

**PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA IN THE FAMISHED ROAD BY BEN OKRI****S. Jesintha Rosalynd<sup>1</sup>, Dr. C. Shola Fernando<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Ph.D Scholar (Full Time), Register Number: 22122024012010, Aditanar College of Arts and Science Tiruchendur, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, India.

<sup>2</sup>Research Supervisor, Assistant Professor of English, Aditanar College of Arts and Science Tiruchendur – 628216, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, India.

**ABSTRACT**

This paper, “Psychological Trauma in The Famished Road by Ben Okri” explores the psychological sufferings experienced by the protagonist, Azaro. Ben Okri presents his hero as an abiku who believes that the spirit child is a part of Yoruba culture. This kind of tribal faith connects the Nigerian people to the novel which helps them to realize their hardships of life. Azaro’s road of life is filled with unavoidable spirits and the inevitable reality. His abikuness presses him all the way down in every aspect. Belongingness and identity are the constant fear of the abiku child. Through a critical analysis of “The Famished Road”, this research paper tries to highlight how Azaro’s experiences of abandonment, rejection and oscillation contribute to his psychological trauma.

**Key words:** Psychological trauma, abiku, rejection, abandonment, fear, spirit world and real world.

Psychological trauma is a condition where the person experiences anxiety or stress over an event. It can be felt directly or indirectly. It creates a serious impact on the individual and the people around him. Traumatic events can affect anyone and the impact may vary, depending on factors like severity of the event, resilience of the individual and the support system. In The Famished Road, Azaro is born as a spirit- child. The spirit children are referred to as an abiku. Azaro experiences psychological trauma being an abiku in the novel, which makes him experience the poverty and violence. This contributes to his psychological struggles.

Ben Okri, one of the most celebrated authors of Africa, was born in Nigeria in 1959. His works are a testament to power of narration exploring human condition. His Booker Prize winning novel, The Famished Road (1991) presented him an international recognition. His novels such as Songs of Enchantment (1993) and Infinite Riches (1993) continue to navigate the complexities of culture and history while connecting them with human experience. His writing is a powerful element, a reminder of the transformative power of language and the human spirit. He creates Azaro as an abiku to highlight the critical condition of Nigeria. His characterization is perfect, which clearly depicts the psychological trauma of Azaro.

According to Maurice, “Azaro is a spirit child who populates both the realm of the living and the dead, and it is through his consciousness that the narrative structure is organized” (69). The

trauma can be witnessed in many aspects. Being an abiku, he goes through the river which is the gateway to the spirit world. He is always on a journey where he is unable to create his own path. The trauma is experienced by Azaro when he is destined to visualize and live the chaos and the hardships of the real world and the spirit world. He knows the life in the spirit world where the spirits wait for the next life. They come to life as birds, animals or even the children of the poor. Their destination is always hidden and Azaro shares his life and the struggles in the spirit world, where he is unable to escape from the reality of being a spirit child.

There was not one amongst us who looked forward to being born. We disliked the rigours of existence, the unfulfilled longings, the enshrined injustices of the world, the labyrinths of love, the ignorance of parents, the fact of dying, and the amazing indifference of the Living in the midst of the simple beauties of the universe. We feared the heartlessness of human beings, all of whom are born blind, few of whom ever learn to see. (FR 3)

Azaro experiences trauma over his cycle of birth and death. As a spirit-child, facing death is inevitable. He is a young boy who is too young to understand and experience death. But Azaro faces birth and death because of his abiku nature. John states, in his research paper, “Azaro, the central character, is introduced as a spirit child/ abiku, who, according the African tradition exists between life and death” (380). Ben Okri assures his faith in Yoruba belief by making his protagonist as an abiku. He makes his hero switch in between the two worlds and portrays the inability of Azaro to stay in his preferred world. He wanders without any linear path. He faces the harsh reality of poverty in the real world which is inevitable and unchangeable in the current politics of Nigeria. Niyi says, “Azaro wanders through multiple worlds, he is also firmly anchored in a physical, material worlds; in which the harsh ephemeral of the daily life of the poor has a very strong impact” (210).

