

Mythic Imagination and the Postcolonial Experience in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* and Debo Kotun's *Abiku*

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Abstract

African novels have been acknowledged and widely accepted as products of oral tradition and socio-historical experiences. These two intertwined imperatives have been variously underscored by critics, as the *sine de qua non* of a functional heritage of African literature. This paper is essentially a comparative study of the exploitation of the *abiku* myth in Debo Kotun's *Abiku* and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*. An attempt is made at extending the *abiku* metaphor to the prevailing dysfunction in the novels' enabling milieu. Furthermore, the paper posits that the African oral tradition, as exemplified by the *abiku* myth among the Yoruba of south-western Nigeria, remains a vibrant asset for thematic and aesthetic directions for contemporary novelists. In Okri and Kotun therefore lies a refreshing mythic exploration which interrogates the postcolonial Nigerian experience. This underscores the need for a conscious mythic exploration in the postcolonial literary experience for an effective engagement with the burden of underdevelopment plaguing the postcolonial world. This ultimately reinforces mythic relevance in the aesthetics of the postcolonial African novel.

Keywords: *abiku*, Myth, postcolonial, socio-historical, African fiction, metaphor

Introduction

In a recent inaugural lecture, Olu-Owolabi (2011) contends that the present state of retrogression in Nigeria, and indeed the rest of Africa, stems from the near absence of the critical capacity to reflect and interrogate issues, concepts and circumstances by the present generation. According to him:

All these signs of impending perilous times are products of our unexamined living,... but the good life, an ideal that philosophers have sought since time immemorial, can only be realized by constant rigorous and critical reflections (43).

In other words, the seeming abyss of being prevalent in contemporary society can only be challenged by the ability to engage those issues critically. Added to this is Oyin Ogunba's (1998) charge on the need for further exploration of myths in order to deepen the thematic concerns of African literature and further endear it to its enabling milieu. In other words, Olu-Owolabi's concern above can be located in the present endeavour in Ogunba's challenge with regard to the question of myth in African literature. This paper is therefore in part, a response to the two scholars' concern on the epistemological foundations as well as the use of myths in African literary imagination. To this end, this paper is concerned with how Ben Okri and Debo Kotun deploy the Yoruba *abiku* myth in *The Famished Road* and *Abiku*, respectively, to project and engage the post-colonial Nigerian condition in their novels. The paper attempts a comparative study of the exploration of the *abiku* myth in the two novels, drawing heavily on the thematic unities espoused by the two writers.

It should be stated that myths in African sensibilities do not just centre on fictional stories or escapist attempts at explaining away existential riddles. Rather, myths represent indigenous attempts at either fictionalizing reality or injecting the elements of the realistic into the fictional. In other words, myths in the African milieu are literary forms which interconnect the states of being, or in philosophical parlance, the different levels of being. A comparative metaphorical import mythic representation in Okri and Kotun is therefore central to this discourse. The approach of the two novelists to their subject-

matter, given the fact that they dwell on the same socio-political issues using the *abiku* motif shall be compared and contrasted. It should be added that because all African myths, particularly the *abiku*, which concerns this study, seem grounded in certain culturally dependent variables like religion, philosophy and epistemology of the specific mother milieu, it becomes relevant to situate the territory of the discourse within post-colonial understanding. The plight of Africa and its inhabitants is a subject of enormous concern. This may explain why the two novelists choose post-independence Nigeria as their setting with the narratives replete with satiric undercurrents. Though Okri's *The Famished Road* seems more in-depth in terms of universalizing a general angst over the state of the human self, thus making its satire less biting but rather subtle, there is no doubt that the pre-occupation of the writer is geared towards political commitment.

Against the above backdrop, the question that agitates the critical mind is, why recourse to oral tradition? It may prove worthwhile to focus once again on myths and how they are reconstructed in the African creative context. The reasons are certainly not far-fetched and shall be demonstrated as this essay progresses. It becomes imperative to examine, or re-examine the mythic sensibilities of the African self, as mirrored in the African novel. As a matter of fact, it is interesting to note that despite the fact that both authors are permanently based abroad, united by formal, stylistic and thematic concerns as well as a common quest for the roots. This shows that oral tradition continues to influence the creative consciousness in Africa.

This essay examines the relevance of the mythic in the portrayal of contemporary African society by the two writers. This is with a view to showing that African writers, especially in Diaspora, utilize the oral raw materials available to them in projecting contemporary literature of twenty-first century. The paper contextualizes the writers' problematization of the *abiku* myth and how this contributes to the literary and aesthetic qualities of the works shall be evaluated.

