which gives the writer access to a world of almost unlimited powers [that, unfortunately,] according to Appiah, "may also lead him sometimes into the irritatingly pseudo-mystical New Age Mode" (pp. 147-148).

Appiah accuses Okri of "othering" Africa in his desire to portray the continent as exotica to a foreign readership. The critic views this as damaging to the images of Africa because it confirms unsubstantiated European negative images of Africa as truth. For Appiah, since Okri's writing is

> bravura writing, it is not surprising that sometimes in this lush excess one may feel that Okri has gone too far. And yet, we (here in the United States) are likely to forgive him, in part because, though he lives and writes in London, he has chosen to speak as an African writer (which, as someone born in Nigeria in 1959, he is surely entitled to do). This choice is part of what gives him the licence *outside* Africa to invent – from the resources of Nigerian folklore and the English language and his own wide reading and ample imagination – a language and a universe of his own. The aludatory reviews this book received in Britain, where the novel won the 1991 Booker Prize, are being followed by raves here, many of which speak of "magical

> realism", explicitly connecting Okri with postcolonial Latin America, another place where Otherness has lowered our barriers to "disorders" of language and the imagination.
>
> (Appiah 1992b: 147)

Okri is faulted not only for reviving the Senghorian negritude philosophy that depicts black people as close to nature and white people as possessing scientific minds. Appiah takes a swipe at the very concept for which Okri has been lauded, and this is the concept of "magical realism". Appiah's view is that the uncritical use of this term has enabled Africa and the third world to be "othered" in places where life is explained in magical terms and not through verifiable scientific laws. For example, what Vinay Dharwadker means specifically in invoking the term "magic realism" (1993: 1) in relation to his brief reading of *Songs of Enchantment* is never explained but left hanging on the assumption that it is a genre that lives to the "post-modernist readership's expectation" (p. 1).

Another critic of Okri, David Whittaker, casually endorses the view that *Songs of Enchantment* is an expression of "African magical realism ... or African animist realism" (2001: 2). Whittaker argues that the novel evinces a "syncretic blend of elements from the real, the esoteric and the super-natural ... mythic landscapes populated with animist deities" (pp. 2-3). The association of Africa with wild animals is a literary trope deeply embedded in Western thought. The idea that ordinary people possess extraordinary powers to protect their cultures in the face of an onslaught by colonialism is clearly Cabral's, and it displays a certain naivety in its insistence that the spirit or the minds of the masses remained an untenanted space, and that for the ordinary people the return to the source is not problematic (Cabral 2009). Okri endorses this naivety from Cabral, which is that the magic in magical realism denotes the "uncolonized cultural space within the spirit of the people" (p. 234) so that the distinctively "political" aspect of the term magical realism refers to its assumed potential to surpass the aesthetic frames generated from the West. In Kamulu's framework of appreciating Okri's work, magical realism is accorded undue positivity. Kamalu writes that magical realism is derivative discourse that "interrogates the existence of Manichean dichotomies in Western conventional realism" (2008: 28). The fact that in its response to the Western canon, magical realism creates an alternate genealogy (Appiah 1992a) of nativist signifiers is seen as enabling it to inseminate "hybridity [identities] into the discourse of Europe and the West, to mix with it, transform it, to make it acknowledge margin-alized or suppressed or forgotten histories" (Appiah 1992a: 28). However, Zamora and Faris acknowledge the ambiguity at the heart of magical realism when they argue that on one hand, it positively "creates space for interactions of diversity" (1995: 3), while on the other hand, the text, magic realism creates "opposition between magic and reality that exists within those texts" (p. 3).

Perhaps, the most comprehensive accounts of the instrumentality of magic realism in opening up novels in ways that encourage plurivocal meanings are to be found in Zamora and Faris's (1995) edited collection of essays entitled *Magical Realism: Theory, History and Community*. In it, and for Chanady, magic realism is an "amalgamation of realism and fantasy" (1995: 129). This is ironically an inadequate characterisation that suggests that the fantastic is not a worthy form of realism in its own right. Simpkins views magic realism as "supplementation to 'improve' upon the realistic text" (1995: 145) and thus mistakenly arrogates magic realism a marginal position in literary aesthetics. However, D'haen emphasises elements of "reflexiveness, eclecticism, multiplicity, discontinuity and erasure of boundaries" (1995: 192) as constitutive of magical realist texts. For Foreman, "past-on stories" (1995: 285) are recreated and resignified differently from their "original versions". Slemon's view is that the term magic realism is an oxymoron since it reinforces a binary between realism and fantasy. Magic realism is located in Latin America and Africa and not in Europe (Foster 1995: 268-283). Warner (2005) complicates some criticisms on magic realism by stating matter-of-factly that it existed in Africa for all times though it did not bear the name magic realism. Warner draws attention to questions not of the origins of magic realism but to the uses to which it is put and notes that magic realism draws upon the cultural resources of classical realism, folk tale and fantasy and "yet does so in such a way that neither of the two realms is able to assert a greater claim to truth than the other" (2005: 2).

Magical realist texts are irreverent: they are concerned with "unmasking the real, showing up its claims to truth to be provisional and contingent on consensus" (Warner 2005: 2). The ability of magical realism to "relativise, ironise, and to question boundaries of all kinds" reveals the author's "faith in the capacity of literature to represent multi-dimensional realities" (p. 2) because this can encourage readers and critics to "look beyond the limits of the knowable" (Zamora 1995: 498). This same perspective can be identified in some versions of Shona cultures of Zimbabwe where magic realism is not merely a creative method but lived experience that is realised through spirit possession. In spirit possession human beings can enter and commune with ancestors and exit the spirit world. Possession is experienced as real life even when in those contexts "a spirit medium who by virtue of being the possessed, does not know the text that he/she produces while in the state of possession".

However,

> [w]hen spirit possession is deliberately incorporated into the novel, it becomes the locus for the possible meanings that can go beyond not only what the author had in mind, but also against the collective perceptions of life. In other words, when inserted into the novel, spirit possession has the capacity to simultaneously rehearse a coherent communal narrative of

> identity while also revealing "cracks and crevices of a world torn apart mercilessly into its representations".
>
> (Vambe 2004: 7)

Notwithstanding some positive evaluations of the term magic realism, its conceptual indeterminacy and excessive significations can fracture unitary ways of seeing, but they also open themselves to the "dangers of appropriation, colonisation, domestication" by dominant voices in society so that it begins to act "almost as a return on capitalism's hegemonic investment in its colonies[.] [M]agical realism is especially alive and well in postcolonial contexts and is now achieving a compensatory extension of its market worldwide" (Zamora & Faris 1995: 2). In view of the reductive nature of magic realism and how it has been racialised to denote the creative method of the formerly colonised people of Latin America and Africa, this article narrows down the focus towards interrogating the significance of the "fantasy" and the fantastic in *Songs of Enchantment.*

The Fantastic in African Literature

In literary texts, the fantastic element "traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture; that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made 'absent'" (Jackson 1981:4). Fantastic stories defy literary borders and transgress the boundaries into the spiritual in search of, or in an attempt to create what is not yet known but can become knowable. Fantastic art operates in contradictory ways. It can "tell of desire" (p. 4), signalling a quest for a better life or degenerate into mere fantasy that can also "expel desire" (p. 4) by allowing people to wallow in unproductive thinking not followed by programmatic action. The fantastic's most powerful creative principle is its capacity to be used in ways that fracture homogeneous ways of naming reality, and in the process the fantastic facilitates the multiplication of several counter-hegemonic narratives. Unlike the term "fantasy" that denotes the unreal, the fantastic is an elastic conceptual term that can be stretched to accommodate and explain the literary qualities of fluidity, liminality and crossing of zones of occult instability (Fanon 1963) that mark the internal disjunctive signifiers which diffuse and decentre dominant narratives within the admixture of genres such as classical realism, the folk tale mode, dreamlore in a novel. The sources of the literary influences on Okri (Whittaker 2001; Quayson 1997) have been established, but what has not been sufficiently paid attention to in the analysis of the novel in the short reviews and short articles is the need to critically examine the structural significance of the constitutive presence of the fantastic elements in *Songs of Enchantment*.

