

# Women Sufferings in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment*

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## Abstract

This paper entitled Women Sufferings in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment* deals with the relentless plight of women. It examines the womanhood discourse in areas such as motherhood, marriage, the portrayal of the woman in her private domain of life in relation to her public image, relations with patriarchy, and the contradictions in the collective experience of women and the self. It focuses on Okri's approach to these issues, which encompass womanhood both as a biological constituent and as a social construct.

**Key words:** *motherhood, domain, patriarchy.*

Ben Okri was a Nigerian novelist, short-story writer, and poet who won the Booker Prize for his novel *The Famished Road*. Ben Okri examines the womanhood discourse in such areas as motherhood, the institution of marriage, the portrayal of the woman in her private domain of life, her public image, relations with patriarchy, the contradictions in the collective experience of women and the self. His approach to these issues that encompass womanhood both as a biological constituent and as a social construct. In this process the perception of gender as an aspect of sociality is interrogated.

In the aspects of womanhood in *The Famished Road* through the abiku myth. As a cyclical process of birth and death, the abiku is an entry point into the experience of motherhood, its attendant joys and tribulations. The recurrent birth and death of the spirit-child implies pain, fulfillment and loss for the mother. In Okri's *The Famished Road*, Azaro, the spirit-child, undergoes this cyclic existence severally. His friend Ade is also a spirit-child who has been through a repetitive process of birth and death. Ade says, "I have worn out my mother's womb and now she can't have any more children" (477). But unlike Azaro, who has opted for permanent stay by severing attachment to the spirit world, Ade is visibly on the boundary of death and life, his leaning towards the former being so pessimistic. "Ade wanted to leave, to become a spirit again, free in the captivity of freedom. I wanted the liberty of limitations, to have to find or create new roads from this one which is so hungry, the road of our refusal to be" (487).

Okri depicts the spirit-child as the search for fulfillment by the mother, which is painful with only momentary periods of contentment. The abiku as an identity is the source of anguish for the mother since it embodies ephemeral relief from the burden of childlessness before recurring. In *The Famished Road*, the herbalist who prescribes the ritual performance that is to end Azaro's vacillation between the world of the living and the dead inflicts pain when he pronounces him an abiku child. Azaro says, "He was the first to call me by that name which

spreads horror amongst mothers” (8). This horror is due to the biological and psychic pain that repeated but unprolific childbearing subjects the mother to. “In not wanting to stay, we caused much pain to mothers. Their pain grew heavier with each return.... And we remained indifferent to the long joyless parturition of mothers” (4-5). It is more of lack of choice than as a result of malevolent mythology that the mother has to suffer. The values of motherhood bestow a positive identity that women desire but it is at the same time contradicted by the painful moment of parturition. The desire to free Mum from this predicament of motherhood motivates Azaro’s pact to cease intermittent existence in the spirit world.

Experiencing the abiku phenomenon is thus tortuous reproductive motherhood as it marks the woman’s relentless plight in the search for social mooring and harmony within the self. The “bruised face” represents the entire litany of traumatic fences that mothers bear as they strive to project their positives womanhood through reproductive motherhood. Considering the searing efforts of the mother of the Pint-child, therefore, Okri portrays motherhood as a necessity, as a prerequisite for social visibility and elevation. A woman has to endure the sufferings of reproductive motherhood since it underpins her image in society.

Looked at differently, however, this could also amount to an interrogation of whether it is imperative for women to endure the cruelties of societal acceptance under patriarchal definitions of motherhood. With so much pain and suffering exposed, Okri seems to be tacitly re-evaluating adherence to the institution of reproductive motherhood if it is fraught with such debilitating challenges. Jean Elshtain in his work *Public Man Private Works* observes that, “Motherhood is complicated, rich, ambivalent, vexing, joyous activity which is biological, natural, social, symbolic and emotional. It carries profoundly resonant emotional and sexual imperatives” (243). The abiku myth is therefore symbolic, representing the countless times of physical pain and psychological agony that mothers have to withstand every time a child is born. “I passed a house where a woman was screaming. People were gathered outside her room. I thought thugs were beating her up and I went there and learnt that she was giving birth and that she had been in labour for three days and three nights” (16).

