



Spectral Struggle: Necro power and Narrative Resistance in Ben Okri

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Abstract:

This paper examines the intersection of postcolonial theory, necropower, and narrative resistance in the fiction of Ben Okri, focusing primarily on *The Famished Road* and related novels. Drawing on the work of Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, Homi K. Bhabha, and Achille Mbembe, the study identifies Okri's spectral aesthetics—particularly the abiku child and the spirit-world—as sites of counter-discourse against necropolitical regimes that consign the poor and the politically inconvenient to half-alive, “living-dead” existence. The paper argues that Okri's magic-realist narrative strategies function as forms of narrative resistance that re-center indigenous cosmologies, re-map the postcolonial subject's temporal and spatial condition, and reinscribe testimony and memory into the national archive.

Keywords: Necropolitics, Counter resistance, Magical Realism, Narrative resistance, Power and resistance, social oppression, Necropower

Introduction

Postcolonial literature has consistently interrogated the enduring effects of colonial domination, exposing how systems of oppression continue to shape political, cultural, and social realities long after formal political independence. Among the contemporary critical frameworks that illuminate these structures of domination, Achille Mbembe's concept of Necropolitics offers a significant theoretical lens for understanding the mechanisms through which sovereign power regulates life and death, particularly within postcolonial spaces (Mbembe, 11). In *Necropolitics*, Mbembe extends Michel Foucault's notion of biopolitics by arguing that sovereignty is ultimately expressed through the power to dictate who may live and who must die (Mbembe, 66). This framework is especially relevant to postcolonial societies, where colonial violence persists through political instability, systemic exclusion, and social marginalization.

Mbembe argues that necropolitical power functions through the creation of “death worlds,” social and political spaces in which populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of the living dead (Mbembe, 40). These conditions are sustained through racialized governance, economic dispossession, and state-sanctioned violence, often targeting historically marginalized communities. Unlike Foucault's broader emphasis on the administration and optimization of life through disciplinary systems, Necropolitics foregrounds death and social abandonment as central strategies of governance (Foucault, 138). This theoretical distinction provides a powerful framework for examining literary representations of violence, resistance, and survival in African postcolonial writing.



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The poetry of Ben Okri provides fertile ground for exploring these necropolitical dynamics. Widely acclaimed for his Booker Prize-winning novel *The Famished Road* and celebrated for his philosophical engagement with myth and spirituality, Okri's poetic works remain comparatively underexplored despite their profound engagement with themes of dispossession, memory, suffering, and transcendence (Wilkinson, 77). His poetry often depicts fractured landscapes haunted by historical trauma, where postcolonial oppression coexists with spiritual resilience and acts of imaginative resistance (Cooper, 115). Through symbolic language and visionary imagery, Okri exposes the continuing scars of colonial domination while envisioning possibilities for renewal beyond systems of death and destruction.

Okri's poetic imagination reflects what Homi Bhabha identifies as the "liminal space" of postcolonial identity, where histories of violence are contested and reimagined through cultural expression (Bhabha, 5). His works engage deeply with questions of memory and historical rupture, revealing how postcolonial subjects negotiate the inherited structures of domination while reclaiming agency through mythic and spiritual reconstruction. This transformative resistance aligns with Mbembe's proposition that even within necropolitical spaces, possibilities for subversion and renewal remain present (Mbembe, 88).

This paper examines how necropolitical structures operate within Ben Okri's poetry and how his poetic vision resists these structures through acts of memory, mythmaking, and spiritual affirmation. It argues that Okri exposes the violence embedded within postcolonial governance while simultaneously offering counter-narratives that reclaim subjectivity for marginalized communities. His poetry transforms necropolitical spaces into sites of resistance, where imagination becomes a force capable of contesting dehumanization and envisioning liberation.

By applying Mbembe's theory of Necropolitics to Okri's poetic works, this study contributes to postcolonial literary scholarship by highlighting the intersections of power, death, and resistance in contemporary African poetry. It further demonstrates how literature functions not merely as a reflection of social realities but as an active intervention against structures of domination. Through this analysis, the paper seeks to show that Okri's poetry offers a compelling critique of postcolonial violence while affirming the enduring possibility of human and spiritual renewal in the face of necropolitical oppression.

