***The Famished Road* After Postmodernism: African Modernism and The Politics of Subalternity**

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When Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* was published in 1991, it was met with great critical acclaim. Winning the Booker Prize for that year and emerging in Nigerian letters when the novel seemed to be on the decline, its arrival on the international literary scene secured its canonisation. Its publication coincided with the period (the 1980s and early 1990s) when two critical projects dominated literary criticism: postmodernism and postcolonialism. Postmodernism, which found its epistemological basis in post-structuralism, marked its distance from modernism by casting it as dogmatic, imperialistic, and worn out, and heralded, or so its proponents claimed, a shift in paradigm and a new historical epoch. The dissolution of the unitary subject, the privileging of multiple subject positions with often competing and contradictory interests, epistemological relativism, which followed the Derridean critique of Western logocenticism, Lyotard’s assertion of ‘the demise of metanarratives,’ and the subversion of traditional hermeneutics, defined the epistemological and ontological field and scope of this new paradigm.

Postcolonialism, as it became codified during this period by Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, drew its critical energy from post-structuralism (albeit from different perspectives, Foucauldian, Lacanian, Marxist-inflected deconstruction, respectively) and political fervour from the more left-leaning postmodernist thinkers rather than the older materialist critique which had dominated anti-colonial and early postcolonial criticism. The deconstruction of the ‘transcendental signified,’ the unified subject, the metanarratives of History opened up a space for postcolonial theorists to explore the radical potential of hybridity, provide a comprehensive critique of Eurocentricism, debunk essentialist notions of the nation, race, ethnicity etc., and to address the ongoing neo-colonial domination of the postcolonial world by the West. As postmodernism and postcolonialism shared certain similar interests and concerns, critics worked hard to develop “a strong affiliative network of methodological collaboration” (Slemon 4).

Okri’s *The Famished Road* is often read as representing that happy coincidence. Indeed, Douglas McCabe quite rightly avers that “[t]he vast majority of critical commentary [on *The Famished Road*] […] views the text as both postmodern and postcolonial” (1). For example, Olatubosun Ogunsanwo suggests: “What makes *The Famished Road* postcolonial and multicultural both in form and content is precisely what makes it postmodernist” (42). John C. Hawley concurs. Despite acknowledging the possible asymmetrical relationship between the theoretical assumptions of postcolonialism and postmodernism, he applies the label of ‘postcolonial postmodernity’ to Okri’s novel (35). In scholarship of the novel, the overlap of these two literary-critical projects is often allied to a particular genre: magic realism (see Faris 101). Thus, with the publication of *The Famished Road*, Okri joined Gabriel García Márquez and Salman Rushdie to form the ‘holy trinity’ of the field, whose urbane cosmopolitanism was made manifest in their choice of a specific form of the novel: magically realist and intractably postmodernist.

Postmodernism vs. Postcolonialism

The label of postmodernism and the generic identification of ‘magic realism’ have not proved an easy fit for Okri’s groundbreaking novel. One of the more vocal critics of the postmodernist identification of the novel is Douglas McCabe. Dad’s claim that “no way is ever definitive, no truth ever final” (*The Famished Road* 559) is often given as evidence of Okri’s privileging of a decidedly postmodern epistemological relativism (e.g. see De Bruijn 178). McCabe counters this critical attribution by drawing attention to one of the novel’s central rhetorical strategies, its millenarianist-spiritualist discourse, by using Anthony K. Appiah’s reading of the novel and Okri’s remarks in a radio interview to support his argument. Appiah contends that in the novel, “the world of spirits is not metaphorical or imaginary; rather, it is more real than the world of the everyday” (“Spiritual Realism” 147) and Okri in an interview in 1994 claimed that: “We need ritual, initiation, transcendence of consciousness” (cited in Ogunsanwo, 40).

However, McCabe does not need to look outside the text to find ample evidence for Okri’s non-postmodernist allegiances. In the novel’s utopian and messianic periphrastic strategies, a rather old-fashioned Enlightenment/Romantic couplet, which aims to join politics and poetics, ethics and aesthetics, i.e. ‘Justice’ and ‘Beauty,’ is voiced often by Ade and Dad. Ade, Azaro’s friend and another abiku-child, returns to the spirit-world because “he did not like the weight of the world” (557), its suffering, its poverty, its pain. Ade prophesises: “Suffering people will know *justice and beauty*. A wonderful change is coming from far away and people will realise the great meaning of struggle and hope” (557, my emphasis). Azaro notes that when Dad pleads for justice in the “supreme courts” of the spirit-world, he does not see the multitudes “pleading for *justice and the balance of beauty* in the world” (565, my emphasis). Earlier in the novel, Mum remembers her mother prophesying that: “*Beauty* will rule the world. *Justice* will rule the world” (325, my emphasis). Given their discursive allegiances with Enlightenment modernity, Justice and Beauty function in Okri’s novel, like Kant’s moral law, which is both universal and transcendental, a law “which being independent of nature is not empirical but has its ground in reason alone” (Kant quoted in Walsh, 1956:319). Its transcendentalism, universalism, and its attempt at metanarrativity are antithetic to postmodernism’s central tenets.

While I agree with McCabe that *The Famished Road* is clearly very un-postmodern in various ways, I do take umbrage with his claim that it also anti-postcolonial in other ways (see McCabe 2). There are numerous post-colonial and decolonising aspects of the novel in terms of both form and content, which have been comprehensively addressed by almost every critic of the novel. Everything from the formal subversion of Western realist conventions (notions of character, closure, causality, the place of the supernatural etc.) and the privileging of African folkloric and mythic literary models, to the postcolonial critique of neo-colonialism (“[Dad] saw our people always preyed upon by other powers, manipulated by the Western world” (564)), and postcolonial failure (“[Dad] saw our people drowning in poverty, in famine, drought, in divisiveness and the blood of war” (565)) have been critically addressed to suggest that the novel operates, as Fredric Jameson has suggested of postcolonial fiction, as a “national allegory” (See “Third-World Literature”) of the Nigerian postcolonial predicament.