Okri is concerned that though appealing to the womenfolk, motherhood as a contributory aspect of womanhood is oppressive, child bearing being contested as the exemplification of biological and psychological suffering. This indictment of motherhood goes beyond the parturition experience. As argued by Rich in his work *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose* observes that “historically, cross-culturally, a woman’s status as child bearer has been the test of her womanhood; a test which gives rise to divisive categories of mother, Matron, spinster, barren, old maid” (261), motherhood is disruptive in the context of realizing the unity of women. For whereas society idealizes motherhood as the quintessence of womanhood, not fulfilling it becomes burdensome to women. Echoing Rich, Tong says, “Men, suggested Rich, have convinced women that unless a woman is a mother, she is not really a woman” (87).

Madame Koto is socially stigmatized because of her inability to assert herself as a mother through childbearing. Other women see her as the repudiation of what is not just definitive of their expression of womanhood but at the same time as the nemesis of society. According to Palmer in his work *Contemporary Women’s Fiction: Narrative Practice and Feminist Theory* states that, “Her independence and child-free status... divide her from other women whose lives centre on marriage and the family” (82). In the highly prioritized politics of motherhood, therefore, Madame Koto cannot postulate the norm.

It then emerges that Okri assigns Madame Koto the onus of explicating what society withholds from a woman who is unfulfilled as a mother. The fact that she has no child of her own to legitimize her womanhood partially accounts for her personality as a malevolent force in society. Eventually, the collectivity of women as a sex category is threatened, with those excluded from the definition of womanhood at the point of motherhood seeking re-entry through a display of surrogate maternal responsibilities.

Okri brings Azaro into Madame Koto’s life in a relationship of mother and child in order to suggest alternatives to reproductive motherhood that would finally restore the ostracized woman to the precincts of motherhood. In *The Famished Road*, Madame Koto says, “This is my son” (109). The policeman’s wife also perceives in Azaro her deceased son in order to remedy her childless status. Azaro narrates that, “She always dressed me in their son’s finest clothes. I only became scared of her when she started calling me by his name” (20). However, Okri demonstrates that even though surrogate relationships that compensate for biological motherhood are possible, the woman is not fully embraced where her manifestation of maternal values is required. Nevertheless, Rosemarie Tong in his work *Feminist Thought: A comprehensive Introduction* argues, “Patriarchal society teaches us that the woman who bears a child is best suited to rear him or her” (84). Hence Madame Koto can consider Azaro

as her son but society, Azaro's mother included, still views her as an outsider because her relationship with the institution of motherhood has not been biologically mediated.

Another difference between Madame Koto and the rest of the womenfolk is in terms of the advantages that should accrue to women owing to their motherhood status. Seemingly in *The Famished Road*, Madame Koto views children like Azaro as an expedient identity only if they enhance her entrenchment in economic power within the community. She tells Dad that, "I will let forget the money if you let your son come and sit in my bar now and again. Because he has good luck" (63). On the other hand, women like Mum emphasize the maternal sense of fulfillment that is divorced from their reproductive capacity as the basis for empowerment and recognition within the community. To this category of women, motherhood is essentially for social accreditation.

It is at this juncture that the relationship with a phallogocentric culture is highlighted. According to Adrienne Rich in his work *On Lies, Secrets and Silence* says that "Motherhood is not only a core human relationship but a political institution, a keystone to the domination in every sphere of women by men" (216). Women who perceive childlessness as the cause of social stigmatization are manifesting the criterion for societal approval that is tailored to the depiction of the woman's sexuality and reproductive potential typical of patriarchy. Such women appreciate patriarchal values as the necessity and cardinal value of womanhood. Rosemarie Tong in his work *Feminist Thought: A comprehensive Introduction* asserts that, "The joy of giving birth-invoked so frequently in this society—is a Patriarchal myth" (75). Okri casts motherhood as an area in the relationship between the genders that promotes the oppression of women. Consequently, the picture of womanhood inscribed in the character of Madame Koto and her prosperous women Crates a re-drawing of motherhood.

To conclude, in this dissertation an attempt has been made to analyze the psychological problems of women as well as the political and economic instability of Nigerian Nation. One of the causes for the problems, as has been found out from the above study is the violent patriarchal culture and the failure of the leadership. Therefore further study can be pursued on re dreaming the world fantasy and reality.

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