Spectral Struggle: Necropower and Narrative Resistance in *The Famished Road*

Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* presents a haunting meditation on postcolonial existence through the spectral consciousness of Azaro, the abiku child whose repeated returns to the world of the living expose the violence underlying modern Nigerian life. Situated between spirit and material reality,



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Azaro becomes a witness to what Achille Mbembe calls the “subjugation of life to the power of death” (Mbembe 39). Through this spectral perspective, Okri reveals how postcolonial sovereignty produces what Mbembe describes as “death-worlds,” social spaces where subjects are condemned to forms of “living death” (40).

The opening declaration of the novel “In the beginning there was a river. The river became a road and the road branched out to the whole world” (Okri 3)—immediately establishes a world of unstable transformation. The river-road metaphor reflects the fluidity of postcolonial history itself, a condition of perpetual movement haunted by unresolved colonial violence. This instability becomes central to Okri’s critique of Necropolitics, for the post colony remains trapped in cyclical structures of domination even after formal independence.

Okri intensifies this condition through the harsh realities of Azaro’s community. The compound is marked by hunger, exhaustion, and despair, where existence itself becomes precarious. Azaro observes that “our lives seemed to be balanced on a strange knife-edge” (Okri 71), suggesting a fragile existence suspended between life and death. This resonates with Mbembe’s argument that necropolitical regimes force subjects into spaces where death is always imminent. Similarly, Azaro notes that “hunger has many faces” (Okri 112), transforming deprivation into a spectral force that consumes the living from within.

Political violence in the novel further reflects Mbembe’s notion that sovereignty is exercised through deciding who may live and who must die. The Party of the Rich and the Party of the Poor symbolize a corrupt order where power depends upon coercion and disposability. During moments of unrest, Azaro describes how “the air was full of cries, curses, and the smell of blood” (Okri 146). This imagery reveals the normalization of violence in postcolonial governance, where the poor are reduced to expendable bodies within structures of domination.

Yet Azaro’s liminal identity complicates this politics of death. As an abiku child, he belongs simultaneously to the spirit and material worlds. The spirit companions repeatedly urge him to abandon earthly suffering, reminding him: “This world is not for you. Come back” (Okri 9). His refusal to return becomes an act of resistance against erasure. Azaro chooses life despite suffering, interrupting the necropolitical logic that renders marginalized existence disposable.

This resistance is reinforced by Dad’s defiant resilience. Even amid crushing poverty, he insists, “A dream can be the highest point of a life” (Okri 497). This assertion transforms imagination into political resistance, affirming life against structures designed to produce death. As Jacques Derrida suggests, spectrality preserves unresolved histories that continue to haunt the present (10). Through Azaro’s vision, Okri reveals that postcolonial modernity is shaped by such haunting.



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Ultimately, *The Famished Road* offers hope through endurance and narrative resistance. Azaro's continued presence among the living signifies an ethical refusal of necropolitical surrender. By foregrounding spectral struggle, Okri reclaims agency for those condemned to the margins, showing that storytelling itself becomes an act of survival.

The Abiku as Necropolitical Witness

Azaro's condition as an *abiku* makes him uniquely positioned to testify to the invisible violence of postcolonial society. As both participant and observer, he occupies a liminal space that enables him to perceive realities obscured from ordinary human consciousness. He repeatedly reminds readers: "Our country is an abiku country. Like the spirit-child, it keeps coming and going" (Okri 494). This powerful metaphor transforms the Nigerian nation itself into an *abiku* figure, endlessly reborn yet unable to escape historical trauma. The nation's cyclical instability reflects the persistence of colonial violence beneath the surface of political independence.