Certainly literary productions have the imprint of the milieu which produces them, since art penetrates social psychology and engages

happenings in society. Accordingly, African literature has been said to be self-reflexive, especially through pungent depiction of the enabling situations. The African novel demonstrates a viable melting pot for the philosophy, oral, religion and world-view generally. Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* and Debo Kotun's *Abiku* represent African prose fiction which centres on African mythic consciousness.

The point is that African literature is inward looking and root-seeking. The social and political angst which runs in the world of the two novels is archetypal of post-independence African states. What then is the role of art in restoring confidence in the polity? The two novelists offer instinctive, yet similar, explanations on how the self can survive the torment of existential vicissitudes. Of course, this is not a recent development in literary creation, especially in Africa where art is inherently and innately utilitarian.

Engaging Myths in African Literature

Scholars have engaged the question of myth and how African literature employs it. Many of them consider myth as an integral part of a larger definition of oral tradition which they take as the fulcrum of African literary thematic preoccupation. Others have devoted intellectual energy to a thorough analysis of myths and their paramount place in the African worldview; Soyinka (1976) and Okpewho (1981) are classical examples. Myths, according to Akporobaro,

... symbolize human experience and embody the spiritual values of a culture. Every society preserves its myths because the beliefs and worldview found within them are crucial to the survival of that culture.... Myths often include elements from legend and folklore. They depict humans as an integral part of a *larger universe*, and they impart a feeling of awe for all that is *mysterious* and *marvellous* in life (2001: 130; emphases, added).

The above definition can be located in Okri's and Kotun's appropriations of the *abiku* myth. The novelists attempt giving meaning to the various levels of existence and also show that the human plane of existence is only an aspect of a larger existence of spirits, ghomids and several other

beings. Ogundele (2002) observes the prevalence of myths in African creative imagination, against the historical. This shows that African creative imagination naturally yields to the mythic. In his words:

Although there is much ado about myth, history and literature in African literary discourse, the overwhelming bulk of that labour is expended on myth and literature, with fairly little to spare on history and literature (126).

The implication of this is that if African literature cannot fulfil the historical mandate, then it can interrogate history through mythic devices. This is readily manifest in the political and historical dialectic of the world of Okri and Kotun. While Kotun thematizes post-independence Nigerian society especially in the wake of coups and counter-coups, Okri concentrates on a society bedeviled by the consequences of bad leadership and the antics of corrupt politicians. In other words, there is critical and thematic unity in myth and the accompanying histories of the social contexts in the two authors.

George (1991) not only underscores the interconnectedness of myth and history, but also demonstrates how indispensable a fair treatment of both is to an objective consideration of African literary works in what he calls a 'qualitative approach'. This is to a very large extent true of *The Famished Road* and *Abiku*, given the fact that:

The employment of the artistic resources of the African oral tradition in addressing the contemporary social history of Africa continues to engage African writers concerned with creating an artistically authentic African literature (107).

In other words, writers not just engage myth and history but also employ the devices of oral story-telling tradition. This implies that the task of the writers is to reconstruct socio-historical experiences. To return to George's poser:

How are the artistic devices of the oral story-telling tradition and fictive-imagination married to (re)construct past and contemporary social experience in Nigeria? And this is done within the framework of the qualitative approach to African literature, a recent strain of

African traditionalist aesthetic criticism which recognizes that 'tradition' is dynamic rather than static (1991: 107).

The above re-echoes Isidore Okpewho's (1980) classifications of the different levels of how African literature employs myth and oral tradition. He observes:

It soon becomes clear that the further a tale moves away from the world of real-life experiences into that of fantasy, the more it liberates itself from the bondage to historical time and thus addresses itself to larger philosophical questions of existence (5).

In essence, critical contentions on the deployment of myths in African literature have expressed and highlighted the inherent value of myths. In other words, myths remain an important creative invention through which the African world is explored and appreciated. Thus, myths are important ways of assessing dimensions and diversities of the African experience.