The "Fantasies" of Classical Realism in *Songs of Enchantment*

Songs of Enchantment is a monumental creative epic novel structurally made up of four books. The novel is entitled "songs", but the actual plot of the novel is constructed on the basis of short, filmic stories whose power to enchant the reader derives from various cultural resources including what I describe in this section of the article as the "fantasies of classical realism". In its protocols of depicting African reality, realism has tended to emphasise typical characters operating under typical conditions. The realist novels, writes Appiah, were "legitimations of nationalism: they authorise a 'return to traditions' while at the same time recognising the demands of a Waberian rationalised modernity" (Appiah 2007: 660). Realism imagines coherent, uniform and unproblematic representation of the concepts of progress that it shares and promotes. Realism imagines a beginning, a middle and an end sealed with closure to the contradictions that rent society. Quayson notes that in Africa, in the 1950s, during the run-up to independence, realism was privileged as the aesthetic of nationalism. Realism also celebrated linear conceptions of progress based on the recognition of a dramatic shift from traditional society to the modern and industrialised urbanised cities. This unbearable commitment to a unitary road towards progress, understood narrowly in terms of the need to achieve political freedom first with the hope that other freedoms such as economic, cultural, ideological and spiritual creativity could be factored in at a later stage in the development of the African postcolony constitutes one of the several aporias of realism.

In the words of Jackson, classical realism's fantasies worked to "expel desire" by narrowing the spaces of imagining expanded forms of democracy. In *Songs of Enchantment*, alluring and enchanting charms of classical realism and the philosophies of nationalism are rudely exposed as displaying what Mbembe calls the power of the false. In the novel, Azaro, the child protagonist, opens the story by noting the folly of negritude philosophies (including, among others, nationalism, Pan-Africanism, ubuntuism) that unbearably impose unitary ways not only of imagining one destiny for Africans, but also actually prevent people from proliferating the constructions of alternatively imagined African worlds characterised by a plurality of cultures and diversity of views. Azaro believes that Africans have been negatively enchanted or spellbound by colonialism and neocolonialism and thus have remained trapped in interpretations of realities that undermine the possibilities of thinking outside the artificial ideological boundaries prescribed by African political nationalism:

> We didn't see the seven mountains ahead of us. We didn't see how they are always ahead, always calling us, always reminding us that there are more things to be done, dreams to be realised, joys to be rediscovered, promises

> made before birth to be fulfilled, beauty to be incarnated, and love embodied.
>
> (Okri 1993: 3)[1]

This opening attack on the ideology of nationalism's insistence on a parochial notion of nation without internal contradictions threatened to foreclose the possibilities of continuing debate among Africans on the multiple destinies of the continent's people. The policing discourses characteristic of African nationalism promise bliss in the new postcolony and present life as bounded with closure on higher goals of human aspirations. However, for Azaro, the spirit-child, struggles are never "finished" or "truly concluded" since the conditions of possibilities of human regeneration are based on the capacity to "re-dream our lives, and that life can always be used to create more light" (SoE 3).

It is not only people in the new Nigerian-, and by extension, African postcolony who were persuaded by nationalism's rhetoric of the fundamental end of the history of struggle to attain more higher forms of African sociable lives. African literature was also complicit in authorising "feverish narratives" (SoE 3) that presented life in the postcolony in a one-sided way. Nationalism and its favoured creative method of classical realism precluded the anticipation of political scenarios and counter-scenarios of African sociality. However, when the realities of mass corruption, poor governance fed on political and electoral violence by elites vying for positions of power confounded the ordinary people,

> [w]e were unprepared for an era twisted out of natural proportions, unprepared when our road began to speak in the bizarre languages of violence and transformations. The world broke up into unimaginable forms, and only the circling spirits of the age saw what was happening with any clarity. This is the song of a circling spirit. This is a story for all of us who never see the seven mountains of our secret destiny, who never see that beyond the chaos there can always be a new sunlight.
>
> (SoE 3)

The extent of the damage to the communitarian dreams of the people are hinted at in the discursive linguistic markers that pit "us" against some imagined political elites who have assumed the implied position of political opposition; these elites have contracted the democratic spaces once promised by political independence since the elites have introduced "bizarre languages of violences" (SoE 3). Other images depicting how people have been entangled in the labyrinth of negative values of an outdated version of African nationalism are suggested in the diction of a "road" and not the pluralising form, "roads", that would have implied more than one option for

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1. Subsequent references to *Songs of Enchantment* (Okri 1993) are indicated by SoE followed by the page number(s).

Nigerians as they try to create and experience multiple narratives of freedom.

Furthermore, the ominous nature of the entrapment of people's creative energies is captured in the central motif of the "circling spirit" in novels variously described by critics as the *abiku myth* (Appiah 1992b) that is explained as the metaphor of a seemingly unbreakable cycle of a violent history without end. *Songs of Enchantment* is concerned with unravelling the conditions that make Nigeria – as described by Ade, a character in Okri's famous novel *The Famished Road* as – "an abiku country [that] like the spirit, keeps coming and going" (Appiah 1992b). However, I shall argue in this article that *Songs of Enchantment* also significantly denotes the ways in which the people and the child spirit Azaro are enchanted by the possibilities of breaking the hold of dominant hegemonies, thus making it possible to imagine that "beyond the chaos there can always be a new sunlight" (SoE 3).

In *Songs of Enchantment*, the ideology of cultural nationalism has ossified, is collapsing on itself and producing psychological neurosis on its power. Instead of the new Nigeria being a space for unfettered self-actualisation for the individual, Azaro notes that the country has been taken over by political thugs who do not hide their shame when they ruthlessly deal with dissentious masses of people that hold different views about the possible paths for the development of the new nation. At the market place "thugs of politics drove [women] away because [women] hadn't joined their parties" (SoE 32). The political thugs' rise to power is facilitated by corruption that ensured for them "shortcuts that elongated journeys [and] roads" to economic freedoms in ways that "induce their own peculiar form of dreaming on the exhausted soles of the feet" (SoE 32). The lethargic economic development of Nigeria in *Songs of Enchantment* is not depicted as a product of "how Europe underdeveloped Africa" (Rodney 1972); Nigeria is a product of its politicians who have failed to establish meaningful links with the gravid mass (Achebe 1984).