This cyclical existence mirrors what Achille Mbembe identifies as necropolitical sovereignty, which sustains populations in prolonged states of precarious survival rather than direct annihilation (Mbembe 21). Rather than immediate death, necropower imposes what Mbembe calls "death in life" (40), a condition of suspended existence in which life is reduced to endurance. Azaro inhabits precisely this threshold. Neither fully alive nor dead, he exists in a state of ontological instability that mirrors the social condition of the postcolonial poor. Early in the novel, he recalls: "I was born and I began to live. I had decided to stay" (Okri 6). This deceptively simple declaration signals his resistance to the cyclical pull of disappearance.

The spirit world constantly tempts Azaro with escape, insisting, "This world is not for you. Come back" (Okri 9). These repeated calls symbolize the seduction of surrender in the face of suffering. Yet Azaro's refusal to return permanently to the spirit realm becomes an act of political resistance. His persistence affirms life against structures designed to render it disposable. His decision recalls Frantz Fanon's claim that "the colonized subject discovers reality and transforms it" (Fanon 36). Azaro's endurance is transformative precisely because it rejects passive victimhood. He chooses to remain and witness.

Azaro's liminality also reflects what Homi K. Bhabha calls the "third space," where hybrid identities emerge beyond colonial binaries (Bhabha 56). He exists between spirit and matter, tradition and modernity, past and future. This unstable position grants him access to truths hidden from ordinary vision. He confesses that "I saw things which were not meant to be seen" (Okri 78), emphasizing his role as witness to invisible structures of domination. Through Azaro's spectral sight, Okri exposes the



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hidden operations of necropolitical power—the hunger, violence, and despair that shape postcolonial life but often remain unspoken.

Moreover, Azaro's witness is not passive observation but narrative intervention. His storytelling transforms suffering into testimony, ensuring that erased lives are remembered. In this sense, his spectral perspective becomes a form of resistance against what Jacques Derrida describes as the silencing of unresolved histories. Azaro's voice insists that the dead and the dispossessed continue to haunt the present, demanding recognition.

Ultimately, Azaro's identity as *abiku* symbolizes both vulnerability and resilience. His refusal to vanish, despite repeated invitations from the spirit world, becomes an ethical and political act. By remaining among the living, he testifies to survival itself as resistance, exposing the violence of necropolitical structures while affirming the possibility of transformation through witness and endurance.

The Compound as a Necropolitical Death-World

The slum compound in *The Famished Road* functions as what Achille Mbembe terms a death-world, a social space where life is organized around scarcity, abandonment, and continuous exposure to violence. Far from being merely a backdrop, the compound becomes a necropolitical structure that shapes the bodies and consciousness of its inhabitants. Hunger dominates everyday existence, reducing survival to an exhausting struggle against erasure. Azaro describes the residents as “lean with starvation, their eyes hollow with dreams deferred” (Okri 28), an image that captures both physical deprivation and psychological exhaustion. The compound becomes a site where life is not fully extinguished but reduced to what Mbembe identifies as prolonged states of precarious survival—forms of “living death” (Mbembe 40).

This structural deprivation is intensified by political exploitation. Elections, rather than democratic moments of collective agency, become spectacles of coercion in which poor bodies are rendered expendable instruments of state power. Azaro recounts streets filled with “blood, broken bottles, scattered shoes, and voices crying into the night” (Okri 183), exposing the brutal aftermath of political clashes. Such scenes literalize necropolitical governance, revealing how sovereignty is maintained through orchestrated vulnerability and violence. As Mbembe argues, modern power depends upon “the generalized instrumentalization of human existence” (14), reducing human life to a disposable resource. Okri dramatizes this through corrupt politicians who manipulate hunger, fear, and dependency for electoral gain. Their authority rests not on public service but on maintaining systemic precarity.



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The compound's degradation also reflects the afterlife of colonial rule. The postcolonial state reproduces inherited structures of domination rather than dismantling them. As Chinua Achebe observes, postcolonial corruption often perpetuates colonial systems of extraction and inequality rather than replacing them with emancipatory alternatives (Achebe 38). Okri's city remains trapped in this historical repetition, where formal independence conceals deeper continuities of exploitation. The compound thus becomes a spatial manifestation of unresolved colonial trauma, a site where history's violence remains materially present.