Kotun, Okri and the Dynamics of Mythic Exploration

The thematic preoccupation of Okri's *The Famished Road* and Kotun's *Abiku* reveals two African writers' mindful of the functionality of their art as well as the quest for roots, a fact underscored by Adetugbo (1992:7), citing John Parry et al that 'History reveals the need [in] all men for roots and self-expressions, for belonging to, and identifying with a community that has a memory of its past'

The *abiku* images in Okri and Kotun represent the same idea. Human society as *abiku* is the contention of the two. In Kotun, political instability, ubiquity of coups, failure in governance, have direct impact on the character of the *abiku* child. In Okri, the picture appears clearer:

It shocked him too that ours was an *abiku* nation, a spirit-child nation, one that keeps being reborn and after each birth come blood and betrayals, and child of our will refuses to stay (494).

In Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, the mythic template certainly prompts an appreciation of the progressive movement from a world of actuality to the other level of existence. This experience is more visible in Okri's

Azaro, who partakes of the experience of the real world and that of spirits. Deandrea (2001) offers an insight:

Okri's use of the *abiku* differs from his predecessors in as much as he found his magical-realist style with its co-existent rational reality and spirit world on Azaro's first person narration, since the child's contact with his original place is never severed and his perceptions therefore, constantly touch on both dimensions at the same time (1).

Okri's use of the mythic seems to suggest that Azaro's dual vision is a metaphor for re/presentation of the postcolonial African condition. In fact, the theme of post-independence decadence seems prevalent in *The Famished Road* as the novelist soon deploys the force of mythic narration to underscore the satiric undercurrent of the novel. As Bennet (1998) explains:

Each time he revisits these common post-colonial themes, therefore he finds extraordinary new ways to express them with greater insights, imagination and complexity. Taken together, Okri's fiction represents one of the most significant explorations of literary form in the canon, of postcolonial African literature (364).

Ogunsanwo (1995) follows this up by introducing the intertextual dimension to Okri's narrative. This is instructive and clearly shows that Okri's attempt, as in Kotun's, is an affirmation of a device earlier exploited by Soyinka and Clark in their poems, '*abiku*'. He contends:

What makes *The Famished Road* post-colonial and multicultural both in form and content is precisely what makes it post-modernist that is response to 'the need to clear oneself a space'. By means of mythic narration, Okri clears a space for the quintessential texture and structure of African folkloric narrative (42).

In Liman (1997), Okri is shown to be furthering a tradition and not necessarily pursuing a post-colonial agenda, but thematizing issues that are universal and not in any strict terms a 'response', as a postcolonial aesthetic would imply:

There is indeed nothing postcolonial about the picture grim realities of existence Okri has presented. His magnification of the

microcosmic unit of an ordinary family struggling against the overwhelming forces of monopoly capital is typically in place with the normal preoccupation of literary practices in Africa (75).

One can assert that Okri's exploration of mythic consciousness, demonstrates that mythic discourse is capable of multi-thematic attention. Encircling all these concerns, as most critics seem to agree is the magical realist agenda.

It should be noted that *The Famished Road* is an attempt by Okri to interrogate the crisis of the self. He weaves the elements of traditional *abiku* mythology into a formidable alliance with contemporary magical realism, to achieve this aim. Okri's *abiku* character, Azaro, is a mythic reconstruct. Unlike the *abiku* in Soyinka and Clark, Okri's *abiku* chooses to stay by empathizing with his mother. Okri's deliberate deconstruction of the *abiku* personality is a device which empowers his main character to comprehend and comment on the two levels of existence. As an *abiku*, Azaro has a vivid description of his previous existence in the spirit world:

With our spirit companions, the ones with whom we had a special affinity, we were happy most of the time because we floated on the aquamarine air of love... the serene preserves of our ancestors were always with us, bathing us in the radiance of their diverse windows (4).

Azaro's choice to stay represents a force of mythic dialectic. He turns away from the bliss of his other existence to partake of the penury, want and deprivation of human existence. His reasons are many:

I wanted to taste of this world, to feel it, suffer it, know it, to love it, to make a valuable contribution to it... But I sometimes think it was a face that made me want to stay. I wanted to make happy the bruised face of a woman who would become my mother (5).

Azaro chooses to experience the world of humans in order to partake of human life and to appreciate the plight of the downtrodden. Okri imbues Azaro with extra-human powers in order to pass an objective commentary on the decadence that is prevalent in the world of this novel.

Azaro's immediate family stands for the underprivileged. Society's cruelty frustrates Dad's self-determination and prowess. The picture of suffering in the household is grim. The mother struggles with the negative forces of disempowerment. The recurrence of *abiku* children until Azaro chooses to stay in compassion for her also shows her helplessness even in the hands of nature. Azaro recollects vividly: 'I was still very young when in a daze I saw Dad swallowed up by a hole in the road. Another time I saw mum dangling from the branches of a blue tree'(7). The images indicate anomaly, perpetual suffering and despair. There is horror in the figure dangling from a tree branch and in the colour change, owing to assault on nature's green by forces of environmental degradation.