Rather than *The Famished Road* representing an overlap of postmodernism and postcolonialism, I suggest that Okri’s text instead places these two discursive frameworks at loggerheads with each other. The abiku realm, limned by Okri at the beginning of the novel, is a space of happy hybridity, of transformative liminality, of ludic celebration; a “utopia of serenity, beauty, playfulness and brotherly ‘love’” (McCabe 3). The language of this section is excessively poetic and, like poetry, tries to reach beyond the limits of language and rational comprehensibility: see e.g. phrases like “the beautiful terrors of eternity,” “seduced by the annunciation of wonderful events,” and synaesthetic constructions: “golden chants,” “lapis lazuli incantations,” “golden winds” (see 3-4). The postmodern utopia, enacted through the language and narrative, is rejected quickly by the novel as irreducibly escapist. Indeed, the central narrative arc of our abiku-focaliser follows his attempts to escape the pull of the postmodern utopia of the abiku realm. After the longest episode in the supernatural realm when he falls ill, he rebels against the spirits of the abiku realm, and rejects their claim on him, opting rather for the “earth’s life and contradictions,” and the “liberty of limitations” (558-559). When Azaro makes his choice, the novel fragments as Dad takes over as mystical traveller in the text; his journeys into the supernatural realm often revolve around the very un-postmodern transcendental categories of Justice, Beauty and Truth. Azaro notes that, after one of his mystical escapades “Dad’s spirit was restless for justice and more life and genuine revolution” (566). The postmodern utopia is rejected in favour of postcolonial and, I shall argue later on, modernist ones.

Apart from this explicit rejection of the postmodern vision in terms of the major narrative strand of the text, Okri’s offers a more subtle critique, throughout the novel, of its escapist propensities. As with the sobering return to the quotidian, to ordinary life, after Stephen’s metaphysical flights in Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Okri returns Azaro and Dad (and the reader) to the poverty, suffering and violence of the colonial space after their mystical flights into the supernatural realm. After Azaro’s (and later, Dad’s) ranging out into the mythical realms, we are persistently reminded of the family’s daily struggles: Dad “carrying heavy loads at the garages and marketplaces,” the family, at the heart of the text, “going to sleep on empty stomachs for weeks,” the poverty and degradation of their surroundings, of the thuggery, violence and corruption that define political activity in the novel (92, 94). Okri beautifully orchestrates the ‘return of the real’ in a single paragraph at the end of Book IV. Azaro describes a mystical vision: “I saw delicious girls dancing tarantellas in fields of comets. The woman’s head turned to give me a last smile before she vanished altogether in a Milky Way of music” (354). A moment later, he returns to the real world: “I smelt the gutter and the rude plaster of the corroded houses. Then all I was left with was a world drowning in poverty, a mother-of-pearl moon, and the long darkness before dawn” (354). This sobering return to the real is also a return to the colonial reality of dispossession and degradation. Although the postcolonial utopian vision is finally endorsed by the text, Okri complicates this endorsement by drawing attention to the limitations of any utopian discourse: the rather clichéd though well-meaning point that the search for Justice and Truth often ignores the suffering of ordinary people.

Apart from the textual opposition Okri subtly sets up in the novel between postmodernism and postcolonialism, more broadly speaking, the putative correspondence between these two frameworks is theoretically untenable. Various critics have pointed to the disjuncture between the ideological motivations and assumptions of these two critical projects. Stephen Slemon, in “Modernism’s Last Post,” claims that postcolonialism necessarily departs from the postmodernist paradigm and its insistence, in some versions, on epistemological relativism, because “an *interested* post-colonial critical practice would want to allow for the positive production of oppositional truth-claims” (9). Theories of agency and social change, which are central to the postcolonial project, Linda Hutcheon argues, are often incommensurable with the deconstructive propensities of postmodernism (see “Circling” 171). Craig Tapping puts it succinctly: “Despite [postmodern] theory’s refutation of such absolute and logocentric categories as these – ‘truth’ or ‘meaning’, ‘purpose’ or ‘justification’ – the new literatures […] are generated from cultures for whom such terms as ‘authority’ and ‘truth’ are empirically urgent in their demands” (cited in Slemon 10). The answer to the question Anthony Appiah poses in “Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?” seems to be no. In his discussion of the post-nationalist propensities of the second generation of Nigerian writers, he suggests:

[T]hey reject not only the Western *imperium* but also the nationalist project of the postcolonial national bourgeoisie. And, so it seems to me, the basis for that project of delegitimation cannot be a postmodernist one: rather, it is grounded in an appeal to an ethical universal. (“Is the Post-” 353)

In *The Famished Road*’s insistence on a theory of political and social agency, in its demand for social and political change, in its reliance on such supposedly outmoded ideas such as ‘Truth,’ ‘Justice’ and ‘Freedom,’ Okri’s postcolonialism seems to me closer to modernism and its various enthusiasms than to postmodernism’s ludic disavowals.

Indeed, there is much to suggest that *The Famished Road*’s allegiances, ideological and formal, lie with modernism rather than with postmodernism. I have shown above how Okri opposes postmodern and postcolonial utopian discourses (privileging the latter) and, more precisely, how the subversion of postmodern discourse is achieved through recourse to transcendental (in the Kantian sense) categories such as Justice and Beauty. The novel shares with modernist texts various experimental strategies: a “fragmentation of textual unity,” a “play of contradictory genres,” and an “anti-normative aestheticizing impulse” (Frow 117). Also, the novel’s compulsive attention to a particular consciousness (strange though Azaro’s might be), and its recuperation of an historical metanarrative (a sense of beauty and justice will bring about “the first truly universal civilisation in the history of recorded and unrecorded time” (Okri, *A Way of Being Free* 133)), places it firmly in the modernist camp. It is odd that a number of critics, who have pointed to the disjunctures between postmodern and postcolonial literary practice, refuse to consider postcolonialism’s modernist affinities (e.g. see Hawley 35; Ogunsanwo 50; Slemon 9-10). To a large extent, this refusal has to do with modernism’s bad press in postcolonial critical circles: modernism’s identification with colonialism itself (see Said 222-23), its elitist propensities (especially of late modernism), and its obsessive individualism (which proved an anathema to a socially and politically committed critical project).