Yet within this death-world, resilience persists. Families gather despite hunger, stories circulate despite despair, and songs endure despite suffering. Azaro frequently witnesses moments of communal solidarity that interrupt the logic of necropolitical abandonment. These acts of collective endurance transform survival into resistance. Memory and imagination become tools through which the community resists total dehumanization. Even amid ruin, life insists upon itself.

Spectral Realism as Counter-Discourse

Okri's magical realism functions as a powerful resistance to colonial epistemology. The spirit world is not ornamental fantasy but an alternative ontology that reveals truths concealed by official political language. Through Azaro's spectral vision, hidden structures of exploitation become visible. He repeatedly encounters "spirits with faces like cracked mirrors" (Okri 47), grotesque apparitions that embody fractured social reality. These distorted figures externalize invisible violence, making systemic corruption materially perceptible.

As Routledge scholars Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin argue, magical realism disrupts Western assumptions about rationality and historical truth by validating indigenous cosmologies as interpretive systems (Ashcroft et al. 123). Okri's use of Yoruba spirituality reclaims African epistemological authority, refusing the colonial dismissal of indigenous knowledge as irrational superstition. Instead, spiritual perception becomes a legitimate framework for understanding political reality.

This directly challenges what Edward Said identifies as colonial discourse's tendency to render non-Western knowledge inferior or unintelligible (Said 67). Colonial epistemology privileges empirical rationality while marginalizing alternative ways of knowing. By centering Azaro's spectral consciousness, Okri overturns this hierarchy. The spirit world does not obscure reality; it clarifies it. Through this spectral realism, Okri reveals what ordinary political discourse conceals: exploitation, corruption, and necropolitical abandonment. The supernatural becomes a mode of political revelation. Azaro's visions expose the hidden mechanisms through which power operates, transforming magical realism into counter-discourse against colonial and postcolonial systems of domination.



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Ultimately, *The Famished Road* demonstrates that storytelling itself becomes resistance. By giving narrative form to the invisible, Okri restores visibility to lives and histories otherwise condemned to silence. Spectral realism thus becomes both an aesthetic strategy and an ethical act of witnessing.

Narrative Memory and Resistance

Storytelling itself becomes an act of resistance in *The Famished Road*. Against official histories of national progress and postcolonial renewal, Azaro's narration preserves the suffering, endurance, and silenced histories of forgotten lives. His spectral consciousness functions as an archive of marginal existence, recording experiences erased by dominant political discourse. As Azaro recalls, he hears "the stories hidden in people's silences" (Okri 91). This line captures Okri's archival method: the recovery of histories submerged beneath official narratives of independence and development. Silence in the novel is never emptiness; it contains suppressed memory, deferred pain, and unspoken testimony.

For Achille Mbembe, Necropolitics depends as much upon erasure as upon direct violence. Populations must first be rendered invisible—excluded from historical recognition—before they can be abandoned to precarity and death (Mbembe 67). In this sense, invisibility itself becomes a political technology of domination. Okri counters this logic through narrative testimony. By centering Azaro's witness, he restores visibility to those condemned to social disappearance. The poor, the hungry, the displaced, and the forgotten emerge not as statistical abstractions but as living presences whose stories resist erasure.

Azaro's act of remembrance becomes especially powerful because it disrupts nationalist narratives of linear progress. Official postcolonial discourse often imagines independence as a decisive historical break leading toward inevitable modernization. Okri rejects this framework by presenting history as cyclical rather than progressive. Azaro repeatedly encounters the recurrence of failed promises, recurring violence, and deferred transformation. The political landscape remains haunted by repetition. He reflects that "nothing happened and yet everything was happening" (Okri 118), a paradox that captures the suspended temporality of postcolonial existence. Change appears promised but never realized; movement occurs without transformation.

