

Proceedings of the one-day workshop on
**'THE BODY IN THE ARTISTIC AND CULTURAL
PRODUCTIONS: BETWEEN AESTHETICS AND
SIGNIFICATION'**



Actes de la journée d'études et de réflexions sur
**'LE CORPS DANS LES PRODUCTIONS ARTISTIQUES ET
CULTURELLES : ENTRE ESTHÉTIQUE ET
SIGNIFICATION'**

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Klohinlwélé KONÉ

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- BERGER Gaston, 1967, *L'homme moderne et son éducation*, Paris, PUF.
- DIAGNE Souleymane Bachir, 2003, « Islam et philosophie. Leçons d'une rencontre », *Diogène*, 202, p. 145-151.
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SOMMAIRE

1. KLOHINLWÉLÉ KONÉ : THE HUMAN BODY AND ITS CULTURAL MEANING IN G. OKARA'S <i>THE VOICE</i>.....	7
2. AHMADOU SIENDOU KONATÉ & JOHNSON ADEBOYE ADEGOKÉ : THE FEMALE BODY AS THE TOPOS OF PATRIARCHAL OPPRESSION IN "SKINNED", A SHORT STORY BY NNEKA LESLEY ARIMAH.....	32
3. KOUADIO PASCAL KOFFI : FEMALE BODY AS A MUSE OF FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS IN AMMA DARKO'S <i>BEYOND THE HORIZON</i>.....	56
4. KILANKO ADIÈLE ZANNOU : THE NATIVE AMERICAN'S REPRESENTATION OF THE BODY IN LESLIE SILKO'S <i>CEREMONY</i>..	71
5. SIAKA FOFANA : DE-CONSTRUCTING AFRICAN POLITICS VIA THE GROTESQUE BODY IN NGŪGĨ WA THIONG'O'S <i>WIZARD OF THE CROW</i>.....	88
6. ADJAKO KOUASSI : L'ESTHÉTISATION DICHOTOMIQUE DE LA FEMME ET DE SON CORPS DANS L'ÉCRITURE D'EXPRESSION ANGLAISE D'ARMAH.....	103
7. DÉKAO FABRICE TIEMOU : THE FANTASY OF THE BODY IN BEN OKRI'S <i>THE FAMISHED ROAD</i>.....	118
8. DJAHI MICHEL BLYO : L'AUTOBIOGRAPHIE POLITIQUE ET L'EXPRESSION DU CORPS : L'EXEMPLE DE QUELQUES TEXTES DES DÉCENNIES 1960-1990.....	130
9. KOFFI MELAINE-ANICET V. KOUAKOU : LE CORPS ENTRE ESTHÉTIQUE ET EXPRESSION IDENTITAIRE : UNE LECTURE PHILOSOPHIQUE ET SOCIOLOGIQUE.....	157
VARIA	
10. KOUASSI ZAMINA JOHNSON : THOMAS PYNCHON ET L'ÉCRITURE FRAGMENTAIRE.....	169

THE FANTASY OF THE BODY IN BEN OKRI'S *THE FAMISHED ROAD*

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This study attempts to show through Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991) that the body of human beings is reified in the postcolony. In this context, African writers invent some literary devices to account for the fantasy of the human body. In his novel, Ben Okri uses some fantasized bodies, some bloodthirsty, revolutionary and prostitute figures to denounce this violence, raise awareness and renew the African literary aesthetics.



Keywords: Body, fantasy, violence, aesthetics



Cette étude essaie de montrer à travers *The Famished Road* (1991) de Ben Okri que le corps de l'être humain est réifié en postcolonie. Dans ce contexte, les écrivains africains inventent des artifices littéraires afin de rendre compte du fantasme du corps de l'homme. Dans son roman, Ben Okri utilise des corps fantasmés, des figures de sanguinaires, de révolutionnaires et de prostituées pour dénoncer cette violence, faire prendre conscience et renouveler l'esthétique littéraire africaine.