Azaro's poor family couldn't afford for his coffin and burial. The family suffers to meet the essential needs but the single child keeps coming and going which haunts the family physically and mentally. “Neither Mum nor Dad could afford another ceremony. And anyway they did not really want to believe that I was a spirit-child (FR 9)”. Azaro suffers physically and emotionally by facing death multiple times. He feels his spirit going out of his body and also feels his spirit coming inside his body and wakes up like waking from a dream. It is really hard to face the struggles of the world and face the fear of death. Azaro dies and comes back to life which is a burden that a poor boy cannot carry himself throughout his life. It paves the way for anxiety, which shatters joy and peace in the heart of the small child. Ernest in his research paper, states that, “Life and death are perennial burdens of all human being irrespective of race and religion” (2).

The parents meet a near death when their children go missing in a crowd. Azaro is beaten by his father, if he goes missing. This happens only because he is an abiku. He is unable to stop his wanderings. Whether in spirit or in body, he goes somewhere leaving the poor parents in chaos. Even though he receives love from his mother, his father behaves brutally due to his death. This

leaves an emotional scar on Azaro. His father's beating is also a kind of proving his love and care for his son. But the poor child cannot comprehend such complex thing at a small age. There is no stable shelter for him which his trauma is deeply rooted. This creates a sense of instability and fear. According to a research paper, written by Shahaji, "His companions do not allow him to live a comfortable life. Although he is fed up with all the hardships of the spirit world companions, he determined to face them in order to obtain the love of his family members" (140).

Azaro constantly runs away from his own reality. He is a spirit child who has predestined to death but wishes to live for the sake of his family. He tries hard to be in the real world where he wants to find the meaning of his life, enjoy the love of his family and face the struggles of the real world. He too shares in the novel how his abikuness is a barrier for his life in the real world. He shares that,

Apart from a mark on my palm I had managed to avoid being discovered. 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 life to come. (FR 5)

Azaro is bullied by the spirits as he is an abiku who is oscillating between the two worlds. He is tortured by the spirits everywhere. Mahdi, in a research paper, states that "Azaro is harassed and haunted by emissaries from the world of the spirit who, as forewarned, are sent to abduct him back" (1). He finds spirits in the streets, marketplace, forest and even in his home. There is an incident in the novel where Azaro is haunted by the spirit of an old man and his mother comes to his rescue. Here, the spirit child is accused for breaking a window but the window is actually broken by the spirits. But Azaro's father comes to his aid and offers to grant money for the broken window. This is just an additional burden where the spirits come to torture and show their mischievous activities and make Azaro to gain the harvest of it.

'Come here, you abiku child, you stubborn spirit-child. You think you are powerful,eh? I am more powerful than you,' the old man said, in a resonant, young man's voice.

'Leave my son alone,' Mum said before letting out a deafening high-pitched shriek.

The old man stopped in his tracks.

'We pay for the window,' Dad said, in a voice of conciliation. (FR 321)

Being an abiku, Azaro is abandoned and rejected by the society. The other children play happily in the ground, whereas Azaro is treated differently. He is constantly pulled back to the spirit world by his spirit companions. He oscillates between the spirit world and the real world. This experience fills him with fear and anxiety. He sees different kinds of spirits arriving in different shapes and colours. As Douglas mentions in his research paper, "Azaro has been roaming the street overnight after having escaped from the albino twins" (27). This is really a haunting experience and he is unable to comprehend which is real and which is dream. His dreams are

always terrific and haunting. He has no real friends in the novel. His only friend is a spirit child who struggles differently and he helps Azaro at times.

‘Who’s your friend?’ she asked, blinking.

‘Ade,’ I said.

She gave him a curious intense scrutiny. Ade said he was going home. He wandered off and waited a short distance away, watching us furtively. (FR 370)

He finds demons and spirits in his dreams. He is unable to define where the spirits come to haunt him and drag him to the spirit world. He finds himself in the forest and finds his way back home. Being an abiku, he goes missing from his body too. In the novel, he roams in the forest and in the trees, he sees evil spirits who want him to be with them and sometimes he runs out of the forest without even knowing the way.