My re-evaluation of the relationship between modernism and postcolonialism also comes from a shift in contemporary critical concerns. We seem to be in the middle of a sea-change in literary and art production and criticism. On the one hand, modernism seems to be in the ascendant. Critics draw attention to the representative boons and radical political impetus that modernism offers a number of postcolonial writers. Simon Gikandi suggests of Nuruddin Farah: “Farah is attracted to modernism and modernist style because its unfinished and fragmented nature seems to parallel the narrative of the postcolonial state, while its reflexivity and circularity provide him with a language of social critique” (“Nuruddin Farah” 756). Benita Parry looks for and finds likenesses among the many ‘peripheral modernisms,’ which she understands “as the aesthetic forms generated beyond capitalism’s cores” (27). On the other hand, the postmodern, as both a description of a hegemonic historical period (à la Jameson) and a dominant figurative style (à la Hassan), seems to have been abandoned. In attempting to theorise our contemporary cultural and economic moment, the ‘post’ of postmodernism, Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, claim:

The postmodern years of plenty, pastiche, and parataxis are over. In fact, if we are to believe the many academics, critics, and pundits whose books and essays describe the decline and demise of the postmodern, they have been over for quite a while now. (2)

In the epilogue to the second edition of *The Politics of Postmodernism*, one of the more incisive postmodern critics, Linda Hutcheon suggests of postmodernism, “Let’s just say it: it’s over” (165) and issues a challenge: “Post-postmodernism needs a new label of its own, and I conclude, therefore, with this challenge to readers to find it – and name it for the twenty-first century” (181).[[1]](#endnote-1) With some verve, Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie claims: “Modernity is back in the news and the contemporary era after postmodernism has returned to modernist commitments and strategies with a vengeance” (1). What seemed to be representative of *the* logic of a particular historical epoch, is now seen as only one of the logics of late capitalism, and a logic, if one is to believe the accounts above, which has been surpassed. If postmodernism has been the dominant critical prism through which *The Famished Road* has been analysed (see e.g. Aizenberg; Bennet; Cezair-Thompson; de Bruijn; Cooper, Hawley; Ogunsanwo), how do we approach that text in the wake of the demise of the postmodern moment? What would it mean to claim *The Famished Road* for modernism?

Theorising African Modernism

Making the case for *The Famished Road* to be considered a modernist text and insisting on the crucial significance of modernism to postcolonialism in general are controversial theoretical gestures, especially through what Homi Bhabha has called “the postcolonial perspective” (173), a perspective whose epistemological and ideological tendencies, Neil Lazarus reminds us, has come to dominate postcolonial studies since its inception. Among its norms and suppositions, Lazarus includes: “a constitutive anti-Marxism; an undifferentiating disavowal of all forms of nationalism and a corresponding exaltation of migrancy, liminality, hybridity, and multiculturality; […] and refusal of an antagonistic or struggle-based model of politics” (*The Postcolonial Unconscious* 21). Unsurprisingly given his Marxist leanings, the problem Lazarus has with this ‘pomo-postcolonial’ perspective is that a “limited optic on the world, a ‘*selective tradition*’, has been imagined, and is proposed, as a universal” (*Unconscious* 34). The scholarship on Okri’s novel, suggested above, places it firmly within the ambit of pomo-postcolonialism; and it has served it well: here was a novel that, like Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* before it, seemed to perfectly embody pomo-postcolonialism in textual form, and, indeed, extend its assumptions and investments; here, also, was an African example of this particular tendency. The latter was an invaluable service. As the most significant critics in the field, the critics who have provided pomo-postcolonialism with its ideological foundations, Said, Spivak and Bhabha, have largely ignored literature from south of the Sahara, the Africaneity of Okri’s text helped to universalise its central tenets.

Within African literary criticism, the claim of Okri’s modernism is even more controversial as it enters a long-standing debate about the relationship between modernism and nationalism; a debate which was, as was often the case in the discussion among African intellectuals, displaced onto the realm of aesthetics. In “The Short Century”, Simon Gikandi writes that “some time in the early 1960s, at the height of decolonisation, *a strange idea* took hold that modernism was anathema to African nationalism” (12, my emphasis). As the rest of his article quite clearly shows, this idea was not strange at all. Gikandi articulates why European modernism was rejected by “the most powerful and sophisticated advocates of African cultural nationalism, or even Marxism,” as “apolitical,” “decadent,” and “ill-advised” (15). Given the importance of a *littérature engagée* to the various projects of cultural nationalism, European modernism’s promotion of theories of artistic autonomy, the separation of arts from politics, were at odds with “notions of Sartrean commitment popular in the 1960s and 1970s” (Gikandi, “The Short Century” 15). Also, European modernism’s production of alterity, through the discourse of primitivism, led to a malignant apprehension of the African, an apprehension that was the condition of possibility of its own formation. African art served not only to re-invigorate formal principles of European art, but worked to return the ‘auratic’ in the age of mechanical reproduction by displacing the African from the domain of modernity. Although numerous critics have pointed out that black artists and intellectuals from Africa and the diaspora played a fundamental role in the making of modernism, Gikandi is forced to admit that: “Africa may have made its aesthetic presence in modernism but this was in compromised terms, as the extreme of alterity” (23).[[2]](#endnote-2) African intellectuals’ wariness and anxiety about modernism can also be attributed to what was regarded as its complicity in the colonial project, especially in colonial education. Nicholas Brown points to “the prestige accorded to modernist literary texts by colonial-style education at mid-century” (1). As a marker of European civilizational superiority modernism presented the African writer with “both an obstacle and spur to new and sometimes aggressively oppositional literary production” (Brown 1).[[3]](#endnote-3) In terms of the perception of European modernism’s attempt to separate art from politics, in its promotion of primitivist ideas of Africa and the African, and in its role in the cultural imperialism of colonialism, African cultural nationalism’s disavowal of modernism’s central precepts seem understandable and obvious.