Mots-clés : Corps, fantasme, violence, esthétique

Introduction

The body is an essential element used by African writers in their literary productions. It is used for socio-cultural, political and aesthetic purposes. It is thus an important component of both African literary poetics and ethics. Through the corporeal substance, the constitutive elements of the text are built, the narration is produced and completed (Nshimiyimana, 2005, p. 88). However, a good analysis of it in literary productions requires an understanding of the notion itself. According to Achille Mbembe, "the body [...] is an anatomical reality, a gathering of organs, each with its specific function" (Mbembe, 2013, pp. 209-210)¹. This diverse functioning of the body seems

¹ « Le corps [...] est une réalité anatomique, un assemblage d'organes ayant, chacun, des fonctions spécifiques ».

to make it an opaque entity. In fact, by its ability to change differently according to the needs of each organ, the body appears as a fantasized organ or a substance playing a literary or narrative role. Achille Mbembe adds in the same perspective that “more than a symbolical ambivalence [...], the meaning of the body is linked [to the] power of the fantasy [and that] the subject can be transformed at any circumstances” (*ibid.*, pp. 210-211)¹.

This ambivalent representation of the body as a means of contradiction is pervasive in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*. The fantasy of the body, its metamorphosis and the violence upon it, constitutes specific features of Okri's style. To reach the aim of this study, postcolonial theory with its theoretical tools of counter discourse will be considered.

Many research works have been made on the topic of the body in African literature. Works such as “Through a female lens: aspects of masculinity in francophone African women's writing” (2009) by Mutunda Sylvester and the ones by Eugène Nshimiyimana, Joy Charnley, Ghislaine Laghzaoui, Françoise Naudillon etc. (all published in 2005), shed more light on this topic. Through anthropological, psychological, social and symbolical analysis, those literary critics try to understand the use of the body, specifically the female body in African literature.

So, without rejecting their specific views, this study attempts to reveal the fantasy of the body in three points. First, it will show how the human body is characterized by the fantasy in the plot. Second, we will see how this fantasy of the body is pervasive through the lexical category of the sex and how it is a representation of social realities in postcolonial Africa. Finally, the study will scrutinize this fantasized representation of the body as an aesthetic created by Ben Okri.

I. Mythic and fantasized representation of the body

The body in *The Famished Road* seems to have a hybrid nature. It faces mythic and magic transformation, mutilation, initiation and violence. Madame Koto's body can be seen as an example of this ambivalent transformation in the plot. She is firstly seen as a witch because of her nature. For instance, she gets a mythic pregnancy. Shulamith Firestone would say that “pregnancy is the temporary deformation of the body of the individual for the sake of the species” (quoted by Joy Charnley, 2005, p. 136). But this temporary transformation of

¹ « Plus que l'ambivalence symbolique [...], le sens du corps est étroitement lié [au] pouvoir de fantasme [et] le sujet peut se métamorphoser en toutes circonstances ».

Madame Koto's body is a mythic one, because she has never given birth to a baby from her pregnancy. That is why the narrator calls it "Madame Koto abnormal pregnancy [that] some people made it sound almost apocalyptic" (p. 405).

Madame Koto's body also undergoes some magical transformations. She appears sometimes like a monster or a ghost, sometimes like a savage animal as described by the narrator. "She looked like a washed-out monster, a cross between a misbegotten animal and a wood carving" (p. 91) or "she looked like a compressed rhinoceros on the stool" (p. 135). By comparing her to "a monster", "a misbegotten animal" or "a compressed rhinoceros", the narrator tries to show how Madame Koto's body undergoes some unreal transformations. This metamorphosis also deepens with the change of time: "As the evening progressed, she got darker, more dignified" (p. 109). Her whole body is thus a mysterious and mythic one.