Therefore, Azaro's reference to Africa's supposed past of glory and stability is ironic because present-day Nigeria, rampant with corruption, is the opposite of such an imagined life of stability and serenity encouraged in the discourse of classical realism. Azaro confirms that the construction of Africa's pasts as coherent, uniform, peaceful and egalitarian in realist novels is contrived and a misrepresentation of the continent. Azaro undermines the assumptions of identities as informed by monolithic values. Azaro's existence as spirit-child endows him with more than one life since he himself "has several lives resident in me" (SoE 30). In depicting Azaro as a plurivocal "being" perpetually in a condition of unfinished or unfinishable transition into a fully grown-up man, Okri acknowledges that the "tenanted spaces" (SoE 26) and counter-hegemonic narratives that the new leadership of Nigeria would want to smother with its discourse that appeals to a single

African past that never was, cannot stand up to reality. Azaro fractures the ideologies of cultural nationalism that drives Nigeria's rugged political culture when he says:

> Sometimes my other lives would open and then shut, and what I glimpsed didn't make sense. Other times I could see far into an aquamarine past; I saw places I had never been to, saw faces that were both alien and familiar; and my mind would be invaded with the black winds of enigmatic comprehension. The lives in me increased their spaces, languages of distant lands bore my thoughts, and I found I knew things I had never learnt. I knew the charts and tides of the Atlantic, I understood complex principles of higher mathematics, the sign-interpretations of the forgotten *magis*, the sculptural.
>
> (SoE 31)

The emphasis of the passage on the desire to expand and not narrow, to create plural values, and not to be locked in single signifiers of life is an appeal for intellectual tolerance in postcolonial Nigeria. Instead, the response that Azaro receives for his quest to "increase spaces" of imagining alternative values shatters him and "[breaks] his heart" (SoE 35). His people are openly persecuted by political thugs from self-seeking political parties of the Rich and the Poor in postcolonial Nigeria. The end of the novel's Book One makes a mockery of the nationalists' concept of the "forgotten original dream" (SoE 61) of political oneness that spurred people to struggle for self-determination during the nationalist period. After the self-rule had been secured, powerful leaders, soldiers and elites gratuitously committed acts of physical harm against the ordinary humanity in whose name they claimed to rule the country. At the instigation of Madame Koto, soldiers apply systematic pain to those citizens whose ideologies the soldiers do not approve of (Mbembe 2001).

In *Songs of Enchantment*, "[a] robed political leader commanded soldiers" (SoE) to kill people. "The Head of State, a General, barked out orders and they lifted their guns and shot down all the living dreams of the nation" (SoE 43). In this description of the murder of ordinary people, the dream of a progressive movement from colonial servitude to self-rule is debunked. The romance narrative that cultural nationalism privileges for all to see is one that seems untrammelled with opposition, contradiction and dissention, but one that at its core seeks to reproduce the very agonistic patterns under which people continue to live in enslavement. Okri uses the limitations of the fantasy embedded in classical realism that underpins the desire displayed by, or manifested in the cultural nationalist narrative of political freedom in Nigeria to disrupt the assumed homogeneity of material interests that are supposed to inform the new nation. Drew Shaw draws attention to the fact that ideological closure is not only a hallmark of the classical realist novel:

> Closure is [also] a means of sealing off and validating the social and moral universe that the master realist narrative purports to represent. Conventionally, the device signals to the reader that the story is now at an end and he or she is to accept the conclusions and "truth" of the text without further questioning.
>
> (Shaw 1999: 11)

To the extent that elite Nigerian political culture depicted in *Songs of Enchantment* desires and fantasises about the possibilities of silencing the masses through force, it relies on realism whose conception of development is linear and survives on policing borders against other modes of representation. Mkandawire adds that in Africa, the failure of African political nationalism is most felt at the level indicated by its inability to innovate and continue providing a contestatory impulse that initially spurred it. In Nigeria in particular, and Africa in general,

> African nationalism did not uncritically embrace "modernity" as prescribed by the imperial order. Rather it attempted to realize modernity adapted to the cultural and historical experiences of Africa. Not surprisingly some of Africa's most prominent political actors have sought an ideology and identity that would give the project of modernization an African soul – Nkrumah's "African personality", Senghor's Negritude, Nyerere's African Socialism, Azikiwe's "irredentism".
>
> (Mkandawire 2005: 6)

Though these ideologies developed in the context of the struggle against colonialism, in the postcolony in Africa, none of these movements speak to, and wish to account to the African masses. Instead, the wished-for unbridled desires in these philosophies are to zombify African masses that Mbembe explains as a consequence of the African ruling class' display of a "tendency to excess and lack of proportion" (2001: 102), mismanaging "extraordinary authority that they use arbitrarily" (Vambe & Zegeye 2009). Mbembe is more expansive in his characterisation of the use of force in policing the masses in the African postcolony:

> By exercising raw power, the fetish, as embodied in the autocrat and the agents of autocracy, takes on an autonomous existence. It becomes unaccountable ... or arbitrary to the extent that it reflects only upon itself. In this situation, one should not underestimate the violence that can be set in motion to protect the vocabulary used to denote or speak of the commandement, and to safeguard the official fictions that underwrite the apparatus of domination, since these are essential to keeping people under the commandement's spell, within an enchanted forest of adulation that, at the same time, makes them laugh.
>
> (Mbembe 2001: 110)

The question of lack of accountability to the people is in *Songs of Enchantment* secured through and protected by authorising "feverish narratives" that distort, and under-represent the contributions of the masses to the country's development. As the spirit-child Azaro observes, the former colonial masters and the modern black masters in Nigeria are experts at camouflaging realities through inducing fear and nightmares. While in one of his spiritual states of repossession, Azaro says that in the spiritual kingdom of masquerades he saw

> [d]iverse goddesses of fear and nightmares, who were worshipped with the blood of dissenters, worshipped in dreams. I saw the power of the Kingdom, how it manufactures reality, how it produces events which will become history, how it creates memory, and silence and forgetfulness, how it keeps its supporters perpetually young and vigorous, how it protects them, seals their lives with legality.
>
> (SoE 115)

The symptoms of the fantasies of coercive narratives of cultural nationalism and their underpinning creative methods are not only manifest in the imposition of "silence and forgetfulness" among the populace. Reactionary elements of the fantasies in art are, according to Jackson, those that work to limit what is knowable about the struggles for humans to be free. These fantasies insist on enforcing, maintaining and upholding the doctrine of trusting monologic narratives against the dialogical necessity to "keep looking at the world with new eyes" (SoE 23). The critical realism deployed in *Songs of Enchantment* is implicated in this, showing how a creative or theoretical frame can be spellbound, disabled and enchanted in ways that prevent it from suggesting polysemic signifiers that can pluralise human experiences and responses to that experience.

