



International Journal Advanced Research Publications

SPIRITUAL AESTHETICS AND ETHICAL CONSCIOUSNESS: NARRATIVE DYNAMICS IN BEN OKRI'S STARBOOK AND PRAYER FOR THE LIVING

*Ghaneshwari Yadav and Dr. Shreeja Tripathi Sharma

India.

Article Received: 31 October 2025, Article Revised: 19 November 2025, Published on: 08 December 2025

*Corresponding Author: Ghaneshwari Yadav

India. DOI: <https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijarp.8413>

ABSTRACT

Ben Okri, a prominent Nigerian writer, is celebrated for integrating African folklore, magical realism, and metaphysical inquiry in his fiction. This study explores the philosophical dimensions of his post-millennial novels *Starbook* (2007) and *Prayer for the Living* (2021), focusing on ethical reflection, spiritual consciousness, and existential inquiry (Okri, 2007; 2021). Employing an interdisciplinary framework that combines African philosophical thought (Mbiti, 1969; Gyekye, 1997), narrative theory (Bakhtin, 1981), and ethical literary criticism (Bennett, 2011), the research analyses characters as philosophical agents whose actions, visions, and moral deliberations illuminate broader social, ethical, and metaphysical concerns. Key findings reveal recurring patterns in Okri's post-millennial fiction, including ethical agency, spiritual realism, temporal fluidity, and the function of narrative as a medium for philosophical reflection. The paper demonstrates that Okri's novels transcend conventional storytelling, positioning literary narratives as frameworks for examining human consciousness, moral responsibility, and the interconnection between the spiritual and material realms. By situating African philosophical principles within imaginative literary contexts, the research underscores the capacity of Okri's fiction to convey profound ethical and metaphysical insights. These findings contribute to the broader discourse on African literary philosophy and highlight the role of fiction as a vehicle for philosophical and moral inquiry in contemporary literature.

KEYWORDS: Ben Okri, Starbook, Prayer for the Living, African literature, fictional philosophy, magical realism, ethics, metaphysics.

INTRODUCTION

Ben Okri's fiction occupies a distinctive and influential position at the confluence of African literary traditions, magical realism, and philosophical inquiry. As one of Africa's most celebrated contemporary writers, Okri has consistently merged narrative innovation with profound metaphysical reflection, creating works that interrogate the nature of reality, consciousness, and ethical responsibility. His early novels, particularly *The Famished Road* (1991), are renowned for their magical realist style, blending the spiritual and material worlds to depict the complexities of postcolonial African existence. In these works, Okri situates ordinary human experiences within a framework that accommodates myth, folklore, and visionary insight, thereby challenging conventional boundaries between the real and the imagined.

In an interview given in 2007, Okri explains that *Starbook* originated from "a story my mother began to tell me when I was a child," a fragment that continued to "haunt" him after her death. He adds that the work attempts to bring together his lifelong concerns as reality, dreams, loss, and the ethical representation of a people's history. By emphasising his dissatisfaction with existing narratives of the slave trade, Okri positions *Starbook* as an attempt to restore "the fullest dimensions of a people," combining personal memory with collective historical consciousness.

In his post-millennial fiction, including *Starbook* (2007) and *Prayer for the Living* (2021), Okri demonstrates a marked philosophical depth, shifting from narrative experimentation toward sustained engagement with ethical, metaphysical, and existential questions. *Starbook*, set in a mythic and timeless kingdom, intricately weaves African folklore with cosmological symbolism, presenting characters whose journeys traverse both the material and spiritual realms. The novel foregrounds the interplay between artistic creation, moral responsibility, and human aspiration, exploring how individuals navigate complex ethical landscapes while seeking personal and communal meaning. Similarly, *Prayer for the Living* emphasises social consciousness and moral reflection, urging readers to consider the ethical obligations of individuals within their communities and the broader natural world. By portraying characters as ethical and reflective agents, these works invite philosophical contemplation, situating

fiction as a medium through which questions of human destiny, moral choice, and spiritual insight can be explored.

