



MYSTICISM AND MAGICAL REALISM AS AESTHETICS OF NECESSITY IN BEN OKRI'S WRITINGS

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ABSTRACT

*Novelist and short story writer Ben Okri uses nightmarish images and fantastic twists of reality to portray the bizarre social and political conditions inside his native Nigeria. Nigeria has the largest population of any country in Africa, but it has not had a stable government for more than 30 years. The Nigeria Okri describes is dark and often violent and chaotic. Drawing on his childhood memories and imagination, he creates an atmosphere of an African village that lingers in the reader's mind. Okri's fictional world is fraught with violence, corruption, death, ghosts, and legends through which in his Booker prize winning novel *The Famished Road*, Okri further appropriates to translate the violence of civil war into a symbolic form. Okri took inspiration from the work of Amos Tutuola who, in turn, had borrowed many supernatural elements from Yoruban oral narratives. Both in *The Famished Road* and the following two novels within the trilogy *Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches*, there is a move towards a mythical causality that reconceptualises modes of characterization and the relationship between environment and characters. In his works such as *Incidents at the Shrine*, *Songs of Enchantment*, and 1991's Booker-McConnell prize-winner *The Famished Road*, his characters become mixed up with supernatural elements to the extent that the real is indistinguishable from the imaginary. Based on the abstract given and with the following paper entitled "Mysticism and Magical Realism as Aesthetics of Necessity In Ben Okri's Writings" Okri examines the roots of political turmoil of Nigeria and searches for solutions to its present problems.*

INTRODUCTION

When you can imagine you begin to create and when you begin to create you realize that you can create a world that you prefer to live in, rather than a world that you're suffering.

-Ben Okri



Nigerian literature enhances more about the place of tradition in the modern ethos, the problems of the administration of a modern polity, the notions of sexism and the place of the women folk in our new reality. Nigeria has produced many prolific writers. Many have won accolades for their writing abilities, including Daniel.O.Fagunwa, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Buchi Emecheta, Elechi Amadi and Ben Okri. The discursive formation within which Nigerian literature emerged as a complex of diverse literary forms was one governed by an ethic of verbal artistry with strands that have resulted in discernable changes and continuities between the oral mode of the indigenous society and its most prestigious written counterpart of contemporary times.

Ben Okri is a Nigerian poet and Novelist. Okri is considered one of the fore most African authors in the Post-Modern and Post-Colonial traditions. He has been compared favourably to authors such as Salman Rushdie and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Nonetheless, those ten years he spent living in Nigeria have left a profound mark upon the author's psyche, and the most important body of his fiction can be seen as a re-visiting of those years spent in a politically turmoiled Nigeria.

The representative writer of the young generation, Ben Okri inherits the older writers' social conscience and historical consciousness, assuming the writer's duty to unearth the problems with Nigeria and to call up Nigerian people's awareness of their past as a guide to their present.

Postmodernism is a recent intellectual movement which has a powerful influence on contemporary literary writings. According to the radical change that the society moves today, the rapid radical change is more apparent in the field of literary studies. The change in multiplicity of methods of analysis, concepts of literary forms and modes are all the evidents of post-colonial development. Similar problems plague Nigeria, the most populous nation-state in Africa. Its tribalism, racism, political corruption and economic dispossession are at the core of Nigerian social chaos and they are the repeated concerns of contemporary Nigerian literature as in the writings of Amos Tutuola (1920-1997), Wole Soyinka (1934-), Chinua Achebe (1930-), and Ben Okri (1959-).

The ideas of individuality, identity, gender-relations are challenged and a new influence also challenges the modern approach to literary texts. Postmodern writers seem to have new discursive practices to represent the present condition. Postmodern narrative theory invents a new terminology that deconstructs the whole narrative tradition, focusing on the fictionality of a work, on the writing process, on the ambiguity of meaning, and plays with the narrative language.

The fundamental postcolonial issues have been repeatedly explored by many postcolonial writers, it is difficult to argue that Okri's works inaugurate new themes for African Literature.



Okri's works immediately depart from the ordinary, predictable and routine. Each of his works of fiction demonstrates a remarkable sense of formal experimentation, and each work progressively extends his creative exploration of multiple literary styles, genres and traditions. Thus he effectively combines the conventions of the European Bildungsroman or coming-of-age novel, with Nigerian English dialects and modernist narrative strategies to explore a modern, postcolonial context. His philosophical reflections on art emphasize the political dimensions of artistic production and destruction in a newly independent nation struggling to free itself from the quicksand of neocolonial authoritarianism. By redirecting his experimental energy towards an exploration of African models rather than European ones, Okri has prepared himself for a new stage of aesthetic development.