There was music everywhere, and dancing and celebration rose from the earth. And then birds with bright yellow and blue feathers, eyes that were like diamonds, and with ugly scavenging face, flew at me kept pecking at the mask. I took it off and the world turned and the trees seemed to be falling on me and it took a while before things came back to normal. I held on to the mask and went on hobbling, looking for a way out of the forest. (FR 245)

Azaro witnesses violence and chaos that surrounds him, including the political dilemma. He learns the harsh reality of the society in his spirit by visualizing the diseases, disaster created by the rally, threatening of the thugs and the actions of the corrupted authorities. This is more for a small child to digest. His dreams are filled with reality and politics where he visions serious discussions. He faces all these violence and chaos mentally. This makes a profound impact on his mental confusion and disorientation. Dhruti says that, “The author has chosen Azaro, the spirit child as a narrator who shows the constant changing political scene of Nigeria” (42). Madame Koto who runs the bar has spirits coming in and going out. She holds Azaro in her bar without sending him to school that he would bring more customers as he is a spirit child. She thinks he is a lucky boy who attracts more spirits. This incident also contributes to his trauma where he is used by others due to his abiku nature. He is watched and followed everywhere by the spirits. He always hears their voices in the air which means he is always surrounded by the spirits where there is no peace and place for him in the real world.

The spirits were all over the place. They gave every tree a voice. I saw a rusted machete on the ground and picked it up. The man with the bloated eye pounced on me and I smashed his arm with the machete and he did not utter a sound, nor did he bleed. I dug the fetish into his bad eye and he let me go, blinded by Madame Koto’s powers. I ran on till I was lost. I was not sure any more why I was running. I stopped. I wandered amongst the silent, listening trees. I no longer heard the footsteps of the spirits. But from afar I could still hear them calling my name. Their voices were feeble on the wind. (FR138)

Azaro's abiku nature and his experiences in the spiritual realm make him feel disconnected from the real world which questions his belonging and identity. His oscillation, dreams and visions and torturing spirits add burden to him emotionally. Azaro's family's poverty, hunger, violence and political unrest contribute to his psychological distress. His trauma stems from the conflict of his dual existence, the burden of his abiku nature and the impact it brings to Azaro. It serves as a powerful testament to his capacity of resilience and transformation. He overcomes his trauma with the strong will and the support of his family. Okri stresses the importance of will and family support in overcoming his trauma and reclaiming one's purpose and identity in the society.

### Works Cited

Akingbe, Niyi. "On The Threshold of Moral Crisis: Poetics of Good and Bad Characters in The Famished Road" A Journal of Contemporary Research, ISSN 1813-2227, vol. 7, no. 2, 2010, pp.206-220.

Dhanaji Dethe, Shahaji and Dr. A. M. Sarawade. "Linking the spirit and Living World: The Development of Abiku Myth in Okri's The Famished Road". New Academia, 2018, pp.140. DOI:<http://interactionsforum.com/new-academia>

Ernest, Oko Eze. "Postcolonial Realities in Ben Okri's the Famished Road and Songs of Enchantment." IJSELL, vol. 8, no. 2, Feb 2020, pp. 1-7. ARC Journals, [dx.doi.org/10.20431/2347-3134.0802001](https://doi.org/10.20431/2347-3134.0802001)

Kuriakose, John. "Magical Realism in Ben Okri's Novel The Famished Road." Albaha University Journal of Human Sciences, no. 26, Mar 2021, pp. 377-389.

McCabe, Douglas. "New Age Spirituality, Abiku and Hunger in The Famished Road". Commonwealth Essays and Studies, 2013, pp.21-31. DOI:<https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.5324>

Okri, Ben. The Famished Road. A Vintage Book, 1992

O'Connor, Maurice. The Writings of Ben Okri Transcending the Local and the National. Prestige Books, 2008

Raval, Dhruti. "Interpreting Post colonialism in Ben Okri's The Famished Road" The Creative Launcher, vol. 4, no. 3, Aug 2019, pp. 40-45. Perception Publishing, DOI:10.53032/tcl.2019.4.3.05

Teimouri, Mahdi. "Time and Vision in Ben Okri's The Famished Road." SSRN Electronic Journal, vol. 26, no. 2, Dec 2011, pp.1-14. Research gate, DOI:10.2139/ssrn.2055819