Azaro's spirit of resistance, especially of his spirit kindred is a parable of the self. Azaro embodies self-assertion and will, though with a proportional level of mystic power, from his essence. He is conscious of the ability of his dual essence and seems to suggest that comprehension of life's oddities requires the possession of extra-human powers – he does not want to lose contact entirely with that other world of light and rainbows and possibilities. (9) His mother also tells him 'You are a child of miracles... Many powers are on your side' (9). Okri explores the mythic side of existence in order to endow his work with extra depth, and to demonstrate the dynamism in his literary agenda.

The Famished Road yields to satire without necessarily shedding its mythic strength. As a luminal character, Azaro reveals the obvious and the subterranean in existence. For instance, the commentary of the rape of the earth reveals both unseen and seen realities: 'The clearing was the beginning of an expressway. Building companies had leveled the trees. In places, the earth was red. We passed a tree that had been felled' (16). Azaro's luminal powers enable him to see beyond the ordinary environmental degradation that the above represents. He uses this to instantiate the wrangling and upheavals in the spirit world. Okri nonetheless captures his social-political decay but in contradistinction to Kotun's realism, he approaches the subject through his magical

realism. He succeeds in combining the elements of the grotesque in satirizing society. He narrates the irony inherent in human society through a scenario within the ranks of the police, who despite that they swear to oaths, go ahead to betray public trust reposed in them (22).

Okri seems to suggest that to trivialise such a sacred oath is as a result of the indifference to mythic consciousness and traditional ethics. Okri captures police brutality especially in post-independence Nigeria under military rule like several African states. He however elicits pity the way the events bring out the bestial tendencies in society. He seems to suggest that the reaction of the agents of misrule to genuine reaction by the people is nothing but wickedness:

Dad was there, imprisoned for taking part in the riots... He had been beaten by the police and there was an ugly cut on his forehead, bruises on his face.

This is Okri's way of reflecting social and political malaise. But his is more refractive than reflective. It is a general commentary. Each event is symbolic of a whole in terms of space and time. Society is viewed from a cyclical point of time. Human activities get satirized from the point of view of this omniscient narration who has all the benefits – hindsight, foresight. The way Azaro recalls his spirit world experiences, through flashback, reminds one of the capacity of the human soul to interrogate history. Okri's *abiku* hero demonstrates the viability of using mythic consciousness to highlight the ills of society.

Given the fact that Azaro's spirit world is blissful, he seems to suggest that the opposite is what exists in the world he has chosen to live. Also, Azaro's satiric commentaries bring forth the realities of poverty, deprivation and disempowerment. He also suggests that suffering tends to bring out the fullest of man's capacity for comprehending a world of incongruities. He paints the image of penury and demonstrates that society tends to imbue the deprived self with a capacity for violence and resistance. Madame Koto prays philosophically:

The road will never swallow you
The river of your destiny will always overcome evil...

Suffering will never destroy you, but
Will make you stronger (46).

As Azaro narrates one horrible experience of the ghetto after another, the oppositional structures of the world continue to be foregrounded. He captures modernist disenchantment (91), a tolerant spirit of self-assertion (93), anger, frustration and helplessness. Okri advocates recoil to the self; he does not share recourse to Marxist struggle or armed resistance, but rather supports a retreat to the self by the self in order to assign meaning to a world of void. At different times, Azaro comments:

We were heroes in our own drama,
Heroes of our own protest (156).
We may be poor, but we are not slaves (203).

THINK DIFFERENTLY... AND YOU
WILL CHANGE THE WORLD...

REMEMBER HOW FREE YOU ARE,...
AND YOU WILL TRANSFORM YOUR
HUNGER DIFFERENTLY

Thus, Okri is advocating a psychological rebirth and sees this as the ultimate respite for the impoverished self. His aim is to bring out through Azaro the human capacity for survival and defiance. This, one submits, he activates with literary dexterity.

