

BEN OKRI'S FICTION: A CRITIQUE OF POSTCOLONIAL DISCOURSE

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Abstract

The Nigerian writer, Ben Okri, hails from an ethnically mixed background. He is one of the most important African writers in the postcolonial traditions. His fiction is surely a critique of postcolonial discourse. In his novels, he portrays the postcolonial African reality in all its varied colours and texture.

Keywords- Postcolonial, Critique, Ethnic, Neo-colonial, Political reassertion, Devastation, Struggle, Metaphysical

INTRODUCTION

Ben Okri, a Nigerian poet and novelist, was born to Grace and Silver Okri in 1959. His mother, Grace Okri, was an Igbo, while his father, Silver Okri, was hailing from Urhobo descent. During the foundation of Nigerian modern state, the situation of the Urhobos within Nigeria exemplified the problematic of a minority ethnic group who became the victims of the Igbo rivalry and the politics of Yoruba, and it is very important to study Okri's ethnically mixed background while analysing his early fiction.

Okri became successful as a writer when *Flowers and Shadows*, his first novel was published. At that time, he was 21 years old. But, his real success came with the publication of the novel, *The Famished Road* in 1991, for which he won the Booker Prize for Fiction. Okri is considered as one of the foremost African authors in the post-modern and postcolonial traditions and his fiction occupies a high position in African literature.

African literature refers to literature of and from Africa. The term 'African Literature' covers a vast and complex body of creative literary works. Literature produced in the African continent may be divided into three distinct and widely accepted categories:-

- a) Traditional African Oral Literature
- b) New Literature
- c) Modern African Literature

Ben Okri's fiction belongs to the third category- that of the problematic postcolonial African novel in English as representative of a particular moment in African literary history. For socio-historical reasons, the growth of the modern Afro-European novel has been intrinsically bound up with the effect of the experience of colonialism and neo-colonialism on the African intellectual consciousness. This writing was generated by the traumatic collective experience of colonization and strongly reflects the resistance to the colonial and neo-colonial invasion of African cultural space as its primary thematic pre-occupation. The literature that belongs to this category is termed as Postcolonial literature.

Postcolonial literature is a body of literary writing that responds to the intellectual discourse of European colonization in the Africa, Asia, Middle East, the Pacific and other postcolonial areas throughout the globe. Postcolonial literature addresses the problems and consequences of the de-colonization of a country; it also covers literary critiques of and about postcolonial literature. But the maximum number of contemporary forms of postcolonial literature presents literary and intellectual critiques of the postcolonial discourse by endeavouring to assimilate post colonialism and its literary expressions.

Ben Okri's fiction is a critique of postcolonial discourse. His fiction, especially the novels selected for the study in the present paper are at once literary pieces, a social protest and a medium of political reassertion. The novels that are undertaken for the study of Ben Okri's fiction as a critique of postcolonial discourse are *Flowers and Shadows*, *The Famished Road*, *Songs of Enchantment*, *Dangerous Love* and *Infinite Riches*.

1) *Flowers and Shadows* (1980) - In this novel, young idealistic Nigerian, Jeffia Okwe is the protagonist, who desires to be a teacher. Throughout the novel, Jeffia is shown struggling for retaining his youthful idealism. He craves for love and intimacy in his home where business obsessions keep his absent father chained to the firm and he seeks justice among legions of petty bureaucrats who are constantly trying to improve upon the colonial arts of corruption. In his way, Jeffia also wanders through lust, love and other common attractions of youth.

The novel focuses on the social, cultural and political problems that Nigeria was confronting following the wake of colonialism but it doesn't focus on the original confrontation that was going on between coloniser and colonized. Okri presents in his novel, a state in which his idealistic young hero, Jeffia arrives at a more hopeful resolution in spite of the fact that in that state all the things continue to fall apart.

2) *The Famished Road* (1991) – The novel follows Azaro, an abiku or spirit child, from the ghetto of an unknown city in Africa. His sibling spirits from another world constantly harass him. They want him to leave this mortal life and return to the realm of spirits, sending numerous envoys to bring him back. Azaro was not willing to return and he stubbornly refused to leave this mortal life owing to his love for his father and mother. He witnesses many happenings in the mortal land. His father works as a labourer while his mother sells items as a hawker. Azaro is asked by Madame Koto, the owner of a local bar, to visit her establishment. She is very much sure that he will bring good fortune and customers to her. In the meantime, his father convinces himself and his family that he has a talent to be a pugilist and then he prepares to be a boxer. Two opposite political parties try to bribe or pressurize the residents to vote for them.

In this novel, as Azaro has a dual character, he must progress through both worldly and mythical realms so he can mature in a social context as well as metaphysically. Consequently, Okri extends the narrative action of this fiction to a great extent to include passionate dreams, mythical journeys, and other African rituals or rites of passage. By extending the scope of this novel to include mythical dimensions, Okri participates in one more redirection that is characteristic of contemporary postcolonial literature: he efficiently redirects his narrative strategy to maximise the experiences of the postcolonial subject and minimize the significance of the colonial master. Instead of focusing on the colonial devastation of the conventional African societies and traditions, he is curious to focus on their survival, although an insecure survival often lived on the doorstep between life and death. Even though Okri remains ardently conscious of the tragic destruction that colonialism continues to inflict on traditional African societies, he