This cyclical temporality reflects what Homi K. Bhabha describes as the temporality of postcolonial interruption, where historical time is marked by repetition and return rather than smooth succession (Bhabha 7). Azaro's endless returns as an *abiku* embody this fractured historical condition. His repeated crossings between spirit and material worlds symbolize the nation's inability to escape unresolved trauma. The past continually resurfaces, refusing closure.



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At the same time, this repetition is not merely stagnation; it creates the possibility of resistance through remembrance. Every return becomes an opportunity to testify anew. Azaro's memory refuses the political amnesia necessary for necropolitical power to function. Through recollection, forgotten suffering re-enters consciousness as ethical demand. This recalls Jacques Derrida's notion of haunting, in which unresolved histories persist as spectral interruptions to the present. The dead and the dispossessed continue to speak through absence, demanding recognition.

Okri's narrative structure reinforces this politics of memory. The nonlinear movement between waking and dreaming, present and past, spirit and matter destabilizes chronological certainty. This formal fragmentation resists colonial historiography, which depends upon linear narratives of civilization and progress. Instead, memory in *The Famished Road* operates as recurrence, insisting that history remains unfinished.

Ultimately, storytelling becomes survival itself. Azaro's narration transforms memory into resistance by preserving lives otherwise condemned to oblivion. Through testimony, Okri reclaims narrative space for the marginalized and exposes the violence hidden beneath postcolonial myths of national progress. In this sense, *The Famished Road* demonstrates that to remember is already to resist.

Conclusion

Ben Okri's *the Famished Road* emerges as a profound postcolonial meditation on the relationship between sovereign violence, disposability, and imaginative resistance. Through the spectral consciousness of Azaro, the novel exposes how postcolonial Nigeria remains deeply entangled in the afterlives of colonial domination, where poverty, political corruption, social abandonment, and systemic violence continue to regulate existence through what Achille Mbembe terms Necropolitics—the sovereign power to decide who may live and who must die (Mbembe 11–14). The urban compound, marked by hunger, instability, and cyclical violence, functions as a necropolitical “death-world” in which marginalized lives are reduced to conditions of precarious survival, suspended between life and social death.

Yet Okri's achievement lies not merely in representing suffering but in transforming spectrality into a mode of resistance. Azaro's liminal position as an abiku child allows him to witness the hidden structures of power that govern the postcolony while refusing their finality. His repeated returns to the human world symbolize a radical refusal of erasure and disappearance. As Azaro insists, “Our country is an abiku country. Like the spirit-child, it keeps coming and going” (Okri 494). This recurring return becomes a powerful metaphor for postcolonial endurance itself: a history repeatedly wounded yet persistently re-emerging.

Through the lens of Edward Said's critique of representational domination, Okri reclaims narrative authority for subjects historically rendered invisible. Through Frantz Fanon's analysis of psychic



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fragmentation, the novel reveals the deep trauma embedded within postcolonial consciousness. Through Homi K. Bhabha's theory of hybridity and liminality, Azaro's spectral identity becomes a site of negotiation where fixed colonial binaries collapse. Most significantly, through Mbembe's necropolitics, *The Famished Road* reveals how sovereignty in the postcolony continues to operate through abandonment, exposure, and structural violence.

At the same time, Okri's use of magical realism disrupts colonial epistemologies that privilege rationalist and linear narratives of historical progress. The spirit-world is not escapist fantasy but a critical ontology through which invisible violence becomes legible. By validating indigenous cosmology as a framework of political interpretation, Okri restores dignity to marginalized ways of knowing and contests the epistemic violence of colonial discourse.

Ultimately, *The Famished Road* insists that storytelling itself is an act of political survival. In preserving memory against erasure, spectral testimony becomes resistance to necropolitical silence. Okri's narrative suggests that even within spaces organized around disposability and death, the imagination remains irreducibly alive. His fiction offers not easy redemption but a stubborn hope grounded in witness, remembrance, and renewal. As the novel closes with its affirmation of possibility, it leaves readers with the conviction that while necropower may structure the postcolonial present, it can never fully extinguish the human capacity to dream, resist, and begin again.

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