Kotun's picture of Ademola best projects his *abiku* motif. The diviner says about him:

Ola is not your son...
Ola is an *Abiku* sent here for a purpose
He's the child of the world-
A world which had been
Turned upside down... (222)

Ola is an illegitimate *abiku* child of circumstance. The contrast between essence and his mission is very instructive. He is humane, tender and gentlemanly and eventually becomes a salvaging force for

the political vision of the novelist (Kotun). His homecoming climaxes his character assignment – purificatory essence. Ademola is here presented as a foil character to Sakara. He is a medical doctor, and he shares other people’s anguish. His heroism is pyrrhic as he suffers unjustly – his mother mortgages his essence; Sakara hates and hunts him viciously. Ola faces a lot of hectic tasks out of which he comes out vindicated. Kotun seems to suggest that the price of a carrier is weighty and demanding. Ademola is the quintessence of sacrifice and forbearance. His innocence is shown at every opportunity by the novelist yet he is a victim of individual mythic and social discord.

Kotun unwittingly undermines his mythic agenda in the novel, through the subjugation of the feminine will in the ‘womb to tomb continuum’ (Opefeyitimi, 1984), where women exert a lot of influence. The female will in Kotun is highly repressed, and the characters are victims of gender bias in the universe of the novel. At the narrative and thematic levels, Ali appears to be an intertextual experiment in the mould of Okri’s *Azaro*. It is instructive to note that both are seven year olds. However, Ali lacks the mythic and magical charm of *Azaro* who transcends the character paradigm and assumes thematic prominence. Kotun’s attempt at building the character of Ali is unimpressive. Ali however manifests innocence and reinvigorates the widely accepted notion of purity in children who are metaphors of the untainted self. In sum, characters in Kotun’s *Abiku* and Okri’s *The Famished Road* act and behave to type.

The symbol of the road in *The Famished Road* is used both as a purificatory essence and as a mythical allusion to humanity’s quest for meaning. *Azaro*’s resort to wanderings on the road each time he reflects on the plight of his society is not only an opportunity to explore his mythic and animist consciousness, but also a way of projecting the road as a metaphor for life’s many battles. This finds an interesting ally in the ritual essence of the novel and foregrounds trado-spiritual aesthetics. The symbolic thrust of the road motif provides an insight into existential tribulations. The religious/ritual essence of the road is highlighted:

He probably went and walked on all the bad things they wash on the roads. All those witches and wizards, nature doctors, sorcerers, who wash off hard things from their customers and pour them on the road, who wash diseases and bad destinies on the streets (119). The road motif is reminiscent of Soyinka's poetry (see Ibitokun, 1995: 39). Okri ably represents this: 'The road swallows people and sometimes at night you can hear them calling for help, begging to be freed from inside its stomach' (121). It also represents the phases of development of a society. For the self within a given cosmos, quest then becomes an imperative in order to discover the self. Journeying along the corridors of the mythic becomes the enablement for Okri and Kotun. Kotun subtly demonstrates this by the journey which culminates in the escape of Ademola, Crowther and Ali to the United States of America. The journey Ademola undertakes alongside McFlartey to save Jason's life also highlights the significance of the road motif for self-discovery and actualization.

The *abiku* motif in Kotun's novel thus represents the fears, despairs and tribulations of society. Hope is shown to be illusory and appears more like an *abiku* child. The images of post-colonialism are seen in the thematic base. This is a form of cultural assertion. Ibitokun (1995) underscores the structural and philosophical implications of the road:

... there are therefore, echoes of the physical road, of the symbolic road of existence, of the transactional gulf by which man at death passes from human to divine essence. If man is *homo viator*, there are as many roads as there are existences. The most minute acts, aspirations, commissions and omissions, feats and defeats are stop-overs or stages along the existential road (31).

As can be deduced from the above, the road encompasses life's journeys in physical, religious and psychological dimensions. It also represents the phases of development of a society. For the self within a given cosmos, quest then becomes an imperative in order to discover the self.

Conclusion

Postcolonial African literature responds with a more mythical than historical imagination to the historical experience that brought it into existence (Ogundele 2002:137). It should be clear that attachment to historical, time-bound reality robs a tale of its chances of yielding an abstract, transcendent message, and that 'the mythic quality of tales of the fanciful lies in their flight from time bound circumstances and their employment of the medium of symbol and mimesis' (Okpewho 1980: 14). On the basis of these contentions, the various images projected by Okri and Kotun have been explored and this has yielded significant critical finds, mainly the continued viability of the African traditional mythic structures as base for African literary productions.

It has also been shown that Okri and Kotun are united in looking inwards for thematic directions. This is demonstrated in the exploitation of the *abiku* myth to address contemporary issues bedeviling the society of the novelistic universe. As the observations of Okpewho and Ogundele suggest, Okri and Kotun are conformists and non-conformists at the same time. While Okri meets the parameters of Okpewho, Kotun departs from these. Kotun is a conventional meta-historical writer whose art does not deconstruct the myth he relies on in his novel. Given the level of African civilization, a constant revisit of history in African creative imagination is pertinent for a political order and tranquility.