In *Songs of Enchantment*, the monopoly of ideological power and its concomitant discursive violence is not only a preserve of African patriarchal elites. In the novel, and at the centre of the political persecution of ordinary people, is Madame Koto who uses unorthodox methods to coerce people to join her party so as to enable her to acquire political power in ways that transform her into a ruthless living legend. Madame Koto's overbearing physical frame dwarfs and intimidates political opponents. She also bribes people to join her political party; she also "offered money" (SoE 43) to Azaro. The crude materialism that defines modern Nigeria is encapsulated in the wealth she commands and that has turned her into a human ogre. Azaro says: "Madame Koto offered me money – it turned to liquid in my hands. She offered me gold, which turned black, and thickened into wax, and flowed down my arms" (SoE 43). Madame Koto's crassness is further captured in the novel through the language that invokes the imagery of sickness, spiritual degeneration, disease and a chronology in moral decline. Of Madame Koto's physical body, Azaro says:

> She had grown so enormous that the large chair barely contained her bulk. She wore a deep blue lace blouse and volumes of lace wrappers. She had acquired gargantuan space. As the evening darkened, her presence increased. Power stank from the liquid and almost regal movements. Behind her, in a large golden cage, was a shimmering peacock.
>
> (SoE 57)

Besides intimations (SoE 70) that Madame Koto is a cultist who could have acquired wealth through witchcraft, the "gargantuan space" that she occupies is dramatically contrasted with the unbearable lives of poverty that ordinary people around her live. For example, through the agents of classical realism Okri offers an indictment on the fantasy and the myth of a successful cultural and political revolution in Nigeria. One passage describes the world of the poor as rife with violence, "famine, pullulating hunger, with beggars swarming the city centre, with maggots devouring the inhabitants, [and] with flies eating the eyeballs of the children who were half-dead with starvation ... " (SoE 89). The disregard for humanity is not only evinced through the index of the economic squalor among the poor in Nigeria. Physical violence is visited on political opponents by Nigerian leaders working in cahorts with the soldiers, and this creates and fans the notion of bounded citizenship that is based on political affiliation based on divisive and obscurantist ideologies of ethnic patronage. Ordinary men who refuse to concede to the lies hidden by discourses of national interests, collective destiny authorised in the nationalist narrative, are impaled on sticks; with some "men bound on stakes" (SoE 88), while "fierce soldiers" (SoE 88) "shot the men for what seemed like three generations" (SoE 89). Azaro rues that instead of ushering democracy in the country, the rule of the soldiers created, maintained and sustained intact a negative legacy of "coup after coup, till our history became an endless rosary necklace of them, of each bead an assassinated head of state, the secret numbers of failed coup-plotters, executed at dawn" (SoE 89). This endless litany of political miscarriage in the narrative of independence undercuts the images of modern Nigeria constructed out of the raw materials of the romance narrative that falsifies the soldiers' grip on power.

In his article "On the Power of the False" (2002), Achille Mbembe also describes the brittleness of the romantic narrative that undergirds elitist fantasies of political self-fulfilment peddled by African leaders. In *Songs of Enchantment*, negative politics have been shown as possessing some powers to cast a spell or enchant both the rulers and those who are ruled to a point where some sections of people from both classes begin to believe in the naturalness of their situations. The Party of the Rich killed people (SoE 68), spread "new terror" (SoE 71), burnt houses that belonged to political opponents. The Party of the Rich silenced perceived opponents by inducing hunger among the people, and the state presided over the successful execution of these faminogenic policies. Instead of urging people to fight back at their exploiters, the "Party of the Poor forbade anyone killing the white

antelopes" (SoE 79). During "general preparations for the forthcoming political rally" the Party of the Rich routinely sent vigilantes to harass people perceived to be opponents. As Azaro observes from his spiritual world, the political turmoil thrown into the lives of ordinary people like a lice-infested rag totally compromised whatever the claim to represent the people that the Party of the Rich people commanded for itself. Its narrative of violence caused the degeneration of Nigeria into

> [a]nother country, a place of spectral heavings, sighs, susurrant arguments as of a council of spirit elders, a place with fleeting visions of silver elephants and white antelopes, a place where elusive lions coughed – a bazaar of the dead.
>
> (SoE 68)

The mystique that the official narrative of cultural and political decolonisation that the Party of the Rich had created for itself is carnivalised in the descriptions of the country as a "bazaar of the dead". The fantasy of nationalism as a giver of positive identities is further deconstructed and undermined in Azaro's observations that postcolonial Nigeria is largely a failed romance story. The genocide or mass murder that is alluded to in the images of "twisting flesh of the innocent and the silent" convinces Azaro to view Nigeria's history as "a madman with a machine gun" (SoE 90). The explanation of Nigeria's misfortunes in the period after independence uttered by Ade in *The Famished Road* – that "ours is an *abiku country*" – is applicable also to the politically tattered images of Nigeria described in *Songs of Enchantment*. From Azaro's spiritual perspective, the failure of Nigeria to move out of or break the jinx of continued political troubles suggests that politically the nationalist fantasy of a secure future life for all in Nigeria has decomposed before it has been born. The descriptions of Nigeria as a deferred "dream of an unborn nation" (SoE 90) subverts the moral pretensions entertained in the official political narrative of political brinkmanship.

The fact that Nigeria is depicted as a "dream of a dying country that had not yet been born" suggests the political stillbirth that characterises Nigeria's failure to make a transition from being a state to a nation. A nation is a daily plebiscite where the ruled and the rulers find common ground and consent to follow certain forms of tried and tested democratic cultures to govern them. That this has failed to materialise in Nigeria is a severe indictment on the fantasy of nationalism and its undergirding classical realism modes of representing socio-political progress in the country. The failed fantasy alluded to here is the presumption shared by the soldiers and the leaders that they protect, which is that the wished-for desire to achieve a durable form of governance acceptable to the majority has collapsed. Coercion replaces consensual forms of political sociality. But unlike the fantasy of nationalism which is its longing to project itself as collective, the

realism of the fantastic of the official narration degenerates into baroque or grotesquery where political coercion and not mutual agreement dictates the governance of the country. In the words of Achille Mbembe, the fantasies of political control in the postcolony can often take tragic as well as comic dimensions at the same time. This happens when

> [a]n intimate tyranny links the rulers with the ruled. Just as obscenity is only another aspect of munificence, and vulgarity a normal condition of state power. If subjection appears more intense than it might be, this is because the subjects of the commandement have internalised authoritarian epistemology to the point where they reproduce themselves in all the minor circumstances of daily life – social networks, cults and secret societies, culinary practices, leisure activities, modes of consumption, style of dress, rhetorical devices, and the whole political economy of the body. The subjection is also more intense because were they to detach themselves from these lucid resources, the subjects would, as subjects, lose the possibility of multiplying their identities.
>
> (Mbembe 2001: 128)

The possibilities of co-opting the ordinary people into participating in debased forms of political sociality to secure patronage point to the total collapse of the spiritual resources necessary to revive the moral economy of the ruled. In *Songs of Enchantment*, it is intimated that authoritarianism has a negatively enchanting effect which, if it goes unchallenged, renders Nigeria the "dream of a dying country that has not yet been born, a nation born and dying from a lack of vision, too much greed, and corruption, not enough love, too many divisions" (SoE 91). Since it is in the interests of the Nigerian ruling elite to persuade those they rule that the world is ugly, the nationalist narrative can hold onto this fantasy of eternal power, which ironically as depicted in *Songs of Enchantment* inexorably undermines itself until the fantastic phantom of eternal control on people's minds begins to unhinge, subsequently resulting in the demise of the dream of a perpetual rule of the few over the many.

