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Exile and postcolonial national redemption in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the link between exile and national redemption in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003). Although exile constitutes the dominant interpretive concept as it relates to the scandalous and the breaking of a vicious cycle of violence and hopelessness in both novels, the connection between exile and postcolonial national redemption has gone unexplored. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's notion of becoming-traitor and on exile as *ex salire,* the paper argues that contrary to Edward Said's and Walter Mignolo's conceptualisation of exile as the idiom for rethinking location and identity beyond the imaginary of the nation as territoriality, Okri and Adichie re-present exile as an ethico-political act of radical refusal and epistemic disobedience to the existing norms of violence and nonbeing, and a precondition for postcolonial redemption. The paper reveals two things: that novelty, in both novels, can be located at the conceptual level wherein the transformation of exile into a strategy of rebellion and subversion becomes the precondition for postcolonial agency and redemption; and that the scandalous event is a site of contestation, epistemic disobedience and futurity.

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The question of newness is at the heart of theories of the novel as a literary form (Bakhtin 1981; Lukács 1971; Watt 1957). From the African context, Simon Gikandi suggests that a major source of novelty is the persistent quest for 'narrative forms for representing the increasingly complex' (2000, 1–2) socio-political formation called the postcolony. However, as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1994) show, newness can also be articulated through concept creation and transformation. This shift in emphasis on the location of newness from form to conceptual transformation provides us with an important interpretive tool for exploring how creative writers think otherwise. As sites of contestation, concepts provide insights into a writer's dialogue with the archive and the subtle or overt articulations of alternative styles of living, ethicality, nation formation and redemption. If the postcolony, as some have argued,[1] is characterised by the paradoxical co-existence of extreme disorderliness, criminal violence and the fetishism of the rule of law, then, perhaps, it may be worth exploring what concepts or conceptual transformations

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postcolonial writers deploy to signal alternative modes of thought and living the embattled subjects in the postcolony adopt in response to the crisis of temporality and meaning.

Some perspectives have emerged on styles of living in the postcolony. Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman suggest that rather than focusing on the search for distinctive narrative forms, it might be useful to explore 'regimes of subjectivity' (Mbembe & Roitman 1995, 324). In *On the Postcolony*, Mbembe posits a Nietzschean style of 'living and existing in uncertainty, chance, irreality, even absurdity' (2001, 242). On the other hand, David Scott has argued for the cultivation of a tragic sensibility as a response to 'the temporal disjunctures of living *on* in the wake of past political time […] postcolonial future pasts' (2004, 2). However, the extent to which the concept of exile is at the heart of the African writer's quest for alternative thought, agency and national redemption has rarely been explored. The African writer thinks through concepts and by exploring this we can address the extent to which they affirm, complement or modify discussions on the crisis of temporality and exile.

Using Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) as exemplary texts, I show that conceptual transformation constitutes a site of artistic novelty and the genesis of new thought. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's notion of traitor and on *ex salire,* I argue that contrary to Edward Said's and Walter Mignolo's conceptualisations of exile as the idiom for rethinking location and identity beyond the imaginary of the nation as territoriality, Okri and Adichie re-present exile as an ethico-political act of radical refusal and epistemic disobedience to the existing norms of violence and nonbeing, and a precondition for postcolonial redemption. Both novels have been read as *bildungsromans* wherein the becoming of their protagonists is set against the immobility of the postcolonial nation-state. However, the connection between the redemptive vision of the bildungsroman and exile has gone unnoticed, even though exile constitutes the dominant interpretive concept as it relates to the scandalous, the transformation of Azaro and Jaja, and the breaking of a vicious cycle of violence and hopelessness in both novels. A careful reading of both novels suggests that they demand from the reader not only a re-examination of what it means to be an exile but that exile, understood as *ex salire* or becoming-traitor, is critical to how Okri and Adichie think anew postcolonial agency and national redemption.

By attending to the concept of exile, I address three issues simultaneously. First, I interrogate the literature on the nature of novelty in Okri's handling of the abiku myth. The critical consensus is that the nature of newness in *The Famished Road* revolves around Azaro's straddling of the spiritual and the material worlds (Ogunsanwo 1995, 46; Quayson 1997, 124). While Azaro's liminality is certainly unique in the context of abiku poetics, it is not the most inventive and radical aspect of Okri's handling of the abiku myth, especially in the context of his critique of anticolonial and nationalists' narratives of national beginnings and the emergence of new men and women. I argue that it is not so much in Azaro's privileged liminality as in his radical 'betrayal' or exile that we must locate Okri's attempt at imagining something new. Azaro's betrayal of the abiku community and its ethos constitutes Okri's singular strategy of rethinking postcolonial beginning, ethicality and national redemption. Secondly, I foreground Jaja as the ethico-political horizon in *Purple Hibiscus* in order to highlight Adichie's repetition and transformation of exile. Furthermore, I redress the all too common understanding of exile in African literary criticism as geographical displacement, migration and alienation,

which has led to an overemphasis on works by exiled writers to the neglect of 'explicitly tackling the question of exile as a generic issue' (Lewis 2001).

The analysis focuses primarily on Azaro and Jaja as exilic figures who enact the radical act of *ex salire* or becoming-traitor. I draw attention to the different dramatisations of exile or becoming-traitor as embodied by Azaro and Jaja. As we shall see, in *The Famished Road*, exile or becoming-traitor emerges as radical *un*-answerability that repudiates the narcissistic and dogmatic collective ethos of the abiku that subsists on a cruel and immoral cyclical rebellion, in-betweenness, and indifference to the injustice that characterise the everyday existence and politics in the postcolony. In *Purple Hibiscus,* on the other hand, exile is presented through Jaja's becoming-traitor to Eugene's authoritarian and puritan discourse of conformism, brutality, colonial mimicry and civility that denies the possibility of alternate ways of being and cognition.