Kotun's attempt at fictionalizing perhaps Nigeria's most agonizing moment under military rule is indeed both a factual and socio-historical *exposé*. The point is that his literary concern is in tandem with the satiric beckoning of his Nigeria in *Abiku*. As Ogunsanwo (1995), departing from Chinweizu et al, points out, 'It is the creative artists transmutation of his/her *donne* that determines the significance and effect of the raw material' (43). The above explains the divergence of mythic utility in Kotun and Okri. There is no doubt that Okri's and Kotun's senses of the nature of man and his conduct are in total agreement with the observation of Akporobaro that:

the human mind everywhere and at all times is dominated by a deep consciousness of good and evil. Apart from psychological factors, the reality and dominance of this consciousness is intimately bound

up with the nature of human experience, desires and the temper of the environment in which man operates (2001: 381).

The point is that, notwithstanding the fact that Okri and Kotun are two 'non-resident' African writers, they engage the realities of their societies. While Kotun's *Abiku* comes down heavily on the corruption that has taken over society, Okri's *The Famished Road* interrogates the plight of the self in a world of inherent contradictions. The two writers share the same vision of social reformation. While Okri prefers a process of self-examination towards actualization, Kotun would rather see a world that is bettered through a people's determination to end the seeming cycle of misrule. The Nigeria of the two writers has been battered and the values raped. This results in an underdeveloped society in decadence. The breakdown of social infrastructural facilities in Kotun's Nigeria is a demonstration of the effect of misrule on the self within a dehumanizing situation. The literature of social development and committed art is the essence of the two narratives. In their respective postulations, the two novelists link Africa's plight of underdevelopment to successive retrogressive administration in colonial, neo-colonial and apartheid colorations. By using the *abiku* myth to project their vision, Okri and Kotun demonstrate a post-colonial flair. Quite interesting to note is that both writers seem to demonstrate this postcolonial trend from a diasporic point of view. (Kotun is a US-based émigré while Okri is a London-based Nigerian writer). The two writers are convinced of an inward-looking art to capture a universal angst. The quest for roots helps in projecting the image of the black race.

Each writer demonstrates in his own way how the self at the centre of the society appropriates the inherent paradoxes of life to carve out an existential space. In *Abiku*, Sakara battles with a psychic disorder rooted in his unimpressive past. Kotun and Okri, therefore, use magical realism and ritual aesthetics to celebrate the Africa heritage of an inward epistemology, deeply rooted in their avowed quest for roots, and ultimately succeed in projecting the post-independence vicissitudes in their milieux of production.

This essay shows how the African situation in the African creative imagination can be effectively engaged by African mythic exploration which provokes a peculiar nativist consciousness. Since myths, by their very nature, heighten reality and make magic almost part of existence, *The Famished Road* and *Abiku* share this traditional aesthetic. At every opportunity, the two writers show that the solution to Africa's crisis of underdevelopment lies in Africa, where the issues emanated. African prose fiction responds as pragmatically as possible to the African question. This tendency continues to compel the African literary impulse towards internal self-cleansing. Writers, as evidenced by Okri and Kotun, are not just agents of self-definition; they are also tools in this respect. This movement of internal self-criticism in African fiction, however, is not alone:

Another major trend in modern Africa is the focusing by the poets on national experiences as never before... With the excesses of political independence, the poets have come to believe that Africans are mainly responsible for their problems. In their desire to effect changes, they use the nation state as the starting point (Ojaide 1996: 9).

This paper has demonstrated that Debo Kotun in *Abiku* and Ben Okri in *The Famished Road* aptly fit into Stuart's (1995) contention that 'the self-apprehension of the African world in terms of concepts and categories can be embodied in properly African cultural forms, forms which can be considered to have artistic merit'. The mythic identity of the two novels, therefore, provide an enabling literary sanctuary, to tell the story of African anguish, first to Africans, and then to the rest of humanity. The writers ultimately fulfil what Irele (1981) means when he observes that 'immediate engagement with history is the outstanding attribute of the modern African writer' (69). Kotun and Okri have therefore through the exploration of the mythic consciousness in their novels, appropriated the cultural worldview of the enabling society to engage the ever-recurring issues of post-independence woes.

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