"the two characters attempt to eschew the myth of maternity and the maternal instinct"

The narrative also talks about a pregnant goddess whose mythic pregnancy invades all the universe. As stated by the narrator, "her [the goddess of the island] mighty and wondrous pregnancy faced the sea [...]. At night [her] eyes shone like moonstones" (p. 13). Indeed, this

deformation of Madame Koto and the goddess bodies takes the reader into a strange world. This fact epitomizes in many ways the fantasized, mythic and mysterious transformation of the body in the narrative. Taking into account both pregnancies, one might say that the two characters attempt to eschew the myth of maternity and the maternal instinct (J. Charnley, *op. cit.*, p. 135). In one word, they try to defy the inhuman or barbaric aspect of pregnancy on their body. This mythic and magic transformation of their body also unveils the ambiguity and ambivalence of the body and the fantasy it undergoes in the narrative.

Above this mythic and magic transformation of the body, the narrative in *The Famished Road* reveals what Achille Mbembe terms as the "chosité [de la] corporalité" (Mbembe, 2013, p. 209), meaning the animalization of the body. The body can be seen here as the place of all the predicaments. It reveals the inhuman treatment endured by it. In other words, it shows how the body undergoes inhuman labor, violence, mutilation and initiation. In this perspective, the body becomes like an object, a thing or a slave that belongs to someone. It becomes something that one may possess, transform and dominate according some specific needs. That is what Achille Mbembe also thinks when

he asserts that “one knows that, ‘in order to remain in power’ all domination must be done on the body of the dominated subject” (*ibid.*, p. 187, emphasis added).

This reification of the human body pervades the whole narrative. For instance, poor people undergo inhuman labors. The episode of this animalization of the body is shown in the passage below:

There was no stillness anywhere and I went on walking and saw a lot of men carrying loads, carrying monstrous sacks, as if they were damned, or as if they were working out an abysmal slavery. They staggered under the absurd weight of salt bags, cement bags, garri sacks. The weights crushed their heads, compressed their necks and the veins of their faces were swollen to bursting point. Their expressions were so contorted that they seemed almost inhuman... (p. 144)

The body of poor people can be considered as a thing or a machine in the above quotation. These people are no more considered as human beings. As implied in this assertion, the loads they carry deform their bodies. The use of the phrase “abysmal slavery”, meaning everlasting, bottomless, reveals this animalization of the human body. In fact, the body can be qualified here as a thing, an object subdued by the most powerful people. This “abysmal slavery” is used to control particularly poor people who are suspected of being opposed to the Party of the Rich in the narrative:

They have begun to spoil everything with politics (...) Now they want to know who you will vote for before they let you carry their load (...) If you want to vote for the party that supports the poor, they give you the heaviest load. I am not much better than a donkey. (p. 81)

Politics has thus intruded into the field of employment. In this context, the leaders use this fact to control the masses that are suffering from famine et poverty because of unemployment. This kind of dictatorship and punishment aims at subduing the poor people to the willingness of the powerful ones. Sometimes, these poor people are deprived of wages or salaries and food in order to perpetuate their suffering.

Moreover, as already stated, the body undergoes other forms of violence in the narrative. Poor people face terrible violence and repressions. The Party of the Rich uses its “Untamed Pests” (Zezeza, 1991, p. 1) such as the police and the political thugs to repress the poor people.

He hurried away and returned an hour later with three policemen. They fell on us and flogged us with whips and cracked out our skulls with batons. (...). They came back with reinforcements. (...). The reinforcements meanwhile lashed out at everything in sight, unleashing mayhem in a drunken fever. When they had finished fifteen men, three children, four women, two goats and a dog lay wounded along the battleground of our area. (pp. 9-11)

Indeed, such a violence on the human body is one of the main means used in Africa to lead people. The poor are some sort of cattle to the leaders. They can be used as sacrifices in order to reach one's goals. That is why Achille Mbembe thinks that the postcolony is "an opened tomb in all its ugliness..." (Mbembe, 1993, p. 5)². In other words, the life of the majority seems to be less important than the goals of the postcolonial leaders.