I begin by exploring the varied meanings of exile, with particular focus on Edward Said and Walter Mignolo, and end with Walter Benjamin's notion of becoming-traitor and the etymological meaning of exile as *ex salire*. The next section analyses Azaro as an exilic figure by dwelling specifically on what he betrays and its connection to postcolonial national redemption. Jaja's place as an exilic figure and the ethico-political act of becoming-traitor in *Purple Hibiscus* is taken up in the penultimate section. The conclusion reflects on the implications of Okri's and Adichie's transformation of exile.

Exile and the postcolonial imaginary

The literature on exile is enormous and complex. As a concept, exile evokes a constellation of ideas, experiences and affects that revolve around place, dislocation, uprootedness, belonging and solidarity (Zeng 2010, 1). Exile, therefore, describes a traumatic experience that 'entails both a sharp break in the quotidian existence of one's life and a removal from that which is most familiar and comforting' (D'addario 2007, 8). Exile, in this sense, is an agonising condition of violent apartness.

For many Africans the history of colonialism is also the history of exile as a tool of enforced dislocation resulting in loss and the anguish of homelessness. Kings, chiefs and persons whose activities were viewed as subversive of imperial designs were exiled to far flung territories of Empire.[2] Formal independence did not exorcise this spectre of exile. Intellectuals, artists and writers who became overly critical of their governments were forced into exile in order to escape incarceration or brutal murder. Exile, for this category of people, is a potent trope for exploring the tragic condition of the individual and the postcolonial nation-state. Furthermore, exile in Africa encompasses the tragedy of those who were sold and transported across the Middle Passage. Finally, in the last few decades, extreme poverty has produced a new class of exiles or economic migrants. Exile in the African imaginary, therefore, refers to these categories of agonising unhomeliness. These productive meanings of exile have been explored by literary scholars (Anyidoho 1997; Jones & Jones 2000).

However, beyond geographical uprootedness, exile has also emerged as a mode of thought for rethinking subjectivity, location and the nation. Said and Mignolo, for example, have theorised exile in terms of transnational nomadism, subaltern consciousness, border thinking and epistemology, thereby de-emphasising the nation-state as location, territoriality or fixity. In 'Reflections on Exile', Said describes exile as not only 'a

condition of terminal loss' and 'a discontinuous state of being' marked by 'a tragic fate of unhomeliness' but, more importantly, as 'an *alternative* to the mass institutions that dominate modern life' (Said 2000, 173, 177 and 184, emphasis retained). Central to Said's discussions on exile are the notions of in-betweenness and de-centeredness. Hence his exemplary figures of exile are the migrant, the intellectual and artist, and the political figure, all of whom are caught 'between domains, between forms, between homes, and between languages' (Said 1994, 403). Crucially, Said makes two assertions that I will argue contest Okri's and Adichie's representation of exile as becoming-traitor. First, he positions exile and the state as radically opposed horizons of expectations. Secondly, he evacuates exile of the ethico-political element of choice by insisting that the exilic condition is something that 'you are born into or it happens to you' (Said 2000, 184). Like Said, Mignolo (in Delgado & Romero 2000, 15) views exile as essential to imagining 'location beyond the imaginary of the nation, of the territory with frontiers'. He, therefore, prioritises 'location-in-movement' over 'location-in-land' (Mignolo in Delgado & Romero 2000, 15).

Said's insights, especially his emphasis on the exilic condition as an alternative mode of being and the exile as uniquely endowed with a 'plurality of vision' which engenders 'an awareness of simultaneous dimensions' (2000, 186), are broadly useful. However, I find Said's and Mignolo's conception of exile and the nation-state as incommensurable logics opposed to the relationship between exile and the postcolonial nation state explored by Okri and Adichie. For these theorists exile describes a form of identity and subject location that calls into question the state as territory. Their conceptualisations of exile, therefore, cannot account for such ideas as betrayal, *ex salire* and becoming-traitor as strategies for the redemption of the nation-state. Consequently, I draw on Benjamin's notion of traitor and on *ex salire* as an alternative etymology of exile because it is key to understanding the 'scandalous' around which exile is refigured as becoming-traitor. By scandalous events, I am referring to Azaro's singular betrayal of his spirit companions and Jaja's revolutionary act of epistemic disobedience, both of which subvert the epistemological basis of the ruling ethos. Scandal, in these novels, constitutes a site of contestation, rupture and exile, or becoming-traitor to the normalising knowledge and pernicious forms of subject formation. Okri and Adichie explore the nexus between exile and alternative postcolonial agency and redemption.

The notion of becoming-traitor, as it is used in this paper, is suggested in Benjamin's essay 'The author as producer'.[3] The essay was a decisive intervention in debates on the role of the intellectual in the proletarian revolution. Benjamin's argument is that the task of the intellectual is not to transmit the apparatus of production but to transform it. To achieve this the intellectual/writer must transcend mere ideological solidarity with the proletariat and become a producer of new thoughts and realities. The paradox, however, is that because the intellectual/writer owed his means of production to the bourgeois class, 'a bond of solidarity which attaches him to his class, and still more attaches his class to him' develops (Benjamin 1998, 102). Benjamin's solution is that 'the revolutionary intellectual' must 'above everything else [become] a traitor to his class of origin' (1998, 102). Benjamin considers this class repositioning the most radical act that disrupts the capitalist system that oppresses the proletariat. Traitor, for Benjamin, means a betrayal that 'consists, in an attitude which transforms him, from a supplier of the production apparatus, into an engineer who sees his task in adapting that apparatus to

the ends of the proletarian revolution' (1998, 102). To become a traitor, therefore, represents an act of radical delinking.