The relationship, however, between modernism, modernity, African anti-colonial and early postcolonial nationalism was a more complex affair. If European modernism’s essential gesture was, as Adorno claims, the saying of ‘No’ to modernity (see Lazarus, “Modernism and African Literature” 234), African nationalism had, by necessity, to say both Yes and No: Yes, as modernity provides nationalists the tools with which to modernise their societies and gain political independence; Western models are used as a means to combat Western aggression, and No, because Western modernity represented the ideological basis of colonialism. In attempting to bypass the discourses of modernity, African cultural nationalism aimed at (paradoxically like colonial capitalist processes) dismantling traditional structures of power “while reviving what was defined as the true and pristine traditions of a distant and independent past” (Jayawardena 5). Modernity then, becomes the site of a deep ambivalence, in that African anti-colonial nationalism defends both tradition and modernity, at the same time. Neville Hoad avers that “[t]he emergent post-colonial nation must posit itself as the vehicle for economic and cultural progress – as the agent of modernity. Simultaneously, it must represent itself as the custodian of the fixed identities conferred on it by (an imagined) pre-colonial past – as the repository of tradition” (33).[[4]](#endnote-4) The saying of ‘No’ to modernity, therefore, creates an affinity with modernism even as it marks its distance from it, as European modernism, following the Poundian injunction to ‘Make it new,’ rejects various forms of traditionalism.

The general disavowal of modernist aesthetics came to head in 1975, around the question of the place of modernist poetry in Africa, in what has come to be known as the *Transition* debate, named after the literary magazine in which it first appeared. The terms (authentic African poetics vs. derivative Euro-modernism) and antagonists (the bolekaja critics and Soyinka) of the debate are well known[[5]](#endnote-5), and need not to be addressed here except to draw attention to aspects of Soyinka’s riposte. In “Neo-Tarzanism,” Soyinka subtlety suggests that much traditional African poetry, by being “allusive,” “elliptical,” and “multi-textured” is already modernistic (38-39) and it is precisely a distinctive African “ontological relationship” to the products of Western modernity which makes them African – an essentialist Africaneity which organises modernisation’s various commodities into an ontological framework. In *The Famished Road*, we see numerous examples of both the processes of modernisation and its technological products, e.g. the Photographer’s camera, Madame Koto’s car, electricity etc. being incorporated unproblematically within the animistic framework of the text. Technological modernisation leads less to the disenchantments of a Western modernity, but to further re-enchantments of an African modernity.

The *Transition* debate revolved around poetry in Africa. However, the protocols and terms of the debate were firmly established in earlier discussion of the form and role of the modernist African novel from about the mid-1960s to the 1970s. Various writers and critics reacted with an initial consternation and then disdain and sometimes open hostility to a new type of the novel in West African letters, which quickly became referred to as the ‘disillusionment novel.’ Their reaction was two-fold, directed against both the form and content of these novels. A sort of what Lukacs had called a ‘critical realism,’ had dominated the anti-colonial and postcolonial novel in most decolonising and decolonised African countries. A realism, despite subverting some of tenets of the European model e.g. the idea of the hero-as-protagonist, its individualistic inclinations, its often hetero-normative triumphalist closures, was used effectively as a vehicle for the nationalist, and sometimes Marxist demands of the decolonising agenda.[[6]](#endnote-6) In terms of form, the new set of disillusionment novels seemed to draw its aesthetic strategies of fragmentation, temporal and narrative disjunctures, a detailed exploration of interiority through the stream of consciousness technique, etc. from the European modernist novel and its content, rather than representing the submission to the priorities of cultural nationalism and its concomitant of ‘authentic’ modes of representation, offered a bleak, despairing, indeed ‘disillusioned’ view of the early postcolonial state. These novels, from Soyinka’s *The Interpreters* (1965*)* to Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautyful Ones are Not Yet Born* (1968) to Kofi Awoonor’s *This Earth, My Brother* (1972), Simon Gikandi argues, in “Nuruddin Farah and Postcolonial Textuality,” represent the high modernist moment of African fiction. In following Gikandi’s lead, I argue elsewhere that these ‘disillusionment’ novels appropriate and engage with Euro-American modernism and, at the same time, re-tool, interrogate and subvert its aesthetic and political strategies, especially, its advocacy of artistic autonomy, its attempt to separate art from the socio-political (at least, in its post-1945 institutionalised form), and its production of African alterity through the logic of primitivism. Soyinka goes a step further (shown above) by claiming the modernism of traditional African verse and other modes of orature. If as Adorno claims of the modernist cultural artefact, that form is a sedimentation of content, then modernist form in these novels, negotiated, acted as a symbolic resolution of a new political landscape, in which artists were increasingly side-lined in the new elite’s drive for political and economic power, and in which the dreams of the independence movement of economic and cultural self-determination, of social equality and human dignity were being steadily eroded. The form of these novels, thus, recuperates postcolonial realities which “echo a confluence of political hopes and disillusionments in postcolonial Africa, the discontinuities of the (post)colonial state, its arbitrary regimes of power and uneven modernity” (Mathuray, “Intimacies” 636-637).

My reading is, of course, a retrospective one. Advocates of cultural nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s responded with much antipathy to these novels in almost exactly the same terms of the bolekaja critics. In a lecture, “Africa and her Writers,” given in 1973, Chinua Achebe, although praising the talent of Ayi Kwei Armah, describes *The Beautyful Ones are Not Yet Born* as a “sick” book. For Achebe, Armah’s novel is too modernistic, too foreign, too Angst-ridden:

The hero, pale and passive and nameless […] wanders through the story in an anguished half-sleep, neck-deep in despair and human excrement, of which we see rather a lot in the book. […] But his Ghana is unrecognizable. This aura of cosmic sorrow and despair is [...] *foreign and unusable* […] Ayi Kwei Armah imposes so much *foreign* metaphor on the sickness of Ghana that it ceases to be true. (524-525, my emphases)

Achebe’s broadside reveals the various priorities of cultural nationalist writing: a rejection of modernist modes of writing, and their assumed privileging of the aesthetic (over the political); their existentialist despair in the face of a degraded modernity; a repudiation of the foreignness (read: Western) provenance; and the imperative of utilitarianism in terms of either its pedagogical function (see Achebe’s “The Novelist as Teacher”) or its role in decolonising the African polity or, indeed, its role in imagining the nation-state into being.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Working against the general historical antipathy, there have been recent attempts to plot the affinities between modernism and African fiction *tout court*. In *The African Novel and The Modernist Tradition*, David I. Ker adopts a purely formalist approach, and argues that a range of African writers (from Achebe to Ngugi, from Soyinka to Armah) adapt the formalist strategies of various European and American writers in an attempt to make sense of the “disorder, despair and anarchy” of their postcolonial predicament (1). Not only does his language betray a decidedly Euro-centric view (describing African novelists as entering “the modernist stream” which clearly starts in Europe, or participating in the modernist “universe” in a “*mature*” way (2-3, my emphasis)), but also, by treating Ngugi, Achebe, Soyinka and Armah as all modernist writers, Ker’s ahistorical formalist approach has to ignore modernism’s various aesthetic strategies (deployed by European, American and African writers) and focus solely on a special handling of point of view. More importantly though, Ker’s reading of Achebe and Ngugi as modernist writers makes the debates (outlined above) in the 1960s and 1970s among African intellectuals and writers, Achebe’s and Ngugi’s privileging of forms of realism, and their antipathy to Armah’s and Soyinka’s, inexplicable.