This paper situates Okri's post-millennial fiction within the emerging discourse of "fictional philosophy," a conceptual framework that examines how literary narratives can articulate philosophical thought through storytelling. By focusing on the integration of metaphysical reflection, ethical reasoning, and African cultural thought, the study seeks to illuminate the ways in which Okri's novels engage with fundamental questions about human existence, morality, and consciousness. Through careful analysis of narrative structures, character development, and recurring philosophical motifs, the study underscores the capacity of African literature to function not merely as a cultural or aesthetic artefact but as a site for moral, spiritual, and intellectual inquiry. Moreover, by centring African cosmologies, mythic paradigms, and culturally specific ethical concerns, Okri's fiction contributes to a broader understanding of how African writers negotiate universal philosophical questions while remaining deeply rooted in local epistemologies and ontologies (Achebe, 1990; Emecheta, 1994).

In addition to its literary and philosophical significance, Okri's post-millennial work reflects the socio-cultural and political dynamics of contemporary Africa, including the ethical challenges posed by globalisation, environmental degradation, and social inequality. The novels' imaginative scope enables a holistic exploration of the human condition, where moral dilemmas, ethical responsibility, and metaphysical inquiry intersect with cultural narratives and historical consciousness. Consequently, this study not only examines Okri's fictional techniques and philosophical insights but also situates them within broader debates on African literature's role in shaping ethical reflection and metaphysical understanding in the twenty-first century.

By analysing *Starbook* and *Prayer for the Living*, this research contributes to ongoing scholarship on African literary philosophy and highlights the unique capacity of fiction to convey complex philosophical ideas. In doing so, it demonstrates that Okri's post-millennial works extend the boundaries of African literature, offering readers both aesthetic pleasure and profound ethical and metaphysical engagement.

Literature Review and Research Gap

Existing scholarship on Ben Okri has predominantly focused on his early magical realist works, particularly *The Famished Road* and its sequels, with critical attention directed toward his innovative narrative style, use of folklore, and exploration of postcolonial identity (Gikandi, 2000; Meštrović, 2019). Scholars have noted how Okri blends the mystical and the real to convey the psychological and social experiences of postcolonial African societies, emphasising the spiritual and symbolic dimensions of everyday life. These studies have highlighted the ways in which Okri's early fiction negotiates the tension between tradition and modernity, myth and history, and personal and communal identity.

In contrast, research on Okri's post-millennial novels, *Starbook* (2007) and *Prayer for the Living* (2021), remains comparatively limited. Existing studies on *Starbook* have emphasised its allegorical structure, mystical symbolism, and engagement with African cosmologies (Okri, 2007), while scholarly attention to *Prayer for the Living* has been minimal due to its recent publication. Consequently, there is a lack of systematic inquiry into how these later works extend beyond magical realism to engage deeply with philosophical, ethical, and metaphysical questions.

Significant gaps remain in the scholarship, particularly in three interrelated areas:

1. **Philosophical and Ethical Inquiry in Post-Millennial Fiction:** While early analyses have explored Okri's narrative techniques and mythopoetic style, there is limited examination of how his post-millennial fiction functions as a platform for philosophical reflection. The ethical dimensions of character decisions, the moral dilemmas they encounter, and the existential questions they raise have not been sufficiently explored in critical discourse.
2. **Integration of African Metaphysical and Moral Frameworks:** Okri's novels are deeply rooted in African cosmologies and cultural epistemologies, yet few studies systematically analyse how these frameworks inform the ethical and metaphysical dimensions of his narratives. What African concepts of destiny, spiritual agency, and communal responsibility shape character development and thematic structures remain underexplored.
3. **Interplay of Spiritual Realism and Social Commentary:** Post-millennial fiction by Okri often merges spiritual realism with reflections on contemporary social issues, including environmental degradation, social inequality, and ethical responsibility toward community and self. Existing scholarship has not adequately addressed how this synthesis shapes

readers' understanding of consciousness, moral responsibility, and the broader human condition.

This research paper seeks to address these critical gaps by offering a comprehensive analysis of the philosophical and ethical underpinnings of *Starbook* and *Prayer for the Living*. By examining narrative strategies, character development, and recurring philosophical motifs, the research demonstrates how Okri's post-millennial fiction positions literary storytelling as a medium for exploring metaphysical questions, moral responsibility, and human consciousness. Furthermore, this study situates Okri's work within the broader discourse of African literary philosophy, highlighting its capacity to integrate cultural specificity with universal ethical inquiry, thereby contributing to ongoing debates about the role of literature in philosophical and social reflection.

Theoretical Framework

This research employs an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates African philosophical thought, narrative theory, and ethical criticism, providing a robust lens for analysing the philosophical dimensions of Ben Okri's post-millennial fiction. By combining these approaches, the study situates Okri's novels as spaces where literary imagination and philosophical inquiry converge.

African Philosophical Thought: This component draws on key concepts of African metaphysics, communal ontology, and ethical reasoning. Philosophers such as John Mbiti (1969) and Kwame Gyekye (1997) emphasise the interconnectedness of individuals, communities, and the spiritual realm, highlighting the centrality of moral responsibility and collective well-being in African thought. These perspectives inform an understanding of how Okri constructs ethical and metaphysical frameworks within his narratives, portraying characters whose choices and consciousness are embedded in culturally specific conceptions of reality, destiny, and communal obligation. The framework of African philosophy allows for a reading that situates Okri's fiction within indigenous epistemologies rather than solely Western philosophical paradigms, foregrounding the cultural specificity of moral and metaphysical reflection.

Narrative Theory: Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, this study examines characters as active philosophical interlocutors whose actions, reflections, and ethical dilemmas generate dynamic moral discourse (Bakhtin, 1981). Dialogism emphasises the

multiplicity of voices and perspectives within a text, enabling an analysis of how conflicting ethical and metaphysical positions are represented and negotiated in Okri's fiction. Narrative structures, including nonlinear timelines, magical realism, and symbolic motifs, are read as mechanisms through which philosophical ideas are dramatised, allowing characters to embody, contest, and explore ethical and metaphysical questions.

Ethical Criticism: This approach applies contemporary literary ethical criticism to evaluate the moral significance of characters' choices and their broader philosophical implications (Bennett, 2011). By analysing how narrative events, character decisions, and imaginative scenarios convey ethical dilemmas, this framework highlights the ways in which Okri's fiction functions as a vehicle for moral inquiry. Ethical criticism allows the study to interrogate not only the content of moral reflection but also the form, showing how narrative strategies shape readers' ethical and philosophical engagement with the text.

By integrating these three perspectives, the theoretical framework provides a nuanced lens through which to examine *Starbook* and *Prayer for the Living*. It enables the research to explore how Okri's post-millennial fiction merges African metaphysical and ethical thought with innovative narrative techniques, situating characters as both imaginative and philosophical agents. This interdisciplinary approach underscores the study's central argument: that Okri's fiction exemplifies the convergence of literary artistry and philosophical inquiry, offering profound insights into human consciousness, morality, and the ethical dimensions of existence.

Narrative Analysis

Starbook

Starbook is shaped through a richly allegorical narrative architecture that integrates mythic, philosophical, and ethical dimensions. The unnamed prince, who anchors the narrative, undertakes an archetypal quest for artistic and spiritual illumination. His journey dramatizes the tension between worldly obligation and metaphysical aspiration, revealing the ethical weight of decisions made in the pursuit of self-actualisation. Okri's extensive use of dream imagery, visionary episodes, and cosmological symbolism cultivates a fluid conception of temporality and consciousness, suggesting that material and spiritual realities intersect and co-create meaning (Okri, 2007).

By fusing African folklore with metaphysical speculation, Okri constructs a narrative environment in which ethical dilemmas are enacted through imaginative, often otherworldly scenarios. This allegorical layering produces a text that invites multiple interpretive pathways.

Characters' actions and encounters function simultaneously as moral exemplars and as meditations on consciousness, illustrating the inseparability of ethical behaviour, spiritual awareness, and the evolving self. Starbook thus operates as a philosophical fable in which narrative technique becomes a vehicle for ethical inquiry.

Prayer for the Living

In Prayer for the Living, Okri foregrounds ethical consciousness with greater thematic immediacy, framing moral reflection as an essential component of social existence. The narrative underscores the responsibilities individuals bear toward their communities, while characters confront existential questions of duty, justice, and the consequences of human agency. Okri situates these dilemmas within a broader metaphysical landscape, emphasising the African philosophical conviction that moral choices reverberate across social and spiritual realms (Okri, 2021).

The novel's episodic structure interweaves personal narratives with communal and cosmological concerns, positioning ethical dilemmas as both private reckonings and collective tests of integrity. The text demonstrates how literary storytelling can embody philosophical discourse, prompting readers to evaluate the implications of action, consequence, and conscience within wider moral and spiritual frameworks. Prayer for the Living thus becomes a narrative meditation on human responsibility and the ethical textures of lived experience.

Narrative Techniques in Starbook and Prayer for the Living

Okri employs distinct narrative strategies in each work, aligning stylistic choices with the texts' thematic and philosophical objectives.

Lyrical and Poetic Prose

Both works manifest Okri's signature lyrical style, though each deploys this poetics differently. Starbook unfolds as an extended allegorical fable, its ornate and sensuous prose drawing heavily from mythology and the aesthetics of magical realism. Its depictions of spectral landscapes and liminal realms evoke the cosmological tapestries of African oral traditions.

Prayer for the Living, in contrast, employs a condensed and meditative linguistic mode. Its prose resembles philosophical vignettes or spiritual aphorisms, privileging clarity and contemplation. While the language remains evocative, it is intentionally pared down to distil metaphysical and ethical insights with precision.

Structural Approach and Form

The structural design of Starbook mirrors timeless mythic forms. Its narrative progression is cyclical, episodic, and dreamlike, echoing the storytelling patterns of African cosmology and oral tradition. The text embraces non-linear temporality to reflect the simultaneity of spiritual and material worlds.

Prayer for the Living adopts a deliberately fragmentary architecture. Rather than building a cohesive character-driven narrative, it operates as a mosaic of philosophical reflections and narrative moments. Each section can be read autonomously, encouraging readers to engage dynamically with the text as an anthology of ethical and metaphysical meditations.

Application of Magical Realism

Okri's deployment of magical realism diverges meaningfully across the two works. In Starbook, magical realism produces vivid supernatural entities and mythic landscapes, such as the star spirits, which symbolise the spiritual abundance of African cultures and the historical traumas of colonial intrusion. Magic functions as a narrative catalyst that illuminates cultural resilience, spiritual continuity, and existential struggle.

In Prayer for the Living, magical realism is more restrained and inwardly focused. Rather than externalising fantastical beings, Okri relies on surreal imagery and symbolic metaphor to elevate everyday experience into moments of spiritual revelation. The magical resides within consciousness itself, transforming ordinary scenes into meditations on creativity, endurance, and ethical clarity.

Comparative Analysis Across Both Novels

Across Starbook and Prayer for the Living, several converging patterns emerge, illustrating the distinctive features of Okri's post-millennial fictional philosophy. First, characters' subjective experiences operate as platforms for ethical reflection, where personal journeys intersect with communal and metaphysical concerns. Second, narrative events function simultaneously as moral and metaphysical tests, illustrating the inseparability of ethical deliberation from spiritual awareness. Third, Okri's integration of myth, cosmology, and allegory emphasises the dialogic relationship between imagination and philosophical inquiry, positioning fiction as a medium for exploring consciousness, moral responsibility, and human destiny. Collectively, these novels exemplify how Okri's post-millennial work advances a literary philosophy in which narrative form, ethical contemplation, and metaphysical insight are inextricably

intertwined, providing readers with a rich framework for engaging with both the aesthetic and the philosophical dimensions of literature.

Themes in Starbook and The Prayer for Living

Both novels demonstrate recurring thematic motifs that reflect Okri's philosophical inquiries, yet their treatment of these themes varies significantly.

Love and Relationships

In Starbook, love assumes a metaphysical dimension, symbolised by the relationship between the prince and the maiden. This union transcends the corporeal realm, serving as an allegory for unity between humanity and the cosmos. Love operates as a transformative and spiritual force, reflecting African cosmological views wherein the individual experience reverberates within the collective spiritual landscape. Conversely, The Prayer for Living shifts the focus from romantic love to a universalised exploration of love for humanity, life, and resilience. Here, love manifests through acts of forgiveness, hope, and communal endurance rather than through interpersonal or romantic dynamics.

Time and Temporality

Starbook disrupts linear temporality in favour of a cyclic, fluid conceptualisation of time. Through magical realism, the narrative traverses' surreal intersections of past, present, and future, aligning with traditional African storytelling techniques and reflecting themes of cyclical history and resistance.

In The Prayer for Living, time is anchored in the immediacy of the present moment. The novel presents mindfulness and the sanctity of daily existence, emphasising the profundity embedded in ordinary moments.

Cultural Identity and Postcolonial Critique

Both novels interrogate African identity within postcolonial contexts. Starbook allegorises cultural resilience through the artistic heritage of the maiden's village, threatened by colonial forces. The destruction of this cultural wealth critiques the traumatic erasure wrought by colonisation.

In contrast, The Prayer for Living universalises its reflection on cultural identity, immersing African philosophical wisdom into broader existential meditations on the shared human

condition. The text thus shifts its focus from overtly localised cultural critique to a global narrative of resilience.

Philosophical and Cultural Contexts of the Novels

The cultural and philosophical underpinnings of both texts reflect Okri's broader postcolonial and existential concerns.

Postcolonial Critique

Starbook provides an explicit critique of colonialism by juxtaposing the spiritual and cultural richness of precolonial African societies against the destruction wrought by colonial incursions. Through allegory, Okri underscores the dehumanising effects of cultural erasure. The Prayer for Living, while less direct in its postcolonial critique, advocates resisting oppression by embracing creativity, mindfulness, and spiritual connection. Read alongside Starbook, it suggests a universal strategy of perseverance against globalised alienation.

Existential Philosophy

Both novels elaborate on Okri's existential philosophy, exploring themes such as destiny, spirituality, and the search for meaning. Starbook emphasises mystical transcendence, portraying human existence as intertwined with fate and spiritual awakening. The Prayer for Living complements this by grounding existential meaning in the present, advocating for grace and balance in the face of life's inherent contradictions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The analysis of Starbook (2007) and Prayer for the Living (2021) demonstrates that Ben Okri's post-millennial fiction exemplifies a distinct form of fictional philosophy, in which narrative, ethical reflection, and metaphysical inquiry are deeply intertwined. The study identifies several key dimensions through which these novels operate as philosophical texts:

- 1. Ethical Agency:** In both novels, characters' decisions are deeply informed by moral deliberation, reflecting cultural, spiritual, and communal values. Ethical responsibility is depicted as inseparable from social and metaphysical awareness, aligning with African philosophical frameworks that emphasise collective duty and moral accountability (Gyekye, 1997). For instance, the prince in Starbook negotiates personal ambition alongside obligations to his community, illustrating the dynamic interplay between individual freedom and ethical responsibility.

2. **Spiritual Realism:** Supernatural and metaphysical events function as integral mechanisms for exploring consciousness and ethical perception rather than mere narrative ornamentation or escapism. Dream sequences, visions, and cosmological symbolism facilitate a representation of reality that encompasses both tangible and spiritual dimensions, illustrating Okri's commitment to portraying human experience as simultaneously material and transcendent (Okri, 2007). Similarly, in *Prayer for the Living*, characters' engagement with metaphysical forces underscores the moral consequences of their choices, reinforcing the interconnectedness of ethical and spiritual awareness.
3. **Temporal Fluidity:** Both novels employ non-linear temporal structures, blending past, present, and future, thereby highlighting the relational and perceptual aspects of reality. This temporal fluidity allows characters to reflect on the moral and spiritual significance of their actions across different moments, and it situates human experience within a broader, cyclical understanding of time consistent with African cosmologies (Mbiti, 1969). The narrative's temporal structure facilitates a layered exploration of cause, consequence, and ethical reflection.
4. **Integration of African Philosophical Thought:** Central African philosophical concepts, such as interconnectedness, communal responsibility, and cosmological order, permeate character behaviour and narrative outcomes. These elements underscore how Okri's fiction operates within culturally specific ontologies, emphasising that moral and metaphysical understanding is inseparable from communal and spiritual contexts. The novels thereby contribute to the growing discourse on African literary philosophy by foregrounding indigenous epistemologies and ethical paradigms.
5. **Narrative as Philosophical Medium:** Storytelling itself functions as a method of philosophical reflection, allowing readers to engage actively with ethical and metaphysical questions. The dialogic interaction between characters, narrative events, and symbolic motifs enables a multi-layered exploration of human consciousness, morality, and the nature of reality. Okri's novels demonstrate that literature can simultaneously fulfil aesthetic, ethical, and philosophical purposes, offering readers both imaginative engagement and profound intellectual insight.

Collectively, these findings suggest that *Starbook* and *Prayer for the Living* operate as philosophical texts in which literary form, moral inquiry, and metaphysical vision converge. Okri's post-millennial fiction extends the boundaries of African literature by integrating narrative artistry with philosophical depth, presenting characters as ethical and reflective agents

whose experiences illuminate broader questions of human consciousness, moral responsibility, and the spiritual dimensions of existence. This convergence underscores the potential of fiction not only to entertain but to serve as a medium for profound ethical and metaphysical inquiry.

CONCLUSION

Ben Okri's *Starbook* (2007) and *Prayer for the Living* (2021) exemplify a sophisticated synthesis of fictional imagination and philosophical inquiry, establishing his post-millennial fiction as a critical site for ethical, metaphysical, and cultural reflection. Through allegorical narratives, richly drawn characters, and intricate metaphysical motifs, the novels invite readers to engage with questions of consciousness, moral responsibility, and the spiritual dimensions of human existence. Ethical dilemmas are not only dramatised as personal struggles but are also situated within communal and cosmological frameworks, reflecting African philosophical principles of interconnectedness, moral accountability, and the interrelation of the material and spiritual worlds (Mbiti, 1969; Gyekye, 1997).

By embedding African philosophical thought within the imaginative structures of his fiction, Okri demonstrates that literature can function as a medium for philosophical exploration, translating abstract ethical and metaphysical concepts into accessible, narratively grounded experiences. The novels' use of temporal fluidity, spiritual realism, and symbolic narrative techniques further enhances their capacity to convey complex ideas, making the reader an active participant in ethical and philosophical inquiry. In doing so, Okri's post-millennial fiction bridges the gap between aesthetic innovation and intellectual depth, affirming the potential of African literature to engage meaningfully with universal questions of human existence.

This study underscores the significance of examining Okri's later works through the lens of fictional philosophy, revealing how narrative form, ethical reflection, and metaphysical vision converge to produce literature that is both culturally specific and philosophically resonant. Future research could expand on these insights by conducting comparative analyses between Okri's early magical realist novels, such as *The Famished Road*, and his post-millennial fiction, thereby tracing the evolution of his philosophical concerns, narrative techniques, and ethical preoccupations across his literary oeuvre. Additionally, interdisciplinary studies incorporating African philosophy, ethics, and literary theory could further illuminate the broader implications of Okri's fiction for understanding consciousness, morality, and the role of storytelling in philosophical discourse.

Ultimately, *Starbook* and *Prayer for the Living* exemplify the capacity of literature to function as a medium for profound ethical and metaphysical reflection, demonstrating that Ben Okri's post-millennial fiction is not only aesthetically compelling but also philosophically rich, offering readers a nuanced lens through which to contemplate the human condition.

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