Fantastic Dreams of a "Boxer from the Land of the Dead": Azaro's Dad's Journeys into the Spirit World and the Poetics of Fracturing *Abiku* mythopoesis

The fantasy (unreal) of a narrative that imagines ruling people ad nauseam is not guaranteed in *Songs of Enchantment*. The very conditions of enslavement of the people by the military rulers and rowdy political parties provide fertile ground for the development and possible coalescence of ideas in favour of freeing the country from tyranny. In *Songs of Enchantment*, ordinary people can also be enchanted by the possibility of a life of freedom. Okri dramatises his conviction that nothing lasts forever, and that

the chains of history that tether ordinary Nigerians to a depressing life of poverty can in fact be broken. In the novel, the author uses the rhetorical narrative devices of the folk tale, dreamlore and the allegorical structure of parables in order to hint at the possibility of breaking the *abiku myth*. According to Kwame Anthony Appiah (1992b), unlike in *The Famished Road* where the *abiku* phenomenon is not entirely broken, in *Songs of Enchantment*, "[t]he narrative yokes the familiar and the miraculous in a language that is richly synaesthetic ... and in which the sinuous syntax repeatedly enfolds contradictions" (Appiah 1992b: 147). The stories of violence depicted in *Songs of Enchantment* can serve as cautionary tales, warning African countries of the ever-present possibilities of sliding into civil wars that can lead to the political fragmentation of the nation states. *Songs of Enchantment* also contains literary and cultural ingredients that can lend it to be read as a parable that informs people of the political sacrifices they have to go through in order to secure freedom for themselves.

This important dimension that constitutes the narrative of dream in the spirit world that structures *Songs of Enchantment* has not been sufficiently foregrounded in the appreciation of the novel. Enchantment, as it is used by Harry Garuba (2003), also tells of a fantastic desire to prepossess the future. Kamalu (2008) has linked the deconstructive principles in some versions of postcolonial theory to the fantastic aspects of dreams which place value on heterogeneity and hybridity. Commenting on Okri's novels, Fulford has also suggested that the "political" in fantastic art is the potential to generate unconventional readings of the novels in order to arrive at meanings that "surpass the frame" (2009: 235) of references in the signifiers used in magic realism and fantasy. Mahmutovic amplifies this point, underscoring the significance of the fantastic elements embedded in dreams when he further suggests that the materiality and symbolical instabilities inherent in the anti-structures within dream metaphors in *Songs of Enchantment* and *The Famished Road* "impl[y] an opening to doubt, the kind of positive uncertainty that undermines oppressive social structures" (2010: 2).

Okri's *Songs of Enchantment* fractures the communal narrative of identities that are upheld in nationalist mythopoesis, and through resistance narratives in dreams enacted in the spiritual world the novel recognises the possibility of elaborating gaps in the codes encouraged by this mode of literary representations in counter-narratives. Beyond bemoaning the violence brought onto Nigeria by successive illegitimate governments, the novel affirms life over death; this it does by deliberately undermining the critics' hardened interpretation of the *abiku myth* as signifying merely a dead end to African history. As noted elsewhere in the article, Azaro's story is a challenge to the Nigerian society to look beyond the "chaos" towards a "new sunlight" (SoE 3). Azaro's determination to free his spirit from the boundary of the physical human body is an assertive challenge to the Nigerian syndrome of an unproductive repetitive history of pillage. For

Azaro, this cyclic history can be broken. In the novel, Azaro defies his spirit companions from persuading him not to come back to earth. This courage in Azaro is testimony that even in the spirit world there are dislocations that can be projected onto the unstable political platform on earth. Ideological dislocations in the spirit world that arise from differences in authorised alternative versions intervening to save the mortals on earth take on a metaphysical dimension because they affect spiritual life and the pedestrian politics in Nigeria. Azaro says:

> THE SPIRIT-CHILD is an unwilling adventurer into chaos and sunlight, into the dreams of the living and the dead. But after Dad's last fight, after his dream, my adventures got deeper and stranger. My spirit companions were the invisible causes of this deepening. They persisted in trying to lure me back into their realm, but now they chose another method, a method more terrifying than any they had employed before. They chose to draw deeper into the horrors of existence as a way of forcing me to recoil from life. But they didn't count on the love that made me want to stay on this earth. They didn't count on my curiosity either.
>
> (SoE 4)

This passage requires the reader to suspend conventional beliefs and concede that it is indeed possible to live several lives at once. Azaro is aware of this existential fact when he remarks that there are "several lives resident" in him (SoE 30). Suspension of preconceived beliefs about narratives allows textualisation of the reader into the structures of the story. According to Jo Thiem (1995), textualisation of the listener to oral stories is a permanent feature of storytelling. It allows the reader or listener to be transported into the world of the text (1995: 235), and this immersion transposes the reader to a vicarious experience of the "state of being in two worlds at once, in the book and outside of the book" (p. 238), so that the novel's characters live in their imaginative world constructed by fiction.

If the written word is privileged over the oral, if classical realism is projected as the norm in literary criticism (Slemon 1995), in *Songs of Enchantment*, Azaro's boundless adventures into the spirit world de-territorise fiction and re-territorise creative narrative, in the process advancing the suggestion that if magical realism is thought of as a mode that "naturalises the supernatural" (Warner 2005: 2), then that fact alone, pointing to the transformation of the supernatural into the acceptable or natural, means that the supernatural is already constituted or constitutable as the real. Life in narrative is not merely a given out there to be confirmed as incontrovertible narrative but is a creation that does not admit that one version of experience has "greater claim to truth and referentiality" (p. 2).

Just as on earth human beings manipulate objects, views and values to suit their immediate aspirations, in the spirit world there are also struggles to manipulate and control signifiers of that space. Azaro's strong affinities to

both the spirit world and earth confirm versions of African cultures in which the dead are *not* dead; they are referred to as the "departed" who constantly interact with mortals, the living on earth, to whom they, as ancestors, remain justifiably linked. It is exactly the "horrors of existence" of those left behind or descendants of the departed that force the departed or those in the spirit world to want to intervene and prevent the total destruction of humanity. The concern of spirits in the spirit world over the mortals on earth also signals continued recognition and reverence accorded to ancestors. The reader of *Songs of Enchantment* must step into this African belief system in order to emerge with an understanding of the basis of a liberation ethic that justifies the fundamental revision of the *abiku myth/cycle*.