Rather than the formalism of Ker’s method, Lazarus, in “Modernism,” suggests a materialist approach in dealing with the centrality of modernism to African literature and postcolonial fiction generally (the latter is elaborated more fully in *The Postcolonial Unconscious*). By deploying both Trotsky’s ‘Law of Uneven and Combined Development’ and Jameson’s notion of ‘a singular modernity,’ Lazarus suggests of postcolonial fiction (from Africa and elsewhere), that it engage with the ‘combined unevenness’ of their particular modernities (which are nevertheless singular) and are “all directed to the *longue duree* of specifically capitalist imperialism” (“Modernism” 236).[[8]](#endnote-8) This is an extension of Brown’s argument made in *Utopian Generations*, that both in European modernism and postcolonial African literature, “the ‘political horizon’ of modernism” is a capitalist modernity: “The mere fact that European imperialism names a key moment in the spread of capitalism as a global economic system already implies a certain baseline of universality” (1-2). By deploying the crude Marxian structure of base and superstructure, and ignoring the Althusserian claim of the ‘relative autonomy’ of artistic production, Lazarus makes the theoretical leap, of arguing for the relevance of the theory of combined and uneven development of the postcolony for “the analysis of ‘postcolonial’ modernism” (237). It is quite one thing to argue for shared affinities and a common historical context for postcolonial fiction, quite another to claim the modernism of all postcolonial fiction. In fact, when Fredric Jameson uses the notion of ‘combined unevenness,’ he uses it in relation to a specific postcolonial genre i.e. magic realism, which he describes as a “formal mode” in which the content “betrays the overlap or the coexistence of precapitalist with nascent capitalist or technological features” (“On Magic Realism” 311). Jameson’s analysis is nuanced enough to suggest a purely economic analysis is insufficient (and indeed reductive) in itself to explain the appearance of this new narrative style in postcolonial fiction. Rather, Jameson, in his “Third-World Literature,” points out that any analysis of postcolonial fiction would need to take into account, not only the economic context of its coming-into-being but “such features as the interrelationship of social classes, the role of intellectuals, the dynamics of language and writing, the configuration of traditional forms, the relationship to Western influences, the development of urban experience and money, and so forth” (87, fn).

Lazarus’s blunt economistic model writes out the complexities of African literary history (some of the issues are suggested above in the Jameson footnote) and the debates over form that were central to the project of developing an ‘authentic’ poetics and criticism, poetics and critical paradigms outside of the dominant Western models. In his ‘blanket modernism’ generic terms such as realism, modernism, magic realism, and postmodernism, lose their cogency, despite these literary modes being crucial to the history of African letters. Lazarus’s materialist approach turns out to be as ahistorical as Ker’s formalism and leads, ultimately, to a same dead end in considering African modernism.

How, then, to make the case for Okri’s modernism? Above, I have shown the constitutive incompatibility of postmodernism and African fiction. In Okri’s novel, and in African fiction in general, we note, as Appiah has pointed above, the imperative of ‘ethical universalism’ or, as Brown has argued of European modernism and African letters, a utopian dispensation (see Brown 3-6), ‘meta-narratives’ that suggest something of the embattled and ambivalent relation between an irreducible African modernity and a Western capitalist modernity, ‘meta-narratives’ which are essential to counter the deleterious effects of the latter. A consideration of African modernism, as of all genres of fiction, needs to take into account both formal principles and content, and the way in which form (as all good Marxists argue) reflect, interrogate and sediment the content. In terms of the form of modernist texts, I take as a point of departure, textual techniques (as understood by African intellectuals and writers and, indeed, by their European counterparts), which refuse the conventions of realist representation, i.e. anti-realist strategies which include fragmentation, temporal and narrative disjunctures, generic eclecticism, disjointed and fractured styles, episodicity, excessive repetition, de-metaphoricisation, literalisation etc.; techniques, which are nevertheless girded by a universalist imperative; ethical, political, existential, or humanist. These techniques, might, in part, be derived, as many critics have argued, from the European modernist avant-garde to address the various alienations of the postcolonial condition (see Boehmer, 118, Brown 1, Woods 928-930, etc.). Their source, also, might lie closer to home. Soyinka, as original as ever, makes the case that traditional African poetry in its existential mode and modern African poetry that draws on traditional sources, is often dense and “difficult to articulate” (*pace* the bolekaja critics), in which “[t]hemes are abandoned, recovered, merged with a new arbitrary inclusion” as it attempts “to enter the deeper and essential associations, including the cosmic” (“Neo-Tarzanism” 39, 40). Despite confusing modernism (an aesthetic phenomenon) with modernity (an historical process), Tim Woods’s incisive reading of Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard and His Dead Palm-Wine Tapster in the Deads’ Town* helps to extend the thesis of the African traditional basis of certain modernist aesthetic strategies. In “Modernism and African Literature,” Woods argues that Tutuola’s use of the modes of orature with its “swoops, spirals, digressions, and reiterations,” its use of overt symbolisation and hyperbole, its rendering of abstract qualities as physical realities, a literalisation of metaphors and ideas, and its easy articulation of the natural and mythical planes, techniques lauded as innovative (at least, in terms of Western literary aesthetics) by the likes of T.S. Eliot and Dylan Thomas (932-33), comes very close to some of the formalist techniques of Euro-American modernist poetry and prose.