As another example, Dad is particularly the one who suffers a lot from this kind of violence. His body always undergoes miraculous and cruel transformations after many fights. The narrator accounts for it in the following words: "Dad stayed at home for six days after the fight. His bruises got very big, his eyes swelled to extraordinarily bulbous proportions, and his lower lip grew larger than a misshapen mango. [...] None wanted to see how monstrously [...] Dad was in his condition" (pp. 359-360). As stated in the above quotation, we can notice how fantasized the body of Dad becomes after the fight. His condition here reveals the monstrous representation of the body faced by violence.

The body is also the object of mutilation and initiation. The mutilation of the body can be considered as actions of razor incisions and scarifications on it. This is the example of the midget woman described by the narrator. "She had two fresh cuts on her face. They were new scarifications. They were black as if ash had recently been used to stop the bleeding. Her face was different because of the marks" (p. 275). This example shows how scarifications on the body make one different from the others. In fact, they can be read in African's tradition as a mark of identity. In one word, scarifications in Africa allow people to identify themselves from others. They are, indeed, marks of tradition and belonging to a tribe.

Another example is the "ogogoro-seller [whose] serious face, with long scarifications, frightened [Azaro]" (p. 316). Indeed, this fact shows how the face or the body of the "ogogoro-seller" was fantasized by the razor incision. In this case, the human body is seen as something which can be transformed

² La postcolonie est comme « un tombeau ouvert de toute sa laideur... ».

because of traditional and cultural needs. However, as already stated, this fact comes to value African cultural and traditional identities.

Moreover, scarifications and razor incisions are also used for therapeutic goals. This is the case of Azaro whose “Dad made razor incisions on [his] chest and shoulders and forehead and pressed stinging potions on the cuts [while he was ill and caught by the *abiku* spirits]” (p. 340). Indeed, even if these razor incisions can be painful to the body, their final goal is to heal people from sickness and deliver them from the devils. As a result, Azaro recovers later and “cried out for food”. To sum up, we can say that razor incisions and scarifications are not only used to value cultural identities in African tradition. They are also used to heal or cure people from illness. In this context, they can be considered as a rite of separation and recovery, because they have the power to deliver and heal people from the devil and sickness as seen with Azaro.

Initiation is also inflicted to people’s body in African tradition. It shows “how the body becomes [...] the place of heroism and expiation, the place of contradictions and confusions, of suffering and reconciliation” (Laghzaoui, 2005, p. 26)³. As an example, Azaro undergoes initiation in the forest. During this rite, he faces many obstacles and mysteries. He accounts for this tedious and frightening experience in the passage below:

Dad told me to stay there and wait for him. [...]. A yellow wind stirred the leaves. Branches cracked. An animal cried out. The black cat, eyes aglow, ran past me in the direction Dad had gone [...]. Noises accumulated in the forest. An owl flew over my head and watched me from a branch. I heard footsteps approaching and I could have sworn that they belonged to a heavy man, but when I looked I saw an antelope. [...]. Then I saw something move. The air swelled. A woman stepped out of a tree and limped towards me. [...]. She was deformed in a way I couldn’t define. She had on a white robe... (p. 38)

In spite of the difficult ordeals and mysteries, Azaro did not move. This fact first shows how initiation of the body calls for heroism. Despite the fearful context and experience he goes through, Azaro remains steadfast refusing to run away. In this context, Azaro can be considered as a hero who defeated fear from the mystery of the spirit world. Thus, the initiated body is the one which faces tenebrous, supernatural and spiritual forces. In this sense, it calls for a spirit which wobbles between real and unreal world. That is why, it brings out

³ L’initiation montre comment « le corps devient [...] le lieu de l’héroïsme et de l’expiation, le lieu de toutes les contradictions et de toutes les confusions, de la souffrance et de la réconciliation ».

a sense of obstacle and heroism. In other words, this fantastic wobbling undergone by the initiated body in the space and the time can be considered as a resistance, a perpetuation of the tradition through temporal changes and an essential means of the quest for identity in postcolonial Africa.