In *Songs of Enchantment*, if Madame Koto and her greedy kind had become the nemesis of ordinary people, what Azaro proposes is the invention of equally "awesome converging spirits" (SoE 40) who can take on or inspire people to challenge, engage and flatten the "colossus" and "demonic" power (SoE 36) reincarnated by Madame Koto and the Party of the Rich. Azaro's dad, "a famous boxer from the land of the dead" (SoE 27), renders it imaginable to represent the fantastic spirit world and the forests as spaces of ideological contest manifesting that the disorder and social dislocation on earth are also reflected in the struggle against evil spirits at the level of the incorporeal. Azaro recounts the confusion and yet the implied heroism of his father for daring to challenge the metaphorical evils in dreams inhabiting the spirit world. Dad's story is magnified and elevated to the epic fight between metaphysical good and evil:

> Dad lifted me on his back and bounded on through the pullulating darkness of the shadow worlds .... Dad ripped through the bushes like a madman, chanting curious incantations. The world went on changing and all kinds of lights kept appearing above the undergrowths. It was impossible to determine how long we had been running, or how far we had travelled. But after a while, it seemed as if Dad had been running in a straight line which paradoxically curved into an enchanted circle. We couldn't break out of the forest. It had become a labyrinth of secrets and dreams.
>
> (SoE 25)

This passage conflates the spirit world and the physical forest so that the imagined terrors of each reflect on the other. This gives the passage an aura of the fantastic that is accentuated by the clutches these two entities can exert on those who openly dare challenge it or those who unsuspectingly find themselves in this unstable space.

By fighting the evil in the spirit world, Azaro's dad confirms the power of the fantastic to enable one to achieve a sense of a threshold – registered in the descent into the destabilised spirit world imaged as an "enchanted circle" or forest with a "labyrinth of secrets and dreams" (SoE 25). The descent into the forest world induces in Azaro and Dad a temporary break in

consciousness, an isolation and immobility that epitomises spiritual dislocation and physical rupture from familiar environments. Initial failure to "break out of the forest" (SoE 25) depicts and confirms the spirit world as a space of confusion, cruelty, imprisonment and where action is simultaneously restricted and potentially expanded. According to Ato Quayson, the anxiety-generating forces of nature arise from the communal belief that "the bush is the antithesis of settled communities and is conceived of as the problematic 'Other' harbouring all sorts of supernatural forces" (1997: 46). The fairyland of the fantastic spirit world depicts liminal spaces where identities are inchoate if not perpetually rendered as in transition. On the one hand the forest just as its metaphysical correlate of the spirit world harbours immense spiritual potential to suggest life-giving ideological values for heroes such as Azaro and his dad with requisite skills and courage. The spirit world and forest are anti-structure and ambiguous to the extent that those who venture into these spaces can acquire identities of captive and fighter.

Azaro confirms the multiple identities that his father emerged with from the dreamscape where the fight with the evil spirits had taken place. "He came back a strange man [who] ... [told] stories about people who were dying and who went around helping others who were also dying and the mosquito said different things to the hero on the dawn of his transformation ... I never knew that Dad also had many people inside him" (SoE 49). The heroic element in Dad is celebrated and confirmed in the newly acquired multitudinous identities. His actions have been blessed with what Azaro believes are many "good spirits always on our side" (SoE 77). Here, *Songs of Enchantment* suggests that the fantastic is always ahead of life, and manifests as a quest. The fantastic in life and narrative renders it thinkable that life is changeable through human intervention, and also that the negative energies in the spirit world and the forest can be subdued for the benefit of the society.

The metaphysical transference of the trials and tribulations that Azaro and Dad met with in the forest of the dead reveals the internal crisis and fault lines in the life within the spirit world. Okri transposes and projects these crises onto the Nigerian political landscape in ways that offer a critique to nationalist politics. First, Dad's transformation facilitates his realisation of the necessity of helping other people for social good. At home Azaro's dad takes over the domestic chores from Azaro's mother. "Under the enchantment of Mum's mysterious return he made attempts at living an exemplary life. He went to work early, came back early, fetched water for everyone, washed all our clothes and cleaned the house. He even prepared food" (SoE 67). Dad's transformation enables him to invert the age-old gender roles in which cooking, washing clothes and cleaning the house are normally and unfairly associated with women. If this transformation in Dad appears as

something coming down from a fantastic world, it is precisely because the fantastic in art suggests the possibilities of subverting social roles.

In postcolonial Nigeria, the new identity Azaro's dad has acquired questions the patriarchal narratives that have tended to expect women such as Azaro's mum to confront domestic work as drudgery. In the wider community, Dad "took to clearing the accumulations of rubbish in our street .... He dug gutters, he helped to build wooden bridges over marshlands near us, he worked on building sites, he visited our poor relations and took them medicines and fruits during their illnesses ...." (SoE 49). The spiritual refurbishment that Dad has received from the confrontations with evil spirits requires him to take further responsibilities over mortals on earth and concern about the decaying nation. In the wider community of Nigerian unstable political imaginery, Azaro's dad denounced the political culture of corruption and rigging of "forthcoming elections [that appear] already been forewon" (SoE 120) before they took place. Possessed of a sense of political duty to Nigeria, Azaro's dad criticised the Party of the Rich for "terrorising people" (SoE 120), and also attacked the Party of the Poor for cowardice and vengefulness" (SoE 120). In *Songs of Enchantment*, Azaro's dad has been enchanted by the possibility of creating a better Nigerian society. In his "insurrectional Speech" (SoE 120), he invokes romantic pictures of ideal human existence in ways that illustrate the capacity of the genre of the fantastic to inseminate into human consciousness social ideals that oppose or subvert the culture of political impunity exercised by Madame Koto and her Party of the Rich. In Azaro's dad's new vision of a reconstructed society he attempts to prepossess a different future informed by an idealistic perspective which only the fantastic mode of representation can suggest and access:

> He burst into ranting about how in the country of which he would be the ruler people would take exercises every day. He would toughen the bones of the citizens and make their bodies supple. And rituals would be used for reasons that make us take life more seriously and more joyfully, instead of being corrupted into instruments of terror.
>
> (SoE 125)

In this Arcadian existence, Azaro's dad also dreamt of the "continents of our hidden possibilities, about the parts of us facing inwards in the direction of infinity, and about how we should bring those realms into our visible world and so create a kingdom of serenity and beauty on earth" (SoE 289). The power of the fantastic imagination is that it morally and politically proposes superior forms of existence contrasted to the ugly politics that induces "poverty everywhere, wickedness, greed, [and] injustice all over" (SoE 126), brought about as a result of unfit people described as "goats wanting to lead the country, cows running for elections, rats scheming to become governors" (SoE 126). The banality of power runs against the spirit

of the fantastic that emphasises innovation and creativity. Birer and Yacici might be adding to as well as complicating my interpretation of the vision of Azaro's dad of a glorious, romantic future portrayed as the self-reflective element inherent in the fantastic in art when they argue that fantastic fictions expand human conceptual frames and encourage "multiple perception options" (2011: 1100) in architecture as in the real processes of recreating society.

Folk Tale, and the Decentring of Postcolonial Elite Perspectives in Nigeria

In his evaluation of Okri's *The Faminshed Road*, Appiah suggests that Okri has made use of the oral resources from the Yoruba, Borno, and Igbo cultures. One of these cultural influences is constructed in the folk tale mode that is traced to the influences of the works of Amos Tutuola (Whittaker 2001). Rather than view the folk tale mode in African literature as merely reactive and resisting metropolitan paradigms (Chanady 1995), *Songs of Enchantment* embeds folk tale in ways that make it a "complete" and independent oral genre that can carry the realities of betrayal in postcolonial Nigeria. Folk tales can be aetiological, in which case they help to explain the origin of physical and social phenomena; but folk tales' propensity to defer meanings imposes demands on readers to exfoliate meanings from an interpretation of them that emphasises alternating contradictory meanings which sometimes suggest juxtaposing seemingly irreconcilable forces. In folk tales, setting is timeless, signifiers are arbitrary and this makes the potential messages become meaningful for all times (Vambe 2004). As verbally concretised narratives, folk tales can imaginatively be interpreted in different directions so as to frame contradictory realities (Vambe 2004) and this embeds power in them to mean different things to different people.

In *Songs of Enchantment*, the folk tale narrative suggests a moral compass of human behaviour that disavows narrative's certainties in favour of the unpredictable. The story told to Azaro by his dad of a generous man who helped everybody except himself, initially creates a frame in which metaphysical good is pitted against social evil. It is an ironic folk tale in which a "good man" (SoE 44) loses his son, his house burns down, he is wounded by a cow but tenaciously holds on to his faith in goodness, despite the fact that his detractor, Mosquito, has promised to restore him to life if he abandons his good ways. This story is ironic because it confirms evil as being more powerful than good; evil being more creative than good; evil being more triumphant than good. Amidst the material greed symbolised by Madame Koto, the story symbolises man's fall from grace, generosity and love the moment he succumbs to avarice. In *Songs of Enchantment*, some

ordinary people are enchanted and spellbound by the power Madame Koto exudes. The moral universe of the story attempts to map out what is patently absent in modern-day Nigeria. In the novel, the primal vision of collective identities and working for the common good that used to unite people has been replaced by suspicion and hatred amongst the people (SoE 68). On the larger political canvas, individuals are pitted against each other, and the community ethos that used to sustain the community is fractured. What rules in modern-day Nigeria are "[m]asquerades and political sorcerers [who] rode all the seasons of our future in advance, spreading terror and curfew, disease and the stench of charred earth ..." (SoE 139).

The moral of the story to Azaro is that good is not always repaid by good; that it is important to have a forgiving heart, but this is not enough in a world of violence spread by political matadors described in the novel as "Jackal-Headed Masqueraders ... with blazing eyes" (SoE 138-139). The fantastic subversion of the Nigerian postcolony is hinted at in this folk tale. The will to dominate that has become an obsession for the rich is depicted in the folk tale as supplanting the will to unfettered freedom and nurturing a culture that rejects the pervasive desire to dominate others. The folk tale indirectly evokes the need for the community to return to an assumed world of the past with stable values of the past, and this Arcadian projection into what Nigerian life can be is captured in the novel through references to the Original Way of

> [i]llustrious ancestors with caravans of wisdom, old souls who had been reborn many times in the magical depths of the continent, and who had lived the undiscovered secrets and mysteries of The African Way – The Way of compassion and fire and serenity: The Way of Freedom and power and imaginative life; The Way whose centre grows from divine love, whose roads are always open for messages from all the spheres to keep coming through ....
>
> (SoE 160)

This lyrical passage recalls Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*, in which the author also enjoins Africans to retrace their steps back towards the bygone age imaged as gentle, caring and loving. The romantic streak of the passage is not entirely negative in a novel whose main mission is to seek ways to transcend the political and moral decay brought by human greed in Nigeria. But Okri is also aware from his vast reading as an intellectual that there is no unified past and communal existence to which the poor can retreat from the assault by the rich. Therefore, there is implicit criticism of some African writers. This reveals how in the creative mind of Okri, the fantastic has also been deployed as art that criticises other art in Africa.

Azaro's own violent experiences with evil spirits when with Dad in the forest had already punctured the myth of a single African past for Africans who share common ancestors. Thus it can be argued here that the depiction

of the Original Way that the novel deliberately mentions is in fact a brilliant moment that stages a fantastic subversion of African literature. *Songs of Enchantment* ironises its quest to represent as undifferentiated African cultural values for Africans retrievable from the past and manifested as immutable. The fantastic dimension of *Songs of Enchantment* leaves no ideology to settle or to claim to have more referential power. In its emphasis on the need for Nigerians to recreate new moral economies that are self-dynamising, the story of the good man is also a cautionary tale. A greater evil such as that is captured in the guile and hypocrisy of political leaders who bribe, kill, torment but "weep for our poverty and vulnerability" (SoE 169) as cash mothers such as Madame Koto who survives from manipulating the "co-operation in crisis" (SoE) of the poor, need an equally robust counterforce. This paradox involved in how the novel is undermining what it seems to be projecting as desirable reveals the fantastic elements of the folk tale mode as involved not only in constructing a "story, but reflect [ing] on itself in the act of telling" (Brink 2007: 334). Since representing realities is an arbitrary process, the romantic and fantastic elements that inhabit the discursive interstices of the folk tale mode manifest an "exuberant subversion of a logocentric world" (p. 334) by deploying linguistic signifiers not necessarily through "representing [agonistic] experience through language, but with experiencing language through a destruction of representation" (p. 334).

In *Songs of Enchantment*, if Dad's folk tale to Azaro – of the folly of a good man – is meant to underline the importance of developing skills and critical consciousness to anticipate the ugly in life, or to "take what is good from our own way and adapt it to the new times" (SoE 172), Mum's story of the moral fable about the invention of death is a more macabre one, revealing that the fantastic subversion in narrative happens not only in contesting negative energies and ideologies. In her aetiological tale of the invention of death, Mum emphasises the spiritual zombification that afflicts people as a result of greed that has emptied all humanist content in them. The story reinforces the desire to retrieve some humane aspects that defined the past of the people. However, as with Dad's story of the good man, Mum's story is overtaken by politicians' "new desires and their ambitions" (SoE 75). The human disaster that caused humanity to suffer death is viewed in Mum's story as of humanity's own making because the competition to acquire material wealth forced "[c]orruption [to come] upon the people .... Diseases dwelled in them and Misery had many children amongst them. The world turned upside down. Creation became confusion" (SoE 75). In other words, if death had been sent by God as punishment to a people who had strayed from the road of regeneration, such a measure could not guarantee that sanity would be retained in the postcolony where politicians not only "broke [people] into tribes" (SoE 76) but also introduced "a

demonic spirit-child of the worst kind, the kind that had developed all its potential for malignity to the highest order" (SoE 146).

In Mum's fable of the invention of death, the self-destruction of the people of Nigeria is mirrored in the empty victory that death temporarily enjoys over humanity because God allows death to self-destruct when it finishes off humanity. In Mum's story the obvious moral is that if people find courage in themselves and keep it, they cannot die. If they lose it, they are death's meal (SoE 77). The personification of death that belies the figural tropes of the fantastic elements in Dad's folk tale of the good man and in Mum's fable of the invention and destruction of death therefore is embedded in ritualised intentions that prepare Azaro in his own dreams to confront the blind old man who is the epitome of the evil spirits.