Setting aside the Marxist idioms of 'class struggle' and 'proletarian revolution', my primary interest is in Benjamin's notion of becoming-traitor as a useful analytical concept for reading Okri's and Adichie's recasting of exile. Unlike Benjamin, I focus on the fictional characters created by the writer rather than the writer. For the purpose of this paper, I link Benjamin's insight to a specific etymological meaning of exile in order to arrive at exile as a constellation of ideas such as becoming-traitor, 'leaping out' or radical refusal of the role as a reproducer of the apparatus of oppression and dispossession. Nico Israel alerts us that exile does not always mean *exsul*, banishment, homelessness or living abroad. Etymologically, exile is also derived from *ex salire* which 'expresses a sense of "leaping out" toward something or somewhere, implying a matter of will' (Israel 2000, 1). It is this sense of exile as *ex salire* or leaping out, which emphasises will, choice and futurity, that is extremely useful to reading *The Famished Road* and *Purple Hibiscus*. Therefore, to become an exile, as used in this paper, is to become a traitor to the existing order; to leap out of the tragic captivity of time, structure and vicious repetition, and to summon a new state of affairs. Consequently, to grasp this ethico-political import of exile as enacted by Azaro and Jaja, we must provisionally suspend the juridical understanding of the traitor as anti-community (Ben-Yehuda 2001, 127, 307–308; Thiranagama & Kelly 2010, 2 & 148) and redefine this figure in terms of revolutionary fidelity. True betrayal, as Slavoj Žižek argues, 'is an ethico-political act of the highest fidelity' (2004, 13). It seems to me that only when we focus on exile as becoming-traitor can we fruitfully arrive at the function of the scandalous and the nature of fidelity in the two novels.

Azaro: becoming-traitor and re-thinking postcolonial national redemption

Set in Nigeria and narrated by Azaro, the abiku child, *The Famished Road* is a multidimensional exploration of the pitfalls of national consciousness. It is at once a parody of anticolonial nationalists' narrative of redemption and a critique of transition and nation formation (Asempasah 2019). This is why the quest for figures of exemplarity and alternative redemptive strategies is so crucial to the unfolding of ethicality in the novel. Writing at a time of intense Afro-pessimism and with the twenty-first century on the horizon, Okri's quest for a different style of living is crucial to his critique of anticolonial nationalists' discourses of national formation, transition and liberation. This should not be surprising since, as Scott has argued in a different context, the anticolonial and nationalists' narrative of liberation and its distinctive narrative form of *romance* have become passé (Scott 1999; 2004). Okri's response to the crisis of meaning and hope in the postcolony, then, was to deploy the abiku myth, to borrow Lukács' famous words, as the 'form of an age' in which the anticolonial will to redemption or decolonisation 'has become problematic' (1914, 56). If form is 'the resolution of a fundamental dissonance of existence' (Lukács 1971, 62), then for Okri postcolonial dissonance of existence refers to the shameful difference between the rhetoric of decolonisation as 'the creation of new men' (Fanon 1967, 28) and the widespread failure and disillusionment that independence inaugurated. Okri's solution to this dissonance, is to reimagine a new mode of thought and agency as a precondition for a genuine postcolonial beginning or future. Herein lies the importance of exile and, therefore, becoming-traitor in *The Famished Road*.

Regrettably, while the literature on *The Famished Road* and, in fact, the famished road trilogy, has focused on Okri's transformation of the abiku myth along the lines of discursive multiculturality, magical realism, strategic transformations, new ageism and postmodern tendencies of 'navigating geographies' (Aldea 2011; Cooper 1998; Faris 2004; Hawley 1995; McCabe 2005; Ogunsanwo 1995; Smalligan 2011; Quayson 1997), there is little on exile. For example, in his reading of exilic figures in Nigerian literature, Ignatius Chukwumah rightly describes Azaro as an exilic figure. However, he traces Azaro's exilic status to the fact that 'he is neither here nor there – he owns two homes, neither of which is his home in the long run' (Chukwumah 2014: 16). As I have been trying to suggest, however, exile functions in *The Famished Road* at a deeper level that transcends dislocation and in-betweenness. Other critics have characterised Okri's strategic positioning of Azaro as a liminal figure inhabiting the spiritual and material realms as Okri's most significant transformation of the abiku myth (Ogunsanwo 1995, 46; Quayson 1997, 124). While this emphasis on Azaro's liminality is insightful, not only is it not the most radical, it is also not immediately clear how Azaro's liminality relates to the resolution of a postcolonial dissonance which is precisely what makes the novel a postcolonial text. It is by paying attention to exile as a fundamental concept, and thematic and radical act, which Okri inscribes as the unthought in the abiku myth, that we can arrive at Okri's attempt to rethink decolonisation and national redemption through the strategic act of becoming-traitor.

At the core of Okri's transformation of exile is Azaro's scandalous act of betrayal of his spirit companions. The novel suggests that the possibility of narration, critique, the breaking of the abiku's cruel repetition, and the emergence of an alternative community hinges on exile as a radical betrayal of the existing**,** diabolical ways of living. The representation of exile as becoming-traitor and**,** therefore, 'leaping out' of a bad place is broached in the first few pages of *The Famished Road* where Azaro declares that:

> To be born is to come into the world weighed down with strange gifts of the soul, with enigmas and an inextinguishable sense of exile. So it was with me […] But this time, somewhere in the interspace between the spirit world and the Living, I chose to stay. This meant breaking my pact and outwitting my companions […] It is terrible to remain in-between […] Each one of us made the passage alone […] The exile had begun (Okri 1991, 5–6).

In this quotation, Azaro draws a distinction between exile as a state of liminal existence and exile as an act of disavowal, betrayal or leaping out that he enacts through his decision to break his pact with his spirit companions. For Azaro what is terrible or tragic is the liminal or in-between state. This is interesting as it negates the valorisation of in-betweenness or interstices in postcolonial theory and studies (Bhabha 2004, 1–27). What the passage also reveals is that contrary to Said's rejection of choice as central to the exilic condition, Azaro makes choice the defining feature of his agency. Furthermore, it is worth noting that Azaro himself later describes his action of breaking his pact with his spirit companions as 'betrayal' and rebellion. Azaro's betrayal thus constitutes the scandal in the abiku ontology and protocols of spatial navigation. In *Infinite Riches* (Okri 1998), Azaro strengthens the connection between exile and betrayal when he says, 'I kept expecting voices of my first companions, who were angry with me for betraying my pact to return to them in the spirit world' (Okri 1998, 391).