To sum up, we can firstly assert that this mystery and fantasy undergone by the body shows “the tragic dimension of socio-political realities of the African and Africa” (A. Coulibaly, 2010, p. 201). Ben Okri uses this image to denounce the cruelty of human beings on their fellows and the evil practices of postcolonial leaders upon their people. Also, through this labyrinth of the body, Ben Okri tries to question the hegemony of human beings on phenomena of the universe. His writing is thus a liberation to unveil some drifts in the society such as violence, inhumanity, xenophobia. This is what Maurice Amuri⁴ also thinks by stating that the fantasized body in postcolonial Africa is inspired from “the tragic feeling of life [such as] black slaves trade, colonization, dictatorships, bloody wars etc.” (Amuri, 2012, p. 15). In addition to this mysterious and fantasized body, Ben Okri also tries to escape from the social censor through the lexical category of sex.

“The carnivalesque focuses on an aesthetic of transgression of moral values. It generally refers to immorality, particularly to sexuality without taboo.”

2. The carnivalesque body

The carnivalesque focuses on an aesthetic of transgression of moral values. It generally refers to immorality, particularly to sexuality without taboo (Bakhtine, quoted by N. Auzas, 2004, p. 49). In this analysis, the focus will be on prostitution of the body as revealed in Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*. Indeed, by using this kind of writing in his narrative, Ben Okri would like to escape from the social stigma. As stated by Todorov, “sexual outburst [are] better accepted by any kind of censors if one registers them in the account of the devil [and the fantasy]”⁵ (quoted by Amuri, *op. cit.*, p. 13). In this context, the narrative by Ben Okri shows politicians, deformed spirits, ghosts and devils having sex with prostitutes in Madame Koto’s Bar:

⁴ Le fantasme du corps est inspiré par « le sentiment tragique de la vie [tel que, la] traite des esclaves noirs, la colonisation, les dictatures, les guerres sanglantes... »

⁵ « Les déchainements sexuels [sont] mieux acceptés par toute espèce de censure si on les inscrit au compte du diable [du fantastique, surnaturel] ».

I saw a white man with silver eyelashes dancing with a woman whose abundant breasts brought flames to his face [...]. I saw the ghost figures of young men and women [...] making their silent procession through the celebrations. [...]. I saw men dancing with political erections. Sweat and sexual potency filled the air. Dancing women generated heat-waves with the gyrations of their bottoms. At one end of the party a chained monkey kept snatching off the wigs of prostitutes. A politician was contemplating a woman's quivering buttocks [...]. Red lights flooded my brain and when my eyes cleared, the smells of thousand perfumes, of wild sex on hot illicit nights, of vaginal fluids, of animal sweat, overpowered my senses. In the terrible heat of the dance I saw that, among the erotic dancers, the politicians and chiefs, the power merchants, the cultists, paid supporters, thugs and prostitutes, all moving to the beat of the new music, among them all, there were strangers to the world of living. (pp. 455-459)

There is thus, a subversion of the female sex and body. This passage can be read as a pornographic representation. Perversity and erotism are what draw our attention in the above quotation. There is no taboo about the female sex. That is why, we can read the lexical category of sex such as “abundant breasts, sexual potency, vaginal fluids, wild sex etc.” This lexical category of sex shows that the taboos are revealed and everything is called by its real name. This fact also sheds light on the sexual violence upon women which is pervasive in postcolonial societies.

Moreover, this writing can be considered as an irony to denounce the postcolonial leadership. Indeed, postcolonial leaders are the causes of this sexual transgression and immorality in African societies. By talking about “political erections”, the narrator wants to reveal how the politicians and leaders are the causes of the depravation of social taboos. Instead of guaranteeing or preserving social and moral values, these leaders are the ones who promote social and sexual debauchery. Perversity is therefore the lifestyle of postcolonial regimes. They are generally interested in mere physical pleasures. In a word, these regimes are preoccupied with asserting a power which they are denied in the international relationships. This carnivalesque body is finally a means of revealing the violence, the domination of postcolonial rulers over their subjects. They seem to have the bodies of the people at their disposal.