The Fantastic Dimension in Azaro's Parable of African Liberation

The structural features of Azaro's agonistic experiences under the "grip" of the blind old man are patterned in such a way that they emphasise descent into the spirit- and dream worlds in which Azaro is tormented but comes out fortified by that experience. In the novel, not only has Azaro benefitted from experiencing first hand his father's confrontation with evil spirits, but Dad's triumph motivates him, and the cultural scaffolding provided by Dad and Mum's stories excite him to defy his spirit companions so that he would by himself create a narrative of resistance to the forces of darkness represented by the old man. In the novel, the blind old man transforms into different shapes, including the "army barracks that would be famed for coups and secret executions" (SoE 146), or the towering figure of Madame Koto described as grotesque because of her "massive heaving buttocks, tumescent palpitating breasts, steam-lust breath and an awesome desire that had survived the penetrations of dream sorcerers who had clambered up her spirit body and got locked inside, and who were released only when they surrendered all their powers" (SoE 141). The blind man's threats to Azaro are chilling: "You ugly spirit-Child! The next time I catch you in my dream, I will eat you" (SoE 88). But after being emboldened by Dad's fight in the land of the dead and spiritually fortified by moral extracts from the stories by Mum and Dad, Azaro's fight with the blind old man is described in epic terms: "I was on fire all over with the horror, and the more violently I tried to get away, the greater was the metallic grip on my wrist .... I was surprised to see a fervent mass of men and women tearing the blind old man's body apart, eating his entrails, gorging themselves on his divinatory head" (SoE 91). Azaro feels a temporary sense of heroism as he sees the old man disappear like a "dream of the unborn nation" (SoE 90). The experience of having fought the old man is raw but liberatory. In fiction that emphasises

the fantastic, the terrifying forces of evil are pitched against the weak mortals, and success is handed to the weaker part. However, in *Songs of Enchantment*, the old man tried to self-reincarnate by impregnating itself, suggesting that it possessed several sources of negative energies:

> 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 .... I noticed at the feet of the man-woman a bizarre birth, a birth within a birth .... The man-woman had delivered several babies who were joined at the hips. They were all different, they had few resemblances, their hues were dissimilar, and they were secretly antagonistic to one another. It was truly frightening this pullulation of babies with different voices, different dreams, similar ancestry, all jostling, all trapped within the same flesh, pulling in conflicting directions.
>
> (SoE 91)

This fantastic depiction of an "unborn nation", a "dying country" "trapped midway in transformations" (SoE 88), is an apt description of the ideological stillbirth within Nigerian nationalism. It is a portrayal that subverts any pretensions that in the postcolony people have common national interests. In the streets of Nigeria, the fantastic violence of the birthing of an evil spirit is captured in the image of the Party thugs that continued to "terrorise the people" (SoE 94). Azaro's deliverance from the memory clutches of the blind old man, and from the political mayhem of the two parties "that clashed in their endless wars of mythologies" happens in the spirit world of the dream. In this dream, Azaro saw the "whole community dreaming for his own dad (SoE 276).

> We willed him on within our dreams, praying for him to succeed in countering the negative gravity of our spaces, the bad smells of our days, the dreadful weight of our cowardice and powerlessness, to neutralise the spells and enchantments of powerful witches who had been done injustices all their lives and who took out their vengeance by sealing us within the poisoned cage of limitations and hunger.
>
> (SoE 276-277)

Although in the spirit world Azaro and his community of good spirits had defeated evil forces, an important part of his epic journey lay ahead and it involved helping people to destroy spiritual death that had been induced in them over many years of oppression. Azaro's dad observed that Africa's liberation would not be complete if people still had

> [c]orpses in their consciousness of all peoples, all histories and all individuals, dead things that need to be acknowledged and buried, dead habits, dead ways of seeing, dead ways of living, things that weigh us down

> and drag us towards death and prevent us from growing, choking out the sunlight.
>
> (SoE 289)

> From his epic journey emplotted as a fantastic adventure, Azaro subverts many certitudes. He proudly announces that from the "margins of my vision I saw open doorways with light interiors".
>
> (SoE 86)

To the extent that the fantastic is one previously marginalised genre in colonialist criticism, in *Songs of Enchantment*, the fantastic's subversive elements have been used to decentre the fantasies of classical realism's illusion or delusion that it is the only creative method that can represent the chaos within the postcolony in its contradictory ways. The fantastic subversion in *Songs of Enchantment* is further enhanced in Azaro's deliberate courage to defy his own spirit companions who were persuading him not to come back to earth with a mission of liberating its people from the clutches of evil spirits. Azaro's moments of triumph are couched in language that only the fantastic genre can allow:

> My spirit-companions had tried to scare me from life by making me more susceptible to the darker phases of things, and making reality appear more monstrous and grotesque. But so far, they had failed. And they had failed because they had forgotten that for the living life is a story and a song, but for the dead life is a dream. I had been living the story, the song and the dream.
>
> (SoE 293)

It is a dream that allows humanity to fantasise and imagine the possibilities of some worlds beyond oppressive worlds. And Azaro has the final word that captures the fantastic element that seems to be always ahead of life when he suggests the possibility of taking alternative roads to human development. But the subversive nature of the fantastic is also that it refuses to reinterpret the world with a mind that produces images of a future sealed with closure from a position of certainty. Azaro partialises his language that anticipates a better future for Nigeria, through not only breaking the *abiku circle* in his own agonistic adventures in the land of the spirits and of humans, but also by imploring the textualised reader to train him-/herself to look at the "world with new ways" (SoE 23) to see the world. The hallmark of the fantastic in *Songs of Enchantment* has been to push the boundaries of imagining the possibilities of new life under enervating conditions. The subversive element of the fantastic inheres in the conscious endeavour to displace unitary ways of seeing and representing reality. This is where the power of *Songs of Enchantment* as a subversive fantastic narrative resides.

Conclusion

The aim of this article is to critically foreground the elements of the fantastic genre used in *Songs of Enchantment*. Classical realism, dreamlore, the folk tale mode and the parable are distinct forms through which the fantastic representations of realities of oppression and liberation are refracted. The article deliberately emphasises the fantastic element in the novel because the destabilising aspects of this genre suggest no single solution can conquer the complex problems in society. Okri's *Songs of Enchantment* reveals that the fantastic elements can provoke a reading of the novel in multiple ways. Fantastic elements re-territorialise the spaces of cultural narratives that had previously been monopolised by classical realism that is privileged in criticism of literature. The novel may contain elements of magic realism as critics have suggested, but this is deliberately underplayed. The term magic realism would not have been appropriate in describing the creative methods used in *Songs of Enchantment*. As an oxymoron, magic realism would have reinstalled a binary in which a reading of *Songs of Enchantment* would have been dismissed as margin, thus associating African literature with magic and Western rationality with realism and the scientific world of Western rationality. The protocols of representing in fantastic art are realist to the extent that the fantastic can handle contradictory situations, views, and realities while at the same time interrogating its own ways that attempt to formulate in images new life during and not after the processing of telling the story. Fantastic art such as *Songs of Enchantment* transgresses boundaries and it is this quality that makes it best suited to providing multifaceted images of life. This interpretation of *Songs of Enchantment* largely echoes Dipesh Chakrabarty's search of art that can capture "another moment of subaltern history, one in which we stay permanently, not simply as a matter of political tactic – with that which is fragmentary and episodic. Fragmentary not in the sense of fragments that challenge, not only the idea of wholeness, but the very idea of the fragment itself" (2002: 34-35).

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