The Politics of Subalternity

Attributions of the postmodern nature of *The Famished Road*, depends, in part, on its assumed un-structured nature and lack of politics, e.g. McCabe describes the novel, following Appiah’s review, as “a ramshackle and untidy affair, a hodge-podge of social ideologies [...] whose heterogeneity frustrates any attempt to unify the novel around a single ideological vector [despite his arguing, for the majority of the article, that this vector is New Age-ism]”(17), and “a directionless aggregation of events and perceptions […]; an absence of causality […]; [and] an abundance of paradox and outright contradiction” (17, 14, see also Appiah, “Spiritual Realism” 146-48). A close attention to the novel’s narrative strategies and ideological concerns, I shall argue, suggests the attempt to advance a politics of sorts, even if that political vision is shown to be ultimately futile, and the novel itself, rather than being a baggy, uncontrolled affair, is very carefully structured; a structure, that, in fact, maps out its central ‘ideological vector.’ A case can be made, and has been made, that most of the writers of the high modernist moment in West African letters drew heavily on European modernist experimentation to explore the socio-political intricacies and despair of the early postcolonial nation-state, with the caveat that these writers, simultaneously, subverted and interrogated that appropriation, especially in relation to modernism’s ideologies of both the aesthetic and artistic autonomy. Okri, in *The Famished Road*, seems to circumvent this appropriative strategy and draw, principally, on African orature for its own aesthetic sensibility. In attempting to distinguish Okri’s magic realism from those of Rushdie and Marquez, scholarship on Okri’s novel has focussed almost exclusively on Okri’s appropriation of African oral materials, especially the Yoruba tradition established by Fagunwa and elaborated by Tutuola, and has suggested various terms such as ‘spiritual realism’ (Appiah), ‘shamanic realism’ (Renato), ‘animist realism’ (Garuba), ‘sacred realism’ (Mathuray, “Realizing the Sacred”) to differentiate Okri’s deployment of this particular mode of postcolonial fiction. I shall shift the analysis away from this emphasis on Okri’s primary oral aesthetic strategies (dominant though it is), to a consideration of the largely under-theorised politics and ethical dimensions of the text, even if they are largely mediated through autochthonous belief systems.

In terms of content, Okri’s 1991 novel may be fruitfully regarded as a ‘disillusionment novel,’ recalling the tone of the novels of high modernist moment in African fiction. Written during Sani Abacha’s de facto presidency, whose rule is often regarded as the most pernicious of all the preceding dictatorships in Nigeria, and after the seismic trauma of the Biafran War, after decades of military rule, after coups and counter-coups with its corruption, political thuggery, and prebendalism, after three failed republics, the disillusionment, in Okri’s novel, is deeper and more pervasive than its forebears. What seemed an imminent possibility of those novels was played out in real terms in the years that followed. The abiku-image functions, less, as a number of critics have suggested, as an allegory of liminality, hybridity, or the “labile conditions of migrants and postcolonials,” (McCabe 13) in fact, of the pomo-postcolonial perspective, than as a literary embodiment of Nigerian anti-colonial and postcolonial history.[[9]](#endnote-9) Ade, the other abiku in *The Famished Road*, prophesises “Our country is an abiku nation. It keeps coming and going. One day it will decide to remain. It will become strong” (547). The refrain is repeated. Azaro notes that in Dad’s journey in the spirit realm, he realised that “ours too was an abiku nation, a spirit-child nation, on that keeps being reborn and after each birth come blood and betrayal” (567).

Although Okri sets the action of the novel in the period leading up to Independence, he reads that past from the vantage point of postcolonial disillusionment and Nigerian post-Independence history. The present of the narrative conjoins two historical moments: *a doubled temporality*, which bear a lost past which assumed the hopes and dreams of social equality in a decolonised polity and at the same time the seeds of its future discontent. To manage this temporal doubling, an embedded futurity in the past, Okri effectively uses the oral mode of prophecy. After Azaro’s decision ‘to remain’ in the land of the living, Okri shifts both the protagonist’s function in his novel to Dad, and the prophetic function of the abiku to Ade. Ade, before his untimely death, claims: “There will be changes. Coups. Soldiers everywhere. Ugliness. Blindness. And then when people least expect it a great transformation is going to take place. Suffering people will know justice and beauty (547). Note the staccato rhythm of the description of Nigeria’s postcolonial condition and the lyricism of the envisaged transformation, of the utopian impulse. Dad is more specific in the knowledge he gains from his adventures in the spirit realm: “He saw the wars in advance. He saw the economic boom in advance, saw its orgiastic squander, the suffering to follow, the exile to strange lands, the depleting of the people’s will for transformation. He saw the emergence of tyrants who always seem to be born from the extremities of crises. He saw their long rule and the chaos when they are overthrown” (565). In the few short lines of Ade and Dad, Okri is able to encapsulate the postcolonial history of Nigeria, schematised though it is: the decades of disillusionment that beset the majority of the emergent nation-states as they were excluded from the elites’ drive for power and wealth; the devastation of the Nigerian Civil War; the long line of military dictators; the oil boom and inflationary bust of the 1970s and 1980s; the ‘brain drain’ etc. (see Lincoln 249-251) Okri conjoins the utopian impulse born of the promises of the universalist Enlightenment (and Romantic) categories of Truth, Justice and Beauty, of Western modernity itself, with the indigenous religious framework where “propitious sacrifices” are made to display “our serious intent to bear the weight of a unique destiny” (*The Famished Road* 567). This hybridised utopianism, which is voiced in the second half of the book, acts as both a counterpoint to the politics of the first half and, as a marker of its failure, and its extension and resolution.

In between the lyrical descriptions of Azaro’s escapades in the spirit realm (through dreams, visions, his wanderings in the forest, astral travelling etc.), and the gritty realism of Azaro’s family (of their poverty, their dealings with the unscrupulous landlord, political thugs etc.), Okri presents us with vivid descriptions of *four* unplanned riots in the first two books of the novel; riots, which in Fanon’s highly idealised terms, represent the manifestation of the spontaneous rebellion of the *lumpenprolerariat*, “that horde of starving men, uprooted from their tribe and from their clan, [which] constitutes one of the most spontaneous and the most radically revolutionary forces of a colonized people,” who, in more fashionable terms, can be thought of as Spivakian ‘unrepresentable’ subalterns (129). In the second riot, the landlord, a representative of the Party of the Rich, “like a magician” hands out bowls of milk “to the great surging mass of people” of the semi-urban slums. The action quickly descends into complete chaos:

The crowd converged round the van, arms outstretched, and the rush for free milk broke into a frenetic cacophony. The crowd shook the van, voices clashed in the air, children cried out under the crush, hands clawed at the sacks, and the frenzy became […] alarming. (146)

Okri’s paratactical construction unifies the crowd paradoxically through separation – voices and hands are separated from bodies, children from parents – and through the imagery of dissonance and antagonism (the alliterative ‘clashed,’ ‘cried,’ and ‘cacophony’). The hunger and poverty of the frenzied mass become almost impersonal forces driving “the outstretched clawing hands of all the struggling hungry people” (146).