refuses to let his character admit defeat. He discards the claim that colonialism has vanquished, is vanquishing, or ever will vanquish the deeper mysteries of the African spirit. Okri's protagonist, an abiku spirit-child chooses to live, which suggests that the African spirit can endure the apparently never-ending cycles of colonial and neo-colonial brutality by choosing to reconcile its spiritual and physical dimensions. Likewise, Azaro's father defeats numerous colonial and neo-colonial aggressions in a series of mythic battles. Azaro's mother also aids the survival of her family and community through her less spectacular, but more lasting, character traits: bravery, determination, common sense, and hard work. Of course, there are also other characters that do not adieu so well. Madame Koto, the purveyor of the bar, worsens with each of her gradually more dishonest political and economic deals. Ade is another abiku spirit-child who chooses to return to the spirit world rather than endure the rigors of morality; and Jeremiah, a youthful utopian journalistic photographer, fades into the background because he is so regularly harassed by political hooligans. Hence, Okri faces a lot of prospects presented by the postcolonial state, but he appears to side with the characters who maintain an optimistic, spiritual standpoint in spite of their teething troubles.

3) *Songs of Enchantment* (1993) – The child speaker of Okri's *The Famished Road*, who had outwitted death in the earlier book, again relates the repressive events that keep on plaguing his village and his family. Azaro's father had won a great fight, but, as Azaro reminds us in the novel that victory is never the last, completed and finished. We have to struggle throughout our lives; struggles are never truly done and completed. Further on, the family has to face the unseen seven mountains and all they can do is great effort forward to reach beyond the turmoil that now engulfs them. The mysterious and all-powerful Madame Koto has bewitched Azaro's mother. Azaro and his father ultimately get the mother back but she seems changed, overburdened and oppressed by the various adversities that terrorize the village: a murdered man haunts the streets; a "Jackal headed Masquerade" riding a white horse takes over for a split second and established its realm of horror; women are turned into antelopes; Madame Koto becomes a dread imperceptible presence that saps all vivacity; Azaro's father is blinded; and politicians risk the villagers with adulterated foodstuffs. The situation is very tough and hard- a point excessively belaboured in too many evocations of evil- but Azaro's father regains his sight in a healing. This is not just a regain of the sight but the regaining of the spirit too and Azaro has a great revelation when he sees the prospect of tranquillity beyond the present chaos.

4) *Dangerous Love* (1996) – This novel is in a way a re-written and revised version of "The Landscapes Within". The place chosen for the novel's set up is again Okri's indigenous Nigeria, a country that is maze of dishonesty, bribery, fraud, tribal enmity and conventional rituals. It is a love story with a subtle connotation of politics and artistic liberty. The chief protagonist of the novel is a young man, Omoro who is an office worker and artist too. He lives at home with his father and his father's second wife. In the collective world of the complex in which he lives, Omoro has many friends and some enemies, but most important of all there is a beautiful young married woman named Ifeyiwa, whom he loves with an almost hopeless passion. This hopelessness in his love is not because the beautiful lady doesn't responds to his love, but because there is no possibility of their being together ever in life. The problem is the charming lady is owned by her husband who had paid money for her and bought her as a child bride. Her husband is cruel, abusive and has been a victim of the past like the other characters.

Omovo is a rebel through his paintings and when the authorities come to know about his social protests on canvas, he loses his clerk's job. Omovo vibrantly recollects the nasty consequences of a civil war which he saw when he was an innocent child, remembers the corpses floating in the river and the dreadful scene where the soldiers kill a woman in front of his eyes.

In this novel, Okri builds a vivid picture of Nigerian life: of the compound with its complete lack of privacy, the hearsay, the street life, the good times, the complex nature of family relationships and the benevolence and deceitfulness of friends. Overwhelming the whole lot is the representation of a nation struggling to come to terms with the atrocity of the recent civil war, the echoes of which foretell the story's tragic tale.

5) *Infinite Riches* (1998) – The narrator and protagonist in this novel is Azaro, a young boy who sees beyond the physical world. He made a deal with his spirit escorts that when he was born he would die at the first opportunity and join them again. But after his birth, Azaro ruined this pact. Five spirits have so far sent by his spirit companions to get back him, but they failed. Two more spirits are sent and are the most dodgy and treacherous of all. In one sense, *Infinite Riches* begins from where *Songs of Enchantment* left off. A carpenter has been murdered and Azaro's father has been arrested and imprisoned for the crime which he did not commit. Azaro's mother is infuriated as his husband has taken into custody and searches for him all over the town. Meanwhile, the novel introduces a new and lightening aspect to the study of Nigeria. Okri commences political themes in this novel and giftedly exposes the activities of the party of the rich in opposition to the supposed party belonging to the poor. In the warmth of politics and at rally grounds, a speaker from the party belonging to the rich says (Page 261): "Victory is ours already. We have own. We bring power to the people. We bring wealth and stability. Those who vote for us will enjoy those who don't will eat dustbins!"

CONCLUSION

Okri's fiction portrays the postcolonial African reality in all its pied colours and texture. Okri depicts the struggle against colonial and neo-colonial forces doggedly obstructing the process of social renaissance and political nativization. In each of his works, he returns to a reliable repertoire of frequent postcolonial themes. Specifically, he analyses the pervasiveness of corruption and sadism in modern-day Nigeria, creates a voice for the most toothless members of African and specifically Nigerian society, and inspects the continuous and relentless cultural conflict between alien and aboriginal traditions in postcolonial Africa. Every time, he returns to these general postcolonial themes; therefore, he finds extra ordinary new ways to express them with greater insight, mind's eye, imagination and convolution. Taken together, Okri's fiction represents one of the most significant explorations of literary form in the catalogue of postcolonial African literature.

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