But what is Azaro really betraying or becoming-traitor to? This constitutes the ethical horizon of Okri's famished road trilogy. To answer this question, we will have to see the

abiku myth as the representation of two opposing socio-political formations rather than as merely the spiritual and physical worlds. This is important because in breaking the pact with his spirit companions, Azaro is not rejecting the spiritual world in totality. Rather he is betraying a particular existential entrapment and habitus that is based on an asymmetrical relationship that normalises thievery, exploitation, dispossession and anguish. Douglas McCabe shows that the spatial opposition between the spirit world inhabited by abikus and the material world which they frequent for malicious reasons reflect the historical competition between *ilé* and *egbé* as socio-political organisations among the Yoruba during the Oyo Empire (2002, 48).[4] From this historical contextualisation, the abiku phenomenon transcends myth; it is the symbolic dramatisation of real ideological and economic conflicts that reached their peak during the powerful Oyo Empire. While the *ilé,* which was defined by filiation, was the dominant ideology of the Oyo Empire's organisation of Yorubaland, the *egbé* represented an alliance or a club of shared interests (McCabe 2002).

Conceptually and politically, therefore, the *egbé* represented an alternative form of socio-political organisation that transcended the *ilé* conception of community as based on ancestry, kinship and consanguinity. Implicit in McCabe's ethnographic analysis is the suggestion that the structural and ideological difference between *ilé* and *egbé* was a nascent indigenous contestation over the constitution of the state. This contestation between filiation and alliance is at the heart of the politics of transition and exile in the famished road trilogy. It is within this context that *The Famished Road* and the rest of the trilogy foreground the following questions: What are the implications for nation formation when the ideological, institutional and everyday practices are motivated by a filiative ideology? How do activities of political parties in the postcolonial nation-state, conceived primarily as vehicles of representative or participatory governance but which in practice function as rallying points for filiative tendencies, enact the contestation between filiation and alliance? What alternative form(s) of national consciousness and socio-political configurations are possible?

So how do the above questions relate to Azaro's becoming-traitor and his desire for a reconfiguration of the postulates and practices of nation formation in postcolonial Nigeria and Africa? These questions help us to focus on the strategic importance of Okri's transformation of exile into becoming-traitor and to read this as a form of resistance. According to Olatubosun Ogunsanwo, by re-contextualising the abiku myth, Okri is concerned with two forms of complexity, namely the abiku myth and the plight of the abiku. As a result, Okri calls for 'a critical re-thinking of its ontology and epistemology' (Ogunsanwo 1995, 47). What Ogunsanwo overlooks is that for Okri, exile or becoming-traitor is precisely that which is constantly policed and denied in the abiku ontology because it is a destabilising force to the continuity of the abiku architecture of errancy. Okri's originality is that he moves exile from the margins and relocates it as a fundamental strategy for, to borrow Julietta Singh's fitting phrase**,** 'unthinking mastery' (Singh 2018), and for decolonising coloniality of being.[5] This is why Azaro's betrayal is such a scandalous act for his companions.

Two images of the abiku emerge from the available literature and my analysis. First, the abiku as the soubriquet for the *egbé* that politically represented an alternative to *ilé* as the ruling image of thought. Secondly, the abiku as a cruel, lawless and rapacious band that perpetrated violent acts of dispossession through their slave-raiding activities. Okri's

masterstroke, then, is to re-interpret colonial and postcolonial structures of domination and disorder as forms of imposed *ilé* and *egbé* from which postcolonial people have yet to exit in order to found the nation-state as a community that is based on shared interests. The abiku's utopian world becomes symbolic of that which is lacking in the postcolonial nation-state. When at the end of *Infinite Riches*, Azaro presciently declares that the 'election would seal the fate of the unborn nation' (Okri 1998, 393), we are not surprised since the violence that has characterised the politics of nation formation shows that what will emerge is a fractured nation characterised by ethnocentric and factional interests rather than the collective triumph of the people. In this pseudo postcolonial nation-state in the making, the political parties and Madam Koto represent the rapacious abiku club whose continuity depends on the dispossession of others.

Conceptually, the political parties represent the postcolonial *egbé* as an alternative to colonialism. However, like the historical *egbé*, that alternative is problematic as its activities endanger the survival of the community. It is therefore not surprising that**,** appalled by the violence unleashed on the streets of the ghetto by the opposing political factions, Azaro aptly describes the state of affairs as 'the recurrence of ancient antagonisms, secret histories […]. And blood was a new kind of libation. The road was young but its hunger was old. And its hunger had been reopened' (Okri 1991, 484). It is because, for Okri, a genuine postcolonial nation-state does not yet exist that the critical issue becomes how to inaugurate 'new beginnings' that move 'beyond the famished road' (Okri 1993, 307). From this perspective what is highlighted in the famished road trilogy is not so much the contemporaneity of Azaro's birth and that of the nation, which is the case in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), as Azaro's becoming-traitor to his companions which the postcolonial nation-state has failed to accommodate.

The significance of becoming-traitor as an ethico-political act of refusal and betrayal in *The Famished Road* and the rest of the trilogy is foregrounded in the fact that unlike the normalising logic that regulates the repeated visitations of the abiku to the material world, Azaro is not an unwilling adventurer and he is not on a mission to loot for the abiku spirit world. Neither is his presence in the material world the result of his being fettered by the traditional spiritualist.[6] His presence is the result of a conscious desire to participate in the political vision of decolonisation as the 'annunciation of wonderful events' (Okri 1991, 4). Thus, his agency derives from his deliberate decision to betray or become a traitor to his pact with his spirit companions (Okri 1991, 6; Okri 1998, 391). This explains his refusal to re-join his companions in spite of their repeated attempts to lure, kidnap and play havoc with him. Azaro's becoming-traitor can thus be described as ethical unanswerability or refusal of the logic of exploitation that characterises the activities of the abiku club. As Azaro triumphantly declares in *Songs of Enchantment* (Okri 1993), 'My spirit companions had tried to scare me from life by making me more susceptible to the darker phases of things, and by making reality appear more monstrous and grotesque. But so far they had failed' (Okri 1993, 293). Okri's contribution to the abiku myth, then, is that he refigures becoming-traitor to the dominant mode of existence as radical fidelity or commitment to the possibility that 'our lives could be different and better' (Okri 1991, 569).