In other words, by staging the body in a carnivalesque manner, Ben Okri first wants to escape censorship, then to name things by their real name, and finally to denounce the ‘depravation’ of the female sex and immorality that are so pervasive in postcolonial societies. It is what Achille Mbembe also thinks while stating that “in the postcolony, the mouth, the stomach and the penis constitute some classical receipts of commandment [or leadership]” (Mbembe, 2000, p. 175)⁶. Finally, this fantasy and carnivalesque representation of the body can be seen as a literary tool, a way of writing.

3. Aesthetic representation of the body

In the same perspective as Felman⁷ who thinks that the body is linked to writing, particularly to literary aesthetic, Ben Okri produces a writing which values the beauty of the body, especially the woman’s body. Indeed, the female body can be analyzed and interpreted through an aesthetic view in African literature. This fact started in the pre-independence literature with the negritude movement:

Within nationalist pre-independence African literature, two main models of African womanhood were proposed: woman as mother and woman as beauty. The literature of negritude, a movement that attempted, among other things, to recapture African’s glorious past, has countless examples of those two figures. (Mutunda, 2009, pp. 46-47)

Therefore, the second representation of woman, that is “woman as beauty” is what draws our attention through Ben Okri’s writings. As an example, we have Helen, a beggar whose beauty refines all the deformities of the other beggars. In spite of being one-eyed and beggar, her beauty is an extraordinary one. Because of this physical quality, Azaro falls in love with her. He accounts for this fact in the following passage:

The family of beggars, led by the beautiful one-eyed girl, had begun their departure. They filed out, the girl in front. She kept looking back. She had no expression or judgement on her face. [...]. I wanted to follow them on their journeys, to be with the

⁶ « En postcolonie, la bouche, le ventre et le pénis constituent des recettes classiques du commandement ».

⁷ Le corps [est] liée avec l’écriture et particulièrement — pour reprendre une expression de Shoshana Felman — avec la « chose littéraire ». Tous deux sont en effet objets de désir, de fantasmes et de lectures, origine inéluctable du discours ou perspective énonciatrice, figures ambiguës de représentation et d’interprétation.

beautiful girl who had refined all their deformities into a single functioning eye, whose face would pursue me in dreams and loves and music. (p. 422)

“these new [literary] aesthetics that the critic names the textual ‘licentiousness’ [or] carnivalization”

In fact, Azaro would like to follow this family of beggars because he finds in the beauty of Helen an idealized representation of life and a blessing. This fact reveals that the physical beauty gives taste or sense to life and humanity. It shows that the female body is a simple, peaceful and natural beauty, and is far from the ‘savage’ and ‘barbaric’ vision of human beings.

We can thus say that even if the carnivalesque body produced by Ben Okri violates the traditional writing, mainly its cardinal principle of morality, it is the way he has chosen to value his writing and the African literary aesthetic. In other words, the fantasized and mysterious representation of the body developed in the first subpart of this study reveals an African aesthetic which combines African mythical and magical practices with the ones inherited from colonization. By this way of writing, Ben Okri attempts to investigate the African consciousness such as its power of imagination, creation, spirituality and aesthetics in African culture. A. Coulibaly (2010, p. 201) asserts in the same perspective that the aesthetic representation of the body can be seen as one of “these new [literary] aesthetics that the critic names the textual ‘licentiousness’ [or] carnivalization”⁸.

Conclusion

The study has revealed the fantasy, carnivalesque and aesthetic representation of the body in Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* (1991). This ambivalent, mysterious and prostitute body first draws the reader into a strange world. It then reveals living conditions in postcolonial Africa which still undergoes neocolonialism, barbarism and immorality. It is a violent or transgressive writing that raises the awareness of people about their present conditions. It unveils that this representation of the body can be seen as marks of identity and alterity, or as a hybrid humanity which is attempting to reconquer itself and reconstitute its identity. Finally, the study has discovered

⁸ « Cette esthétique nouvelle est une des formes que la critique nomme le “dévergondage textuel”, la carnavalisation textuelle ».

that this way of staging the human body can be perceived as an aesthetic proposal for the renewal of the writing in African literature of the postcolony.

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