The object of Okri’s narrative attention is not, as was the case with the novels of the high modernist moment, the educated intelligentsia, the *been-tos*. As discussed above, anti-colonial nationalists had a deeply ambivalent relationship with Western modernity and anyway, from the vantage point of the late 1980s had revealed their self-interested drive for economic power and social affluence. The African high modernists registered a crisis within a particular class. Okri engages with those, like Spivak’s subalterns, truly marginalised from both the discourses of colonial modernity and anti-colonial nationalism. Like Azaro’s mother and father, the *lumpenprolerariat* are, as Fanon claims in “Spontaneity: Its Strength and Weakness,” “landless peasants […] who leave the country districts […], rush toward the towns, crowd into tin-shack settlements, and try to make their way into the ports and cities founded by colonial domination,” and it is “within this mass of humanity, this people of the shanty towns, […], that the rebellion will find its urban spearhead” (111, 129). Obeying its own logic of constitution, driven by its marginalized status, the phenomenon of the *lumpenproletariat*, “brings all its forces to endanger the ‘security’ of the town, and is the sign of the irrevocable decay, the gangrene ever present at the heart of colonial domination” (Fanon 136).

In order to circumvent the anti-colonial and postcolonial nationalist politics of Nigeria, Okri attempts to find another source for the potential realization of the dreams of decolonization, i.e. in the spontaneous rebellions of the subaltern, the only form of political intervention available to them. Okri’s sympathies are clear. He describes the “compound men” as having “big faces stamped with hardship and humour” (41). His allegiances are made more clear in his subtle use of pronominal variance. At the beginning of the novel, Azaro uses ‘I’ to mark his decision to separate himself from the spirit-world of the unborn (the ‘we’ that dominates the first few pages of the novel), a separation which makes possible the action of the narrative. However, during the riots, the ‘we’ slips back in. In describing the third riot, Azaro says “*we* set about punishing the vehicle,” “*we* gathered and heaved all our energies together” (182) and later while looking at Jeremiah’s photographs of the riot in the national newspaper, he notes: “For the first times in our lives *we* as a people had appeared in the newspapers. *We* were heroes in our own drama, heroes of our own protest” (182, 184, my emphasis). The emphasis on the integrity of the ‘I’ so essential to the mythical aspects of the text, is, here, dissolved in the political imperative of the ‘we;’ in the imperatives of the nascent political community of the subaltern.

In fact, Okri sets the subaltern’s drive towards decolonization at loggerheads with the vanguardist nationalism, represented by the Party of the Rich and the Party of the Poor, who, we are told, “made identical promises,” promises that, as Okri well knows, will never be met (446). The colonial presence is barely discernible in the novel: Azaro witnesses the drowning of a white overseer and Mum tells him a story about a mad white man who is unable to leave Africa. Rather, the violence and conflict between, what Fanon calls, *the lumpenproletariat* of colonial urban centres and the African nationalist is given much narrative attention. In the second riot, the ripping of *agbada*, signifier of wealth and prestige, from the landlord becomes a very suggestive image of this disjuncture: “so many hands grasped at the lace garment that it tore into several places in the air” (147). In the fourth and final riot of the book, Okri is at his most surreal, describing the night as “that night of blue memories,” “that night of mirrors,” “a night without memory” (210, 211). The excessive qualifications are poetic, opaque and mysterious, creating a dream-like ambience. Azaro describes the people of the compound as ‘innocents,’ who with the help of the ancestors rising from the dead are able to repel the hired thugs of the Party of the Rich (see 211-212). Even the dead, it seems, contribute to the political conflict at the heart of the text, a conflict that is not quite class conflict, as the subaltern do not represent a coherent class within the framework of capitalist modernity.

The central conflict is played out through both the doubled temporality of the narration (*the retrospective futurity*, discussed above) and, more broadly, the structure of the novel. Okri carefully divides the novel into parts, with Book III self-consciously proclaiming itself as an ‘in-between’ book: “I knew we were in the divide between past and future” Azaro remarks of this transitional period, “A new cycle had begun, an old one was being brought to a pitch, prosperity and tragedy rang out,” and of Madame Koto: “She too had crossed the divide between past and future. She must have known that a new cycle had begun” (256, 262). The movement from the first to the second half maps the political history of Nigeria, from the hopes and dreams of pre-Independence to the disillusionment of the postcolony. The first two books of the novel, in which the four riots are described, is almost symphonic in its style as Okri deftly threads together diverse incidents from Azaro’s life (the grinding poverty and conflicts in the domestic sphere, the riots, a series of abductions, his encounters with Madame Koto and the Photographer, his adventures in the mystical realm etc.) with a very particular vision of the world he inhabits, in which there is an easy inter-articulation of the real world and the spirit realm, in which pre-colonial social elements, such as witchcraft, healing rituals, oathing ceremonies, and sorcery, co-exist and often subsume the emergent modern world, of skyscrapers, new churches, electricity, and cars. His language oscillates between the lyrical and the starkly realist, the fantastical and the prosaic, the metaphysical and the mundane, the poetic and the everyday.

The second half of the book (Books IV to VII), allegorically, recuperates the failures of anti-colonial nationalism and the postcolonial disillusionment of Nigeria, and marks the shift to a new socio-political order, which attempts to completely ostracise the subaltern from the economic and political spheres of the African postcolony. The tone changes dramatically. A sense of melancholic despair pervades the narrative, as the political potentiality of the spontaneous rioting, of the first half, disappears completely. Mum says: “This life is too much for me. I am going to hang myself one of these days” (546). Violence in this section is greater and seems to erupt everywhere without any obvious cause (see 321). And, finally, when the thugs at Madame Koto’s party whip the beautiful beggar girl and then turn on the people of the ghetto, Azaro notes: “The thugs whipped themselves into future eras [...] under the fevers of their new ascendancy, their certainty of their long future rule, and their inevitable transformation into men of power” (518), the transition to the new degraded order is complete and the majority of the people’s exclusion from it, is tragic and devastating. Their condition is one of *catastrophic postcoloniality*.

Messianic and religious discourses enter the narrative as compensatory mechanisms for the failures of the politics of the subalternity and the resulting degradation of the lives of the people in the compound. They speak to each other: “One day, by a quiet miracle, God will erase the wicked from the face of the earth.” / “God’s time is the best.” / “I wish God’s time and our time would sometimes agree” (324). Dad starts praying “to our ancestors and to the inscrutable deities” (425) and Mum “prayed in three languages. She prayed to our ancestors, she prayed to God, and she prayed to the angel of all women” (566). The millenarianism and religiosity function less as a signifier of hope than one of deep disillusionment. In the wake of the collapse of politics of nationalism and the hopes embedded in spontaneous rebellion, the shift to the religious also brings about a change in the temporal orders privileged by the text. The possibility of linear progress is now replaced with a contradictory mix of the linear Christian eschatological vision (divine intervention ending History) and the traditional religious idea of circularity and recurrence. The first part of the novel ends with words: “Outside, the wind of recurrence blew gently over the earth” (215) and later Azaro talks about being “lashed by the winds of recurrence” (220). Political conflict becomes subsumed by the ahistorical and mythical, which denies the possibility of political intervention. The conflicts between the nationalist parties and between them and the people of the compound become “the recurrence of ancient antagonisms, secret histories, festering dreams” (227). Ultimately, though, Okri, through Dad’s visions, seems to refuse both the cyclical visions of an indigenous religious perspective and the Christian messianism, and opts for the utopian promises of Enlightenment rationality, of Justice, Beauty and Truth (see discussion above). In Book VIII (which acts as an epilogue), we are told again and again, that a great transformation is going to take place and “that new forces were being born to match the demands of the age” (569-70). The shift in focus returns the novel back on to the terrain of the political, even if it is an attenuated one.

Through the simplification and schematisation of the nationalist politics of pre-Independence Nigeria, into the Party of the Rich and the Party of the Poor, Okri shifts the terms of the central conflict of decolonisation from the opposition between coloniser and colonised, to one between African nationalists and the subaltern. In their failure to integrate the demands of the truly marginalised into their nationalist agendas, early African nationalism, Okri seems to suggest, sowed the seeds of a catastrophic postcoloniality. In his use of formalist techniques such as fragmentation, the concatenation of various genres (drawn from European and mostly indigenous sources), disjointed structure, his problematisation of a postmodern utopia, and, more importantly, in his agonised search for a political solution to Nigeria’s postcolonial predicaments, and the privileging of a utopian and ethical universalism, Okri presents us with a distinctive African modernism.

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1. Notes

   Vermeulen and Van den Akker respond to this challenge by suggesting that the post-postmodernist era may be seen as a return to a form of modernism; a modernism that has learnt the lessons of the critique of early twentieth-century modernism and postmodernism. They call this form metamodernism, which is characterized “by the oscillation between a typically modernist commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment” (2). Many other critics have attempted to theorize the contemporary ‘return to modernism.’ Gilles Lipovetsky calls it “hypermodernism,” Robert Samuels, “automodernism” and most convincingly and theoretically feasibly Nicholas Bourriaud describes it as “altermodernism” which he first articulates for an exhibition of the same name he curated for Tate Britain in 2009. He describes ‘altermodernism’ as a “synthesis between modernism and postcolonialism” which is characterized by archipelagraphy and heterochronicity (globally intersecting temporalities and geographies that resist the idea of a centre), progressive creolization (opposed to the vacuous multiculturalism of postmodernism), nomadism (*homo viator* liberated from an obsession with origins moves across the global landscape) etc. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said has conclusively shown us how the production of alterity provides justification for the colonial enterprise. He describes Orientalism as the Western way of not only “making statements about it, authorising views of it, describing it, teaching it” but also the means for “settling it, ruling over it, in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, re-structuring and having authority over the Orient.” [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. In a subtle critique of European modernism, the protagonist, Elizabeth, of Bessie Head’s *A Question of Power*, itself a hallmark of African modernism, meets with incomprehension the remarks of the Danish Camilla: “In our country culture has become so complex, this complexity is reflected in our literature. It takes a certain level of education to understand our novelists. The ordinary man cannot understand them …” (79). Elizabeth contemplates her words: “It never occurred to her that those authors had ceased to be of any value whatsoever to their society – or was it really true that an extreme height of culture and the incomprehensible went hand in hand” (79)? [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. I have discussed in detail elsewhere the paradoxical strategies of African nationalism *vis-à-vis* Western modernity. See Mathuray, “On the (African) National Question (2000)” and “Intimacies Between Men” (2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike (esp.163-173), and Soyinka’s “Neo-Tarzanism.” [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. I have called this installation and subversion of realism’s protocols in the novels of cultural nationalism an “alienated realism” (see “Realizing the Sacred”). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See also Ngugi’s rejection of what he sees as Soyinka’s privileging of the aesthetic (65-66). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. It is surprising then that Lazarus would use Gikandi’s analysis of African modernism in “The Short Century” to bolster his argument, arguing that Gikandi “offers a splendid challenge” to the anti-modernist cultural nationalism of the bolekaja critics (238). Not only does Gikandi not engage with Chinweizu et al. in this article, rather casting Achebe and Ngugi (writers whose positions are validated by Lazarus) as anti-modernist cultural nationalists, he persistently differentiates a Western modernity from an African one (see 17, 22). Also, issues like class, capitalism, and uneven development, central to Lazarus’s argument are absent from Gikandi’s argument. His approach, in its engagement with discourses of African nationalism, modernist aestheticism and imperialism is closer to Said’s *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*, an approach criticised heavily by Lazarus in both the “Modernism” article and in his book, *The Postcolonial Unconscious*. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. McCabe cites Bardolph, Cooper, Gates and Ogunsanwo as subscribing to a view which regards Okri’s use of the abiku as allegorical of a generalized postcolonial condition. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)