On the basis of Azaro's fidelity to his decision to stay, it can be argued that *The Famished Road* and, in fact the trilogy, is an exploration of Azaro's commitment to his decision to stay in the material world. Having 'leaped out' of the spirit world which is presented as 'captivity of freedom,' Azaro opts for 'the liberty of limitations' wherein human potentiality,

inventiveness and productivity are derived from their confrontation with the paradox of time and the incompleteness of historical transformation (Okri 1991, 559). Like Benjamin, Okri positions becoming-traitor not as something pathological but as an authentic and revolutionary act that leaps out of the existing state of affairs for another world. By betraying his spirit companions, Azaro has radically transformed himself from a transmitter or reproducer of the ethics and politics of errancy, disorder and dispossession into a producer of a new way of knowing and style of living. Exile is thus presented in Okri's work as the precondition for a genuine national transition that will 'lead beyond the famished road to new beginnings' (Okri 1998, 307). Perhaps it is in this context that the contemporaneity between Azaro's birth and the birth of the nation become meaningful. Azaro's fidelity to the radical act of becoming-traitor is set against the repeated failure of the political parties and Madam Koto to betray the colonial and historical practices of chaos, domination and exploitation.

That Okri presents Azaro's becoming-traitor as the singular act that the postcolonial subject and nation-state have failed to replicate can be gleaned from Azaro's father's rebirth which is central to the ethico-political direction of *The Famished Road* and the famished road trilogy. Most critics (Aldea 2011; Costantini 2002; Vázquez 2002) have focused on the transformative potential of Dad's rebirth into Black Tyger to the neglect of the implications of his failed rebirth as a politician. Dad's short-lived rebirth marks Okri's attempt to politicise Azaro's becoming-traitor by making it integral to the possibility of 'more vision, more transformation, and the birth of a new cycle of justice' (Okri 1993, 295) at the national level. Beginning as a poor and oppressed load carrier and cart puller, Dad, toward the end of *The Famished Road*, decides to form a political party that will contest the dominance of the Party of the Rich and the Party of the Poor. Unlike the two dominant parties, Dad's party is a collection of the detritus of the postcolonial nation-state (the beggars, prostitutes, his fellow boxers, load carriers and cart pushers). His rebirth as a 'politician,' albeit a momentary idealistic venture, is perhaps the most significant development in the ghetto as it introduces a new rhetoric of hope and also signifies an attempt to translate Azaro's radical act of becoming-traitor to the established order of lawlessness, violence, oppression and injustice that has dominated the politics of transition to independence into national politics. The masses whom Dad addresses represent the inexistent[7] of the new nation who are consigned to merely 'looking in at a bewildering reality' (Okri 1998, 224). Ironically, Dad's attempt at becoming-traitor to the two dominant political parties and Madam Koto merely positions him as a utopian thinker. He uses his imaginary political platform to redream a world without rats and cockroaches that eat away the dreams of people; a world in which the people are empowered through the provision of education and health facilities; a world without hunger; a world without the 'corruption and disintegration of innocent men and women' (Okri 1991, 568); and above all, a world whose potential lies in the ability of the individual to redream new forces and spaces that call into question pre-established conceptions.

Okri's forte lies in his use of Dad's failed rebirth to critique the pitfalls of anticolonial narratives of redemption and the postcolonial nation's failure to institute a new ethical community and pact. His rhetoric of possibility is exposed as groundless because he lacks Azaro's epistemological insight into the dynamics of the paradoxical becoming of the nation-state. It takes a while for him to accept that nations 'partake of the spirit-child's condition' (Okri 1991, 558) and, therefore, like the abiku-child, the nation does not stay 'till we have made propitious sacrifices and displayed our serious intent to bear the weight of

a unique destiny' (Okri 1991, 567). This is the epistemological insight about the ontology of the nation that the novel puts forward. If national beginnings and historical progress are constituted by paradox rather than teleology, what style of living or agency does this call for? From the analyses so far, it is clear that becoming-traitor represents the 'propitious' or supreme sacrificial act or style. Genuine national redemption is not attained by merely redreaming the world as Dad repeatedly does throughout the trilogy; it is the result of a new way of acting which specifically means leaping out toward a new order or becoming-traitor to the established structure of violence, corruption and negation of being. Although *The Famished Road* ends with the declaration 'A dream can be the highest point of a life' (Okri 1991, 574), in *Songs of Enchantment*, in the chapter aptly titled 'Deliverance', Azaro provides a poignant corrective: 'A DREAM CAN be the highest point in life; action can be its purest manifestation' (Okri 1993, 275; emphasis retained).

Action here should be understood within the context of *ex salire* or becoming-traitor. It is in the context of action that Azaro assumes Ogun's grandeur and titanic stature as the god of creativity. According to Wole Soyinka, for the Yoruba 'action' relates directly to Ogun as 'the first actor' and 'conqueror of transition' (1976, 146). Acting, therefore, has to do with agency, choice and will. It defines individual and national redemption as a difficult process of confronting chaos by unleashing one's creative potential in order to bring about harmony in the world. As Soyinka puts it, 'To act' is to unleash the 'Promethean instinct of rebellion' that 'channels anguish into a creative purpose which releases man from a totally destructive despair, releasing from within him the most energetic, deeply combative inventions which, without usurping the territory of the infernal gulf, bridges it with visionary hope' (1976, 146). The postcolonial nation-state, unlike Azaro, has failed to unleash this promethean instinct of rebellion which we have characterised as exile or becoming-traitor.

From the above discussion it is problematic to claim, as Cezair-Thompson does, that 'Azaro's destiny is explicitly linked to his country's' and which Okri implies is 'a shared liminality of narrator and country' (1996, 40). This is true insofar as we limit ourselves to the physical and existential challenges in which both are trapped. However, as I have shown, once Azaro becomes a traitor to the abiku club he ceases to be a transmitter of the abiku architecture of illegality. Rather it is the postcolonial country that is caught in the 'spirit-child's condition' and therefore 'not ready, not willing to be born or to become [because] adequate preparations have not been made to sustain […] momentous births, things […] are not resolved, things [are] bound up with failure and with fear of being' (Okri 1991, 487). It is Ade, the other abiku child, whose destiny is linked to the destiny of the nation. Like Azaro, Ade's birth coincides with the transition to independence. Unlike Azaro, Ade decides that the spirit world is 'a greater home' because 'spirit companions know the secret of one's desire and can fulfil those desires, every single one of them' (1991, 557). That the new nation has failed to betray, to inaugurate a genuine beginning, a true liberation is indicated by Ade's refusal to stay. For Ade the material conditions of the people remain unchanged since the 'unnecessary suffering in this world,' the 'filthy untarred road, the broken-down houses and the ulcerous poverty' belie the promise of the momentous birth of a nation (1991, 557).

Ade's refusal to stay has two important significance. First, it is the climax of Okri's indictment of the failure of the transition to liberation. Second, it accentuates the significance of Azaro's fidelity to his betrayal to the criminal and unethical operation of the

abiku club. As Ade prophetically put it, 'Our country is an abiku country. Like the spirit-child, it keeps coming and going. One day it will *decide to remain*. It will become strong' (Okri 1991, 547). The possibility of redemption is transferred into the future when the nation**,** like the abiku**,** will *decide to remain*. The key word here is *decide*. It encapsulates the ideas of choice, will, action and futurity which are crucial to exile as *ex salire*. That decision is a radical betrayal or becoming-traitor to the obnoxious forces, systems, structures and sensibilities that have yoked the nation to a vicious cycle of nothingness or nonbeing.

From the discussion so far, the most significant indicator of the country's readiness for a genuine beginning and redemption is when it has grasped the ethico-political relevance of becoming-traitor. Azaro's exile therefore functions as the quintessential act of refusal of the logics of oppression and injustice, and a fidelity to a just and equitable world that the postcolonial country is yet to inaugurate in order to sustain momentous births. It is the key to breaking the vicious cycle of violence and hopelessness. Thus far we have demonstrated the centrality of *ex salire* or becoming-traitor to Okri's quest for alternative ethico-political acts necessary for a genuine postcolonial national liberation. But Okri is not alone in this regard. The next section will focus on Adichie's representation of *ex salire* and becoming-traitor in *Purple Hibiscus* as a strategy of articulating alternative possibilities.

Jaja's becoming-traitor and the quest for possibility in *Purple Hibiscus*

Set in Nigeria and narrated by the adolescent girl Kambili, Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* focuses on Eugene Achike's domestic space as an arena of despotism, violence, terror, colonial mimicry and civility. At the macro level, it examines the crisis of the postcolonial nation-state as seen by the military intervention in politics, the silencing of political opponents, economic collapse, failing infrastructure and brain drain. Like Okri, Adichie explores the possibility of postcolonial redemption and speaking truth to power. Consequently, Adichie critiques the operations of a neo-colonial matrix of power within Eugene's domestic sphere. This matrix of power revolves around colonial Catholic conservatism, patriarchy and local ideologies of heroism. The result is a fanatical assemblage of domination that regulates what is epistemically intelligible and socially acceptable.

There is a sense, therefore, in which the Achike domestic space functions allegorically as a colonial colony and a beleaguered postcolonial nation-state. Eugene's absolute control over the desires and perceptions of his family through his simplification of reality into a rigid binary of civilised/heathen recalls Frantz Fanon's description of rigid colonial control as 'a mother who unceasingly restrains her fundamentally perverse offspring from managing to commit suicide and from giving free rein to its evil' (Fanon 1967, 170). These multiple figurations of the Achike familial space are integral to Adichie's critique of residual colonial structures of thought and feeling on the one hand, and the fetishism of democratic rhetoric that in reality lack**s** the substantive values necessary for the transformation of the postcolonial nation-state on the other. It is from this perspective that Eugene emerges as one of the most memorable characters in recent African fiction who symbolises a postcolonial contradiction and tragedy. Highly educated and elevated in his church to the status of the archetypal Christian, internationally acclaimed as a champion of democracy in Nigeria, a successful industrialist and a generous man, Eugene is, ironically, religiously intolerant, authoritarian and violent in his running of

his domestic colony, and above all a reproducer of colonial civility. He is a mimic man or as Ifeoma, his sister, puts it 'a colonial product' (Adichie 2003, 13).

It is not surprising, then, that central to *Purple Hibiscus* is the possibility of a new humanism or sociality that does not just destabilise the colonial and patriarchal presuppositions of the everyday cultural, religious and political practices in the postcolony but also hints at the emergence of new men and women with a capacious understanding of their place in the scheme of things. Such new men and women will have to abandon colonial mimicry and civility, and cultivate respect for other epistemologies. It is in this respect that exile becomes a fundamental conceptual motif and strategic act in *Purple Hibiscus*.

Various scholars have noted the centrality of subversion, rebellion and redemption in the novel (Nwokocha 2017; Stobie 2010; Tunca 2009; Wallace 2012). Missing in these discussions, however, is an analysis of exile as a subversive strategy. The result is that the ethico-political significance of Jaja's scandalous rebellion and subversion to the theme of redemption has remained largely unexamined. Although Sandra Nwokocha asserts that subversion functions 'as the fictional figures' responses to oppression' (2017, 1), she does not identify Adichie's repurposing of exile as an ethico-political subversive response to oppression. Similarly, though Cynthia Wallace rightly asserts that '*Purple Hibiscus* is a story of redemption' (2012, 479), she pays scant attention to Jaja's exile. Part of the reason Jaja's exile has suffered neglect in the literature is because most critics have focused on reading the novel from the perspective of feminist theories.[8] The result is that attention has tended to focus on the female characters. The other reason, as I have suggested, is that exile has predominantly been read in terms of *exsul* rather than *ex salire*.

In one of the rare discussions of exile in *Purple Hibiscus,* Pauline Uwakweh argues that 'the theme of exile widens the thematic mooring' of the novel (2010, 62). However, for Uwakweh exile is synonymous with migration. Consequently, she focuses on 'the impact of migration or exile on the creative consciousnesses' of Adichie (Uwakweh 2010, 62). Though Uwakweh asserts that Adichie's affirmation of identity and consciousness can be understood as a direct result of her 'migrant status as a postcolonial writer,' she misses Adichie's recasting of exile as 'leaping out' and a form of resistance and defiance. By substituting migration for exile, Uwakweh obscures the centrality of Jaja's becoming-traitor, and its invocation and rewriting of the activities of a real historical figure in colonial Nigeria. On one level, the name Jaja in the novel is central to Adichie's engagement with the colonial archive of brutality, injustice, violence and trauma. The story of the historical King Jaja of Opobo has been the subject of interesting discussions in Nigeria (Cookey 1978; Davey 2019). Sold as a slave at a very young age, the historical Jaja eventually managed to rise to the level of royalty. His enduring legacy derives from his opposition to British economic and religious imperialism. Frustrated with Jaja's defiance, the English colonial government first deposed and later exiled him to Accra, Gold Coast, and finally to the Caribbean where he died. On another level, Adichie is invoking and recasting a particular form of agency that took the form of resistance to oppressive colonising mentality and attitudes. For Adichie the question is whether the postcolonial subject is able to deploy exile as a radical act of speaking truth to power and intimating a different order of things? Like Okri, Adichie suggests that the possibility lies in the agential act of *ex salire* or becoming traitor.

By nicknaming Eugene's son, Chukwuka Jaja, Adichie is signalling continuity of defiance against neo-colonial and religio-cultural forms of domination and violence. In other words, coloniality of being, power and knowledge must be confronted or unsettled through the

ethico-political act of exile. As Ifeoma explains to Jaja 'I told your mother that it was an appropriate nickname, that you would take after Jaja of Opobo' (Okri 1991, 144). The occasion provides Ifeoma the opportunity to educate the children about colonialism, bad betrayal and defiance. For Ifeoma what is admirable about King Jaja is that he 'did not sell his soul for a bit of gunpowder like the other kings did' (Okri 1991, 144). Adichie is, however, careful not to present a saintly picture of Jaja of Opobo. For, as Obiora, Ifeoma's son, points out, King Jaja 'sold his people into slavery' (Okri 1991, 145). To Obiora's dismissal of defiance with the claim that 'the British won in the end,' Jaja provides an intelligent counter historical response, 'The British won the war, but they lost many battles' (Okri 1991, 145).

The scene is crucial to our understanding of the genesis of Jaja's exile or becoming-traitor. It also points to Jaja's growing awareness of the historical dynamics of domination, oppression and rebellion. As Ifeoma tells him**,** 'Being defiant can be a good thing sometimes […] Defiance is like marijuana —it is not a bad thing when it is used right' (Okri 1991, 144). Here Ifeoma comes close to articulating Slavoj Žižek's distinction between bad and good betrayal. According to Žižek, a truly radical betrayal of an author is constituted 'by way of remaining faithful to the creative impulse or core of his thought' (2004, 13). For Ifeoma, it is by becoming-traitor to all forms of imposition that the postcolonial subject can be said to be truly faithful to the creative thought of Jaja of Opobo. Secondly, it allows us to see Jaja in terms of Adichie's repetition and transformation of the concept of exile. The scene prepares the ground for Jaja's scandalous and radical act of rebellion against his father's colonial epistemology and habits. While in the case of Jaja of Opobo exile must be understood in terms of *exsul* (i.e. banishment and homelessness) and**,** therefore, as punitive, for Adichie's fictional Jaja exile functions as *ex salire* (i.e. leaping out of an apparatus of capture and aiming for alternative ethos and sociality). Part of Adichie's originality in *Purple Hibiscus* therefore lies in her reconfiguration of exile as becoming-traitor to the coloniality of knowledge, power and being represented by Eugene's colonial and conservative Catholic-informed governmentality. To grasp this, we need to return to that originary scene of confrontation between father and son recorded in the first section of the novel titled 'Breaking Gods: Palm Sunday'.

The event of exile is staged when Jaja refuses to participate in communion on Palm Sunday. The scene and the dialogue between father and son, as reported by Kambili~~,~~ is worth quoting in full in order to appreciate Jaja's becoming-traitor:

> 'Jaja, you didn't go to communion,' Papa said quietly, almost a question.
>
> Jaja stared at the missal on the table as though he were addressing it. 'The wafer gives me bad breath.' I stared at Jaja. Had something come loose in his head? Papa insisted we called it the host because "host" came close to capturing the essence, the sacredness, of Christ's body. "Wafer" was too secular, wafer was what one of Papa's factories made – chocolate wafer, banana wafer, what people bought their children to give them a treat better than biscuits.
>
> 'And the priest keeps touching my mouth and it nauseates me,' Jaja said. He knew I was looking at him, that my shocked eyes begged him to seal his mouth, but he did not look at me.
>
> 'It's the body of our Lord.' Papa's voice was low, very low. His face looked swollen already, with pus-tipped rashes spread across every inch, but it seemed to be swelling even more. 'You cannot stop receiving the body of our Lord. It is death, you know that.'
>
> 'Then I will die.' Fear had darkened Jaja's eyes to the color of coal tar, but he looked Papa in the face now. 'Then I will die, Papa' (Okri 1991, 6–7).

Condensed in this scene is contestation over knowledge, the power to name and define, and to decolonise the coloniality of power and being. By choosing the idiom 'wafer' over 'host', Jaja is leaping out of an epistemic domination wherein enunciation and difference are constituted. Put differently, Jaja is interrogating a form of discursive construction of the sacred body that, ironically, in practice subjects the body to cruel brutalities and deformities. If 'host' captures the essence and sacredness of the body of Christ, 'wafer' hints at not just the profanation but the fragility or crisis of the body that the sacred body came to redeem. Therefore, Jaja's act of becoming traitor draws attention to the body as the site on which Eugene imprints his oppressive rule. Jaja's action is scandalous because his choice of idiom unsettles the hegemonic discourse Eugene has so carefully indoctrinated his family with. It is precisely this that frightens Kambili the narrator. From this perspective, Jaja's exile or scandalous act assumes its transgressive function as epistemic disobedience to Eugene's epistemic colonisation. Epistemic disobedience, according to Mignolo, is a radical act of 'de-colonial de-linking with all its historical, colonial and ethical consequences' and constitutes a 'necessary step for imagining and building democratic, just, and non-imperial/colonial societies' (2009, 2).

It significant to note that in 'Breaking Gods' we are presented with the picture of Eugene as a conservative Catholic and an authoritarian father. His credentials at the local and national levels are carefully delineated by his daughter Kambili, the narrator. Through the deft interplay of flashback and narrator reflexivity**,** Adichie sketches the dichotomy between Eugene's admirable and heroic public image and the brutality with which he rules his domestic sphere. Furthermore, Eugene is presented as someone who denigrates his culture as he considers non-Christians like his father, Papa-Nnukwu, as a heathen; a kind of pathology whom his Christian children must not associate with lest they become contaminated. Apart from being a direct victim of his father's domestic brutality, Jaja has witnessed the several times his mother suffered miscarriages and his sister Kambili was subjected to the scalding of her feet. For Adichie, the crucial issue becomes how to dismantle the suffocating authoritarian and neo-colonial bastion that Eugene has constructed around his family.

It is not without reason that Kambili begins the novel by identifying Jaja's becoming-traitor or challenge to Eugene's epistemic domination as the originary disruptive force that began the process of the gradual disintegration of Eugene's domestic fortress: 'Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go for communion and Papa flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines on the étagère' (Adichie 2003, 3). Up until this incident no one had actually dared to challenge Eugene's power to defy with such audacity. I have argued that it is valid to see Eugene's domestic sphere as a microcosm of the Nigerian national sphere. Therefore, we should see Jaja's becoming-traitor to Eugene's colonial mimicry, civility and violent oppression from a broader perspective. A genuine egalitarian national sphere can only emerge when there is a radical betrayal of the colonial and neo-colonial game of inessentiality. In this we see the intimate connection between exile and redemption.

In her reading of *Purple Hibiscus,* Wallace argues that by confessing to killing Eugene and going to prison in place of the mother, Jaja 'complicates the problematics of suffering and redemption' in the novel (2012, 476). Wallace draws the conclusion that the novel's 'postcolonial location renders questions of redemption untraceable to a single source' (2012, 478). Part of the complexity of redemption in Adichie's novel, Wallace avers, is the impossibility of deciding whether Jaja's choice of self-sacrifice originates from either the Christian or Igbo

'cultural modes of sacrifice' (2012, 478). However, as I have been suggesting, to grasp Jaja's centrality to the thematic of redemption we must begin from his confrontation with his father over the semiotics of the Eucharist. Rather than reading Jaja's sacrificial act in isolation, we must view it as a consequence of his originary act of betrayal of his father's semiotics of neo-colonial authority. Jaja's substitutionary act suggests that he has indeed leaped out of a diabolical form of masculinity, symbolised by his father Eugene, and colonial structures of thought that produces figures of colonial mimicry like Eugene. Jaja's exile thus intimates a new form of masculinity essential for reconfiguring postcolonial domestic and public spheres. Jaja's masculinity embodies Papa Nnukwu's, Father Amadi's and Aunty Ifeoma's open-mindedness, love, criticality and acknowledgment of other epistemologies that have been marginalised by Eugene's recalibrated colonial discourse and masculinity.

Conclusion

Exile is at the core of how Okri and Adichie rethink postcolonial agency, ethicality and national redemption. The paper has shown that contrary to Said's and Mignolo's celebration of exile as transnational nomadism that downplays the power of the state, Okri and Adichie rethink exile as an ethico-political act essential to genuine national redemption. For Okri and Adichie, exile and the nation-state are not diametrically opposed horizons of expectations; exile as *ex salire* is fundamental to the constitution of a genuine postcolonial national redemption. By attending to exile as leaping out toward something ethically superior, we have highlighted the significance of Azaro's and Jaja's scandalous acts as sites of epistemic disobedience and the genesis of new truths. It is within this context that Azaro and Jaja can be read as exilic figures.

Crucially, the analysis has also shown that beyond form, African writers deploy conceptual transformation as an arena of critique and newness. This has implications for the way we read the African novel. Future studies may validate, broaden or problematise the extent to which concepts function as markers of novelty, critique and futurity in African literary works. Furthermore, the analysis provides an alternative to Mbembe's and Scott's theorisations on the postcolonial subject's response to the crisis of temporality and meaning. For Okri and Adichie becoming-traitor constitutes a radical act for rethinking the relationship between exile and national redemption.

Notes

1. On postcolonial disorder, see Mbembe (2001) and in particular Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (2006).
2. Examples of African kings and rulers exiled by the British include Prempeh I, King of Ashanti who was exiled from the Gold Coast to the Seychelles from 1896 to 1926; Mwanga II Mukasa, King of Buganda, Uganda, exiled to the Seychelles in 1899 and died there in 1903; King Chwa II, Kabelega of Bunyoro kingdom, Uganda, exiled to the Seychelles in 1899 until 1923.
3. The essay was originally an address at the Institute for the Study of Fascism in Paris in 1934.
4. In what follows I draw extensively on McCabe (2002).
5. On coloniality of being, see Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007).
6. See John Clark-Bekederemo's "Abiku" in *Ozidi* and Wole Soyinka's "Abiku" in *Idanre and Other Poems* for an appreciation of the ritual mnemotechnics intended to break the vicious cycle of birth-death-re-birth.

7. For Badiou, the 'inexistent' refers the oppressed masses 'who count for nothing […] who are present in the world but absent from its meaning and decisions about its future' (2012, 55–56).
8. On the various feminists readings of *Purple Hibiscus*, see Sandra Nwokocha (2017).

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