Okri's fictional world is fraught with violence, corruption, death, ghosts, and legends, through which Okri examines the roots of political turmoil of Nigeria and searches for solutions to its present problems. His representative work, the Azaro trilogy, set in the background of pre independence days, traces the causes of social chaos to British colonization and regionalism and at the same time foretells the impending civil war as the outcome of political and tribal struggles. Because his setting, themes and character realizations are peculiar to the Nigerian national terrain, Okri's novels are integral components of Nigerian prose-fiction to which the Nigerian novel is a befitting heir.

Likened with contemporaries Salman Rushdie and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Okri's approach to magical realism is folk-like, with lines of prose reading like poetry, rhythmic and short, but poignant increasing in length and tempo as the emotions of the story rise in a crescendo. Through mesmerizing story-telling, Okri uproots the conventions of language to restore it to a place slightly indebted to his country's lore as well as Western post-modernist tradition where every word carries depth and promise.

The major areas of convergence of the novel and the short story within which Ben Okri's literary motifs are expounded are narrativity and the versatility of prose fiction in its subjugation of elements of other genres; and for the realization of aesthetic value and social relevance. For instance, Okri's texts especially in *The Famished Road* and *The Landscapes Within* combine elements of the dramatic and folklore in their explication of Nigeria's postmodernist experience. Furthermore, the genre of prose fiction offers a prolificacy of subgenres such as the novella, the prose poem and the popular fiction, which add to its sustenance as a relevant art form in Nigerian literature.

If *Flowers and Shadows* was a relatively conventional Bildungsroman, *The Landscapes Within*, Okri's next novel, takes a similarly conventional form and, as the title suggests, begins to stretch the imaginative properties it holds. The central character here is a solitary painter named Omovo, whose artistic vision leads him into conflict not only with his family and friends but also with the state. Social and political corruption are the condition and

context of Omovo's artistic effort. If the clarity and precision of Okri's style owe something to Chinua Achebe, then his vision of social squalor and human degradation is as unflinching and as compassionate as that of Wole Soyinka. Omovo is actually described at one point, reading Soyinka's novel *The Interpreters*, whose title points up the social significance of his own artistic dedication. Omovo's tender love for Ifeyinwa, the wife of a neighbour, develops towards emotional disaster when she leaves their squalid township and wanders unwittingly to a senseless and anonymous death, shot by soldiers and dumped. The novel ends with Omovo picking his way.

This turning out and movement away from conventional contexts is mirrored in Okri's next two books, both collections of short stories which develop the nightmare visions of nocturnal landscapes, filling them with the bodies of spirits, living and dead. *Incidents at the Shrine* is a slim volume of eight stories, each one a strong but unemphatic marvel. The stories are set in Nigeria during the Civil War, in London among the derelicts and the dispossessed, and in dream-worlds suffused with an African sensibility and experience of Britain in the 1980s, where a ruthless Conservative government oversees urban and industrial collapse. Hidden histories reveal themselves, disparities converge and prayers go crooked in an unkempt, deregulated world. Yet the pace and procedure of Okri's prose is undaunted.

Okri maintains a fluent attention to realistic detail. He is still observant of those moments and places of very perceptible demarcation. *Stars of the New Curfew* opens with an epigraph by Christopher Okigbo: "We carry in our worlds that flourish our worlds that have failed." In both short story collections, Okri's visions have the vividness of hallucination.

Ben Okri's *The Age of Magic* (2014) expresses dissatisfaction with the careless bustle of our everyday lives. In the age of smartphones, tablets, hyper connectivity, social media and constant distractions in which many seem to spend their lives constantly rushing about, switching between one screen and another Okri calls for a moment of quietness.

To hint at ways in which people slow down and sense something of the magic of moments, these invisible things that constitute their lives, is a special thing. But Okri's novel best expresses its dissatisfaction with the careless bustle of our everyday lives not just through its content, but through its unusual form. Piece of good fortune to be able to do. Okri's own novelistic form, which forces the reader into the prolonged exploration of a continuous present, can be said to be training the readers, and encouraging them to engage with the moments of their everyday lives in a more considered and meaningful way.

Okri's ethnically mixed background is important when analyzing his early fiction. Nigeria came to form part of the western region of the country. That is when they came under the powerful influence of Yoruba. When Okri returned to London he set about writing his first novel, *Flowers and Shadows* (1979), which dealt with the difficulties of urban existence in

Nigeria. His second novel *The Landscapes Within* (1989) employed the motif of the disillusioned artist which he adapted from James Joyce's *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*. In this novel the protagonist transforms the grotesqueness, he feels, he is surrounded by artistic intention as a means to escape the prevailing sense of futility, his environment projects upon him.

After this publication of the collection of short stories, *Incidents at the Shrine* (1986), it became clear that Okri was developing a distinctive multi-perspectival narrative capable of transmitting a more profound sense of African reality at the formal level. When compared to his first two novels, it is found with an indigenizing of form and content. The enigma of arrival is something Okri omits from his creative work, and he prefers to give focus to Transnational and Transcultural motifs, many of which are Pan- African in nature. A fervent admirer of James Joyce, he views the modernist reconfiguring of narrative form as a template for the creating of a distinct contemporary fiction.

Okri won the Booker prize for his novel *The Famished Road* (1991), the story of Azaro, an abiku (spirit-child), and his quest for identity. The Novels *Songs of Enchantment* (1992), and *Infinite Riches* (1998) continue the themes of *The Famished Road* relating stories of dangerous quests and the struggle for equanimity in an unstable land. His novels or works portray the essential link in Nigerian culture between the physical world and the world of spirits which is a part of Yoruban folklore.

The Famished Road expands the hallucinatory medium of the stories over the length of a 500 page novel. This is Okri's most haunting, entertaining, and challenging work to date. It is as if Soyinka and Amos Tutuola had co-authored a work with the South American magic realists Borges and Marquez, although there is also a singularly elegant lightness of touch and a constancy of pace.

The narrator is Azaro, a spirit-child who is still linked with the protean spirits that lie unborn behind or underneath creation's struggling forms. His innocuous naiveté, unquenchable curiosity, and endless thirst are unchecked by his adventures. His experience is articulated within a limited but shifting constellation of characters and places: his home and his parents; the shrewd, magisterial Madame Koto and her bar; the forest that surrounds the village; and the interstellar spaces into which his wayward imagination sails. Realistic details and dream-scenarios are syncopated and run together. The result is not counterpoint but a unique blend of physical, sensual, and creatural particularities within a radically unpredictable metaphysical context. The staple diet in Madam Koto's bar is hot pepper soup and palm wine. This scalds the palate and the imagination at the same time that it sustains both. The book is populated with grotesque and wonderful characters from the compound, the forest, the world beyond the forest, and the spirit world. The readers encounter a two-legged dog, a photographer, hundreds of rats, various parties of politicians, the motley inhabitants of



Madame Koto's bar, Azaro's Dad who becomes a champion boxer, a political revolutionist, and a fantastic storyteller, and his Mum, who hawks her wares around the streets of the compound to pay for food.

In his Booker prize winning novel *The Famished Road*, Okri further appropriates to translate the violence of civil war into a symbolic form. Okri took inspiration from the work of Amos Tutuola who, in turn, had borrowed many supernatural elements from Yoruban oral narratives. Both in *The Famished Road* and the following two novels within the trilogy *Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches*, there is a move towards a mythical causality that reconceptualises modes of characterization and the relationship between environment and characters. The Trilogy abandons archetypal character psychology as conceived by realism.

Characters take on mythical proportions and the readers know them more for their actions than for their inner thought process. This collection treats eclectic themes which are dispersed within Okri's fiction and the author expounds on subjects related to creativeness and the role of poet, the mysteries and the perils of story-telling, race and colonization, spiritual metamorphosis and the power of the invisible.

A Few novels cover such a wide range from the grittily realistic to the utterly fantastic in such a compressed setting. The entire trilogy, the author transpires in an unnamed Third world city apparently based on the landscapes of native Nigeria. Nigeria sets out its boundary lines in folk tales, legends, rumours and incantations rather than in geographical terms. Okri as a Novelist pours in beautiful words through the character Azaro for the reason why babies cry when they are born and the character or protagonist Azaro explains that is the sudden separation from the world of pure dreams.

The Hybrid nature of Okri's works come to the fore in this collection. The author draws upon a wide range of cultural references belonging to his own West African cultural heritage. The validity of visions holds core value in Okri's works. Okri's works nevertheless convey clear and urgent messages about the need for (Africans) Nigerians to reforge their identities. It means that Okri's books often have intangible, deeply human resonances that last well after the narrative is complete.

What is salient within the accrued mass of his fiction is a search for new ways of writing. He has been likening his strive towards new literary forms. In Nigerian literature specifically, Magical realism is seen most often in their texts. From *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe to the works of Ben Okri, fantastical elