



Article Type: Original Research

Page Numbers: 19-34

Received: 30 January 2023

Accepted: 31 January 2024

Published: 03 September 2024

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.22034/cls.2024.63175>

Author Details:

1. Associate Professor, English Department, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran.

msbeyad@ut.ac.ir

2. Ph.D. Candidate, English Department, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran.

(Corresponding Author)

bsadeghianfard@gmail.com

Ethics of Truths and the Diasporic Novel: Radical Ethics in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*

Maryam Soltan Shahd Taj Beyad¹; Behzad Sadeghian Fard^{2*}

Abstract: This study queries into the ethical functions of diasporic fiction through carrying out a textual as well as a contextual study of *The Famished Road*. As an account of the politically marginal and the socially displaced, the diasporic novel is imbued with a singularity of form and content. Formally speaking, diasporic fiction is non-canonical, since it belongs to the space between nations and cultures. Furthermore, it partakes of a dialogic form which novelizes minor discourses and genres. In terms of content, the diasporic fiction opens up and narrates a liminal space and consists of the search for a utopian alternative to the dystopian status quo. The concurrence of these four qualities turns the diasporic novel into an account of experience at its extremes. However, the diasporic fiction is ethically radical not because it shows how different human experience is at the moment of exception, but because it points toward what Badiou calls an ethics of truths in singular situations. The diasporic experience results in a radical ethical system of truths that, far from succumbing to an overarching ethics of difference and a logic of us versus them, highlights the human truth at the heart of the experience of diaspora.

Keywords: diasporic novel; ethics of truths; non-canonicity; liminality; dysto-utopianism; dialogism.

Citation: Maryam Soltan Beyad; Behzad Sadeghian Fard. "Ethics of Truths and the Diasporic Novel: Radical Ethics in Ben Okri's the Famished Road". *Critical Literary Studies*, 6, 2, 2024, -. doi: 10.22034/cls.2024.63175

1. Introduction

Is an ethical encounter with novels possible without succumbing to an orthodox didacticism? In “the author’s preface” to *Moll Flanders*, Daniel Defoe invites readers to reading in a manner that “will be more leaved with the moral than the fable, with the application than with the relation, and with the end of the writer than with the life of the person written of” (4). “The moral”, “the application” and “the end of the writer” invoke a normative morality, whereas “the fable”, “the relation” and “the person written of” are points of departure toward a non-prescriptive ethical system, which serves to enrich the reader’s experience. This study invokes Defoe’s example to claim that there are two major tendencies in ethical criticism: The Levinasian tendency to solidify pre-existing normative morality versus the Badiouian tendency to expand upon and deepen ethical understanding.

Suzanne S. Choo believes that literature can lead to a bigger “imaginative aspiration” (138), which is made possible through an alternative mode of ethical engagement that comes to the fore most pronouncedly in diasporic fiction, represented here through *The Famished Road (FR)*. As an African-European novelist who receives most of his literary education in Europe and uses native African folklore and material to write fiction, Ben Okri’s work can best exemplify the in-between location of the diasporic fiction. This study argues that, as a diasporic novel, *FR* has four characteristics that, although present in other novelistic and literary forms sporadically, concur in diasporic fiction and turn it into an apt manifestation of ethical multiplicity. These four attributes disrupt normative moral axioms of Good versus Bad and Same versus Other and encourage identification with, and give way to an imagination of, the edge which can be understood in terms of Alain Badiou’s ethics of truths. Two of the four components of diasporic fiction are attributes of form, while the other two work through content. In terms of form, the diasporic novel is non-canonical and dialogic; in terms of content, it is liminal and dystopian.

2. Literature Review

What literature does is one of the central questions in ethical criticism. Marshall Gregory regards “stories as an influence on ethos, or who we become” (194) and introduces several areas of ethical engagement which presuppose a one-way relationship between the text which instructs and the reader who is edified (196). The inevitability of moral engagement with literature is, in Gregory’s words, due to the fact that “human actions are imagined and chosen rather than prescribed or programmed” (196). Recent research

has focused on establishing a direct link from the aesthetic to the ethical, as does Giovannelli in his ethical fittingness theory which argues that “the artwork’s ethical status contributes, in a systematic way, to the artwork’s artistic value” (338). Martha Nussbaum claims that the diversity and vastness of novels provides them with an extra “ethical dimension” (cited in Wrighton 154). Arguing for a turn to Levinas’s ethical system, Wrighton states that “ethical criticism needs to extend Levinas’s account of the phenomenology of the face-to-face experience in language in order to understand reading as a textual encounter” (166-167).

Diasporic novels have not been the focus of ethical criticism, though certain aspects of the culture of diaspora have been discussed vis-à-vis ethics. Samir Dayal has highlighted the double consciousness characteristic of the diasporic subject who, “always in the waiting rooms of the nation-space, is preserved at least from the illusion of a fixed identity and a prefabricated cultural role” (51). Such cultural openness can be read as an ethical identification with the other that finds voice within the diasporic culture. Sarah Fulford has discussed the possibilities that aesthetic aspects provide for ethical engagement in the novels of Okri, saying that “the power of the aesthetic is found as much in the process of creativity as in its reception” (238). For Fulford, it is through the aesthetic that the ethical finds voice and comes to the fore. Hawley explains how this is done by arguing that Okri has brought to the English novel native traditions, myths and folklore that serve to blend two cultures and expand the limits of modernist ethics. In the same vein, Douglas McCabe argues that “New Age spirituality – not postmodernism or postcolonialism – is the most important cultural vector shaping *The Famished Road*” (2). However, the system McCabe detects in Okri comprises of a spiritual, rather than ethical, consciousness. Okri’s own assertion in an interview helps to pave the way toward the understanding of a radical ethical system. Okri believes that “art frees the human spirit, frees the place that talent and possibility pour out from [...] an art thing is a life thing” (“An Interview” 215). Rather than providing a spiritual framework, art and literature, with their fluid and ever-changing nature (218) have an emancipatory power which opens up the individual to the vastness of life.

3. Methodology

This study divides ethical literary criticism into two types: The Levinasian and the Badiouian. The former consists of what Geoffrey Galt Harpham calls “the imposition of an ‘ought’” (371) to literary works. The Levinasian method is an inquiry into the didactic capacities of literature. As Harpham argues, literature is characterized with an “ethical

ambivalence” (372), a hovering between pleasure and edification, that can turn it into “a force superior- richer, more powerful, more capacious- to ethics itself” (373). The Badiouian method inquires about what literature can do and achieve, and how (through what formal, figurative or thematic means) it can do so. The former can be affiliated with normative or prescriptive ethics while the latter can be seen in Badiou’s formulation of ethical theory which rejects the possibility of a universal ethics in favor of “an ethic of singular truths, and thus an ethic relative to a particular situation” (lvi). Such an understanding of ethics is founded upon a rejection of Emmanuel Levinas’s ethics.

According to Levinas, ethics is an optics rather than a politics (29), which means that the perspective of the subject is always central to the ethical judgment. It is through the other that one can build a system of ethics. Taking the other to be an Altogether-Other, or a transcendental point of reference, Levinas argues that responsibility toward the other is the essence of being (109). Through such an understanding of ethical theory, each literary work can be regarded as an encounter with the Other, and each literary character as an opportunity to view and judge the world through the lens of previously unrecognized others, that results in an enhanced ethical understanding.

Badiou starts by saying that Levinasian ethics serves “both as an a priori ability to discern evil [...] and as the ultimate principle of judgment” (8). As Badiou shows, Evil comes before Good in such a system: “Evil is that from which the Good is derived, not the other way round” (9). Levinas “defines man *as a victim*” (10, italics added) while, to Badiou, man is an ethical animal precisely at those points where he turns into “*something other than a mortal being*” (12, italics in the original). The other, as illustrated by Levinas, “is acceptable only if he is a good other”, similar to us (24). The ethics of difference calls for an ethical alterity in so far it upholds our standards, while the ethics of truths shatters the good/ bad binary, seeking singular truths divulged through multiple modes of existence that yield themselves to experience through literature, among other ways.

Badiou defines truth as “the coming-to-be of that which is not yet”, “*indifferent to differences*” and “*the same for all*” (27). In *Being and Event*, he defines it as “a singular and universal procedure of thought that breaks with the dominant of a given situation” (6). As an intrusion into the reigning discourses, each truth creates a new singularity. Rather than calling for an acceptance of the other, the ethics of truth sets out to establish a new set of norms and serves as “the practice of maintaining the consistency of a truth against the forces of the world that seek to undermine it” (68). One cannot talk of one single system of ethics aligned with a universal truth. “Ethics does not exist. There is only the

ethic-of (of politics, of love, of science, of art)” (*Evil* 28). Pitting opinion against truth, Badiou associates the former with the ethics of difference while the latter “deposes constituted knowledges, and thus opposes opinions. What we call *opinions* are representations without truth” (50). The culture of diaspora can be viewed as the negation of such knowledges, where singular truths find concrete representations.

Each diaspora, according to Robin Cohen, consists of a group of people who flee from an original home in search of a better life. They preserve aspects of their original identity, idealize about the concept of home and fantasize about returning to it. Each diasporic group is ethnically distinct and cannot identify with the host society, which then pushes it toward creative ways of living and forming bonds with fellow members of the diaspora (3). Paul Gilroy adds one further edge to the definitions of diaspora that accounts for its radical potential: “*Life itself* is at stake in the way the word suggests flight or coerced rather than freely chosen experiences of displacement” (207, italics added). The fiction representing such culture reflects its radical alterity through four attributes.

This study contends that non-canonicity, dialogism, liminality and dysto-utopianism are the four characteristics that, although found separately in other literary genres, concur in diasporic fiction, accounting for its radical quality. In the following, a contextual study of *FR* shows its position outside established canons, which contribute to its singularity. Then, textual analysis of *FR* demonstrates how the ethical singularity is created through the formal dialogism of the novel, the liminal situation of the characters and the dysto-utopian course of the plot. These four components, which work through form and content, turn the diasporic novel into a unique narrative of ethical singularity, which serves to recreate a unique truth about human experience.

3.1. Singularity of Form

3.1.1. Non-Canonicity

Harold Bloom defines the literary canon as “a choice among texts struggling with one another for survival” (23). Similar to Bloom, Katharine Hodgson stresses the way canons are *made* rather than simply handed down to posterity. She defines canon as “a body of texts that is given exemplary status by being widely reproduced and circulated, made the subject of scholarly commentary and analysis, and included in educational” (166). While Hodgson distinguishes between national territory and cultural space (171), arguing in favor of a non-national, diasporic canon, it is debatable to what extent the national and the cultural can be regarded separately.

Canons are not purely aesthetic phenomena that judge individual works based on literary merit. As E. Dean Kolbas puts it, “artistic reproduction, cultural familiarity, historical cumulativity and the social relations of production are all essential to canon formation” (79). The existence of each canon depends upon a tradition, usually a national one, which can expedite a flow of culture with which new literary productions are associated and on top of which they can accumulate. Hence, diasporic literature might be inherently at odds with the idea of a canon and approaches the singularity characteristic of the spaces between canons. If a novel belongs to such non-canonical space, it can be argued to contain the singular ethical system theorized by Badiou.

3.1.2. Dialogism

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin asserts that Dostoevsky's novels are “a whole formed by the interaction of several consciousnesses, none of which entirely becomes an object for the other” (40) and consist of “dialogic communion between consciousnesses” (74). The overriding voice of the protagonist or the narrator does not silence the opposing voices in a polyphonic novel and “never leads to a merging of voices and truths in a single impersonal truth” (77). The conditional nature of discourse, according to Holquist, means that “at any given time, in any given place, there is a set of powerful but highly unstable conditions at work that will give a word uttered then and there a meaning that is different from what it would be at other times and in other places” (67).

This conditionality goes so far as to penetrate the very genre by means of which literature is produced: “Dialogism assumes that the bases of genre formation are to be found, rather, in the rules that govern speech activity in our everyday conversations” (69). Genres are not literary strongholds with impenetrable walls, but fluid structures that can combine to create new discursive possibilities. Through what Bakhtin calls novelization, genres become dialogized: “Their language renews itself by incorporating extraliterary heteroglossia [...] the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still evolving contemporary reality” (*The Dialogic Imagination* 7). The realistic narrative line comes into dialogic clash with minor literary genres: Biblical writing, fantasy and folklore. In this sense, not the consciousness of a specific character but the consciousness of an entire genre comes into conflict with other consciousnesses. The singular ethical truth is expressed more pronouncedly in a novelized intermingling of major genres with their opposing discourses.

3.2. Singularity of Content

3.2.1. Liminality

Arnold Van Gennep divides the rites of passage into three groups: rites of separation, transition rites and rites of incorporation. These three stages refer to a process by means of which the individual separates oneself from a previous status quo, goes through changes and is accepted into the a new stage. According to Van Gennep, he who enters the middle stage of liminality is “physically and magico-religiously in a special situation for a certain length of time: he wavers between two worlds” (18). Bjorn Thomassen characterizes liminality in terms of “moments of change” that are “both social and personal” (4). According to Thomassen, liminality consists of neutral zones “standing outside the normal social order” (11).

However, liminal moments can be public as well as private. Bjorn Thomassen defines public liminality as “types of rituals that involve the entire group” (206) and mentions political revolutions as an example: “Revolutions always entail a double aim: to delegitimize the existing order [...] and to legitimize themselves as carriers of the new order” (209). A revolution is a situation where subjects are “pushed to the limit by the force of events” (211). The diasporic novel narrates liminal subjects who are endlessly stuck in moments of transition. Such an in-between position provides the characters with an outsider perspective upon the pre-liminal and the post-liminal stages, which leads in its own turn to an ethical understanding beyond an establishmentarian morality.

3.2.2. Dysto-utopianism

Karl Mannheim distinguishes between two tendencies in the history of thought: the ideological which consists of “more or less conscious disguises of the real nature of a situation” (49) and “is always bound up with the existing life-situation of the thinker” (71) versus the utopian which “transcends the present and is oriented to the future”, “is incongruous with the state of reality within which it occurs” and sets out to “shatter, either partially or wholly, the order of things prevailing at the time” (86). The difference between ideology and utopia is best summarized in the assertion that the upholders of ideology or “the representatives of a given order will label as utopian all conceptions of existence which *from their point of view* can in principle never be realized” (176-177). Utopian refers to the tendency to subvert the status quo in favor of change. The protagonist in a diasporic novel finds himself in a situation at odds with what he deems favorable. The diasporic novel consists of a pursuit for something that has been made inaccessible due to political, social or cultural obstacles. The ordinary state of affairs is

either not the issue in such a novel, or is the very predicament surrounding the protagonist, who searches for a non-existent utopia from within a dystopian status quo. The search for a non-existent ideal requires a yet-to-be-emerging ethical system that is shaped in the clash between the dystopian present and utopian future.

4. Discussion

The culture of diaspora has been characterized by Paul Gilroy as “a *non-traditional* tradition, for this is not tradition as closed or simple repetition [...] diaspora challenges us to apprehend *mutable itinerant culture*” (212, italics added). Gilroy’s definition highlights mutability, instability and motion as the defining features of the diasporic experience, which are made possible, in Okri’s work, through alterity of form and content.

4.1. Singularity of Form

4.1.1. Non-Canonicity

Bereft of a geographical and national identity, the diasporic culture is by nature cut off from tradition and can be characterized with what Terry Smith calls contemporaneity: “Prioritizing of the moment over the time, the instant over the epoch” (312). This quality cannot be ascribed to novels that work toward building the concept of the nation-state (e.g. Daniel Defoe) or are already established in the national literatures (from William Golding to A. S. Byatt). While the post-colonial novel shares some aspects of the diasporic novel, it is pinned down to the less fluid notion of the colony and the post colony, which aligns it with a canon. However, diasporic fiction can be regarded, through the distance it keeps from traditional canons, in terms of such contemporaneity.

Born and raised in Nigeria, Ben Okri receives his literary education, publishes his work and rises to fame in the UK. *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* introduces him as a “*Nigerian-born* novelist and poet, born in Lagos, and educated at Urhobo College, Warri, and the University of Essex”, whose novel *FR* contains “a strong and epic sense of African place” (“Okri” 738, Italics added), while *Cambridge Paperback Guide to Literature in English* describes him as a “*Nigerian* novelist and short story writer” (“Okri” 285, Italics added). The term “Nigerian” is much less ambiguous in terms of the national boundaries it draws around the subject, than “Nigerian-born” which connotes only a fixed origin, leaving the subject’s subsequent nationality open to debate. *The Routledge History of Literature in English* introduces him not as Nigerian but “*born in Nigeria*” (404, Italics added), glossing over his nationality in a similar vein. *The Short Oxford History of English Literature* by Andrew Sanders has no mention of Ben Okri and his work. Okri’s ambiguous

status with respect to at least two national canons (Britain and Nigeria, or Europe and Africa) renders his work non-canonical, in the sense that it cannot be described as exclusively British or Nigerian. Far from a monolithic literary production, *The Famished Road* combines native Nigerian folk and narrative forms with the novel, which is a specifically European form, and intersperses his narrative with intertextual references to the Bible.

Such non-canonicity is found in Ben Okri's mindset as a literary figure as well. In an interview, Okri describes the writer's journey as one from home to freedom: "one starts at home, but when you take one step from home [...] you leave the village" ("An Interview" 221). In another interview, he extends his characterization of the writing experience as wandering freely between different homes to the world literature, saying that Shakespeare and Homer are African, "And in the same way Chinua Achebe is an English writer, and the authors of *The Arabian Nights* are German and Italian and French and Nigerian. They belong to all nations and none" ("Soul Man").

4.1.2. Dialogism

FR begins thus: "In the beginning there was a river" (3). This sentence reminds the reader of the first verse in the opening chapter of the Gospel of John in the New Testament of the Christian Bible: "In the beginning there was the word" (*John* 1:1). Thus, the narrator enters a dialogue with scriptural writing that continues through to the end of the novel, inviting the reader to read it as a divine account of a prophet. The second paragraph brings fantastic folklore into the novel: "In that land of beginnings spirits mingled with the unborn" (3). The scriptural and the fantastic are novelized to form a multilogue in the novel. The novel begins with the first-person plural point of view, which gives the narrative the impersonality and generality characteristic of folkloric and biblical narratives. This beginning part of the novel narrates a rite of passage that is intended to prepare the ground for "the myths of beginnings" (6) that will serve as the body of the narrative. The multilogue continues among the main three veins in the narrative: the realistic, the scriptural and the fantastic. While each of these gains predominance over others at certain points in the novel, they manage to resurface repeatedly, thereby reigniting the generic conflict.

The intertextual dialogue with the scripture is highlighted most pronouncedly when Azaro is lost and taken into custody by a policeman and his wife. On his arrival, he notices on a wall in the house a painting of Jesus Christ with the legend "Christ is the unseen guest in every house" (19). There are lots of ghosts in this house for whose deaths

the police officer is somehow responsible. Azaro is the other guest who, as the unheard noises tell him, has to serve as “a victim [...] awaiting its sacrifice” (24). Since Azaro sees the unseen ghosts and is seen by them, he is as closely affiliated with the world of the dead as with that of the living, and can be regarded as the Christ-like figure in the legend. This reading has previously been substantiated in the novel, where Azaro was introduced as a spirit child with both a human body that has marks of “razor incisions” on it (4), and a prophetic spirit that has miraculous powers and plays “with the fauns, the fairies, and the beautiful things” (4) and can “read people’s minds [...] foretell their futures” (9). It is with resort to such powers that he telepathically communicates with his mother to come and save him (24). In another scene, which foregrounds the fantasy genre, Azaro discovers that, in Madame Koto’s bar, “many of the customers were not human beings” (136). When Azaro steals the fetish and runs away, surreal fantasy takes the reins. Up until the end of the chapter when all the magic “disappeared, amid infernal sounds, into the effulgent winds” (139), the reader wanders in a magical world where realistic logic plays no role in the narrative. When the chapter ends with “I curled up on the mat, planting my secrets in my silence, and slept as if nothing unusual had happened” (140), realism has turned into the main narrative mode again. Such alternation as well as co-occurrence of the fantastic and the realistic carry the generic dialogism through to the end of the novel. Near the end of the novel, Azaro’s mum tells a story that reminds the reader of the prophetic parables in the Bible. Knitting elements of fantasy into reality, Azaro’s mum tells him about a man at whose touch the fish “came alive and began to twist in my basin” (483), and who tells her “time is not what you think it is” (484).

Thus, the fictional novelizes the biblical and the fantastic, which results in a dialogic form, that although found separately in non-diasporic fiction, works alongside the other three components to create the alterity characteristic of the diasporic subject.

4.2. Singularity of Content

4.2.1. Liminality

The protagonist of *FR* occupies a liminal space all through the novel, wavering between two worlds, not being able to settle in either of them. The imagery of doors, gates and thresholds recurs throughout the novel, echoing the idea of transition that is characteristic of Azaro’s liminal condition. The liminal state of Azaro is first and foremost highlighted by the fact that he is a child, at the threshold of adulthood. Secondly, he is an Abiku or a spirit-child, which is removed further from the real world of the living. The entire course of the novel chronicles Azaro’s attempts to consummate the transition

to the world of the living and turn into a normal child. He sees and hears things that are inaccessible to other worldly characters. He moves through realms unreachable by others. “How many times had I come and gone through the dreaded gateway? How many times had I been born and died young?” (2). The limbo between life and death, where Azaro is stuck, is succinctly described at the beginning of the novel: “This is a child who didn’t want to be born, but who will fight with death” (5). The definition offered in the novel of a spirit-child is quite significant:

The spirit-child is an unwilling adventurer into chaos and sunlight, into the dreams of the living and the dead. Things that are not ready, not willing to be born or to become, things for which adequate preparations have not been made to sustain their momentous births, things that are not resolved, things bound up with failure and with fear of being, they all keep recurring, keep coming back, and in themselves partake of the spirit-child’s condition (487).

The spirit-child, similar to a refugee, treads paths “unwillingly” and always oscillates between doors that do not open for him, but keep him in an eternally transitional stage.

Thomassen’s theorization of public liminality is also a significant element within the novel, and occurs through moments of upheaval. The most important of such upheavals is in chapter nine, when “the van of bad politics” (152) comes back with more lies. The politician is shouting “we are your friends” (153) just as the thugs attack people and beat them up, when “suddenly a stone smashed the van’s windows and undammed the fury of angry bodies” (153). This triggers the moment of public liminality through which angry people attack the thugs and the politician, burn the van and overturn it. The heavy rain at the end of the novel symbolizes the chaotic liminal space that devours both sides of the conflict at the same time:

The road’s sleep was disturbed first by the prostitute who had been electrocuted on the night of Madame Koto’s initiation into higher powers [...] The next day it rained and three men who were laying out cables for the big political rally also died of electrocution. The rains were crazy in those days. The beggars suffered the onslaught, sleeping under the eaves of our compound front [...] Every morning Mum went out with her basin of provisions and the rain drenched everything and she came home in the afternoons soaking wet, no profits made, her provisions rendered useless (491).

Apart from killing people and causing damage to “the road”, the rain suspends routine activities of everyday life as well, causing a hiatus in the life of the characters. Liminal situations recur in all diasporic fiction and highlight the eternally transitional situation of the subject.

4.2.2. Dysto-utopianism

In *FR*, the pursuit of utopia is what motivates the characters and drives the narrative onward. While the search for food, job and peace finds a utopian quality through the idealization of those concepts by the characters, the dystopia that defines the reality around them is characterized by humiliation, hunger, poverty, violence and disability. At the beginning of the novel, we read that “because the road was once a river, it was always hungry” (1). The protagonist always prays “for laughter, a life without hunger” (3). In a story Azaro’s father tells him, there is a man without a stomach who never feels hungry. But when he is united with a stomach, he loses his utopia. Finally, the man tells the stomach: “When I didn’t have you I travelled far, was never hungry, was always happy and contented, and I was strong” (80). In the visualization Azaro’s father gives of his personal utopia, he bases his account on the notion of hunger: “They were once a great people. Hunger drove them from their kingdom and now the road is their only palace.” (444).

Disability and abnormality appear in *FR* both through Azaro’s condition, which makes him a semi-dead or a spirit-child, and through the deformed ghosts and customers who attend Madame Koto’s bar and are scattered elsewhere throughout the world of the novel. Azaro’s encounter with the two-legged dog after he has escaped his kidnappers is one example among many: “It had a left forefoot and a right hind foot and it stood, wobbling, as though on invisible crutches.” (115). Poverty and violence are the other two contributing factors to the dystopia. Azaro’s family is always harassed by creditors who keep bugging Azaro’s mother about the money they are owed, and end up confiscating the family furniture (92). The cross-eyed giant who wants to carry several enormous sacks at the same time is, as one of the carriers mentions, “not mad [...] He’s poor, that’s all” (145). Madness is yet another element contributing to the dystopian reality, which can be seen in the madman who “had one eye higher than the other one” with a mouth that “looked like a festering wound” (73). The photographer brings together madness and poverty to complete the dystopian image of the world. He represents the luxuries of a utopia in a world where the bare necessities of life are hard to find. Since “no one ever paid for their photographs” (142), the photographer’s business goes downhill:

He no longer bothered to surprise us. The old images turned brown and sad and curled up at the edges under the bleaching force of the sunlight. In the nights we heard him raving, abusing everyone for not paying up, shouting that it was people like us who drove people to crime and corruption. His clothes became shabby and his beard turned wiry and brown (142-3).

It is also significant that the photographer represents poverty in its darkest depths, since he later on turns into a revolutionary figure who, through his pictures, resists the thugs who work for the government.

Finally, the dystopian world of the novel is an intensely violent one. In her first appearance, the bar owner Madame Koto establishes her formidable presence by beating up one of the troublesome customers: “The madame grabbed the bad loser’s crotch and he screamed so loud that the crowd fell silent. Then, with a practiced grunt, she lifted him on her shoulders [...] and dumped him savagely on the hard earth” (37). In this world, even home offers no solace and is as violent as the world outside, as Azaro’s father proves in his numerous outbursts of rage: “Dad leapt up into a tidal rage and scattered the plates of food and tossed away the centre table and grabbed the bedclothes and hurled them across the room [...] Mum cried out and then stifled the cry. I heard dad hitting her.” (151). In each case, not the dystopian element itself, but the protagonist’s desire for an idealized alternative, moves the plot onward. This is highlighted all through the novel and comes to its apex at the concluding sentence of the novel: “A dream can be the highest point of a life” (511).

5. Conclusion

Building upon Badiou’s contention that “there can be no ethics in general, but only an ethic of singular truths, and thus, an ethic relative to a particular situation” (*Ethics* lvi), it was argued here that each diasporic novel can be seen as an expression of one singular truth, which manifests itself through four attributes of form and content. As a representative of the diasporic novel, *FR* is a formally dialogic and non-national cultural product, which recounts the liminal experience of an endless transition from the dystopian reality to a utopian possibility the realization of which is continuously thwarted. Such fourfold alterity turns the diasporic fiction into a narrative of singular ethical conditions that do not abide by the normative rules of morality. In other words, the diasporic novel is the story of those who cannot be defined through pre-existing norms. However, encountering the radically different through fiction encourages identification with them and leads to what Alain Badiou calls the ethos of sameness. In this way, the diasporic subject is no longer an “other” that needs to be respected and left alone despite all the differences. Far from a humanitarian gesture of trying to come to terms with what is ultimately seen as alien and foreign, or what Badiou calls “a tourist’s fascination for the diversity of morals, customs and beliefs” (26), the diasporic novel becomes an encounter with what is common to humanity. The act of reading the diasporic novel turns into an invitation to adopt an alternative outlook upon what is radically different, yet deeply human.

Funding:

No funding has been received for conducting this research.

Conflict of Interests:

There is no conflict of interest to disclose.

References

- Badiou, Alain. *Being and Event*. Translated by Oliver Feltham, London: Continuum, 2005.
- . *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*. Translated by Peter Hallward, London: Verso, 2001.
- Mikhail, Bakhtin. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Translated by Caryl Emerson, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- . *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.
- Bloom, Harold. *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*. California: Harcourt Brace, 1994.
- Carter, Ronald, and John McRae. *The Routledge History of Literature in English: Britain and Ireland*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Choo Suzanne S. *Teaching Ethics through Literature: The Significance of Ethical Criticism in a Global Age*. New York: Routledge, 2021.
- Cohen, Robin. *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, 3rd edition. New York: Routledge, 2022.
- Dayal, Samir. "Diaspora and Double Consciousness." *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, vol. 29, no. 1, 1996, pp. 46-62.
- Defoe, Daniel. *Moll Flanders*. London: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 1999.
- Fulford, Sarah. "Ben Okri, The Aesthetic, and the Problem with Theory." *Comparative Literature Studies*, vol. 46, no. 2, 2009, pp. 233–260.
- Gilroy, Paul. "Diaspora." *Paragraph*, vol. 17, no. 3, 1994, pp. 207–212.
- Giovannelli, Alessandro. "Ethical Criticism in Perspective: A Defense of Radical Moralism." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 71, no. 4, 2013, pp. 335–348.
- Gregory, Marshall W. "Ethical Criticism: What It Is and Why It Matters." *Style*, vol. 32, no. 2, 1998, pp. 194–220.
- Harpham, Geoffrey Galt. "Ethics and Literary Criticism." *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. 9: *Twentieth-Century Historical, Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, edited by Knellwolf, Christa & Christopher Norris. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001, pp. 221-239.

- Hawley, John C. "Ben Okri's Spirit-Child: 'Abiku' Migration and Postmodernity." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 26, no. 1, 1995, pp. 30–39.
- Hodgson, Katharine. "Repatriation of Diasporic Literature and the Role of the Poetry Anthology in the Construction of a Diasporic Canon." *Redefining Russian Literary Diaspora, 1920-2020*, edited by Maria Rubins, UCL Press, 2021, pp. 165–93.
- Kolbas, E. Dean. *Critical Theory and the Literary Canon*. Colorado: Westview Press, 2001.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969.
- Mannheim, Karl. *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954.
- McCabe, Douglas. "'Higher Realities': New Age Spirituality in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 36, no. 4, 2005, pp. 1–21.
- Okri, Ben. "An Interview with Ben Okri." By Charles Henry Rowell, *Callaloo*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2014, pp. 214-221.
- , *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English*. 3rd edition, Edited by Ian Ousby, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002.
- . *The Famished Road*. London: Doubleday, 1992.
- , *Oxford Companion to English Literature*. Edited by Margaret Drabble, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996. p. 738.
- . "Soul Man." Interview by Simon Joseph Jones, *High Profiles*, 31 Oct. 2002, <https://highprofiles.info/Interview/ben-okri/>.
- Sanders, Andrew. *The Short Oxford History of English Literature*. 3rd edition, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994.
- Smith, Terry. "Canons and Contemporaneity". *Partisan Canons*, edited by Anna Brzyski, Durham: Duke University Press, 2007, pp. 309-326.
- Thomassen, B. *Liminality and the Modern: Living Through the In-Between*. New York: Routledge, 2014.

Van Gennep, Arnold. *The Rites of Passage*. Translated by Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960.

Wrighton, John. "Reading Responsibly between Martha Nussbaum and Emmanuel Levinas: Towards a Textual Ethics for the Twenty-First Century." *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2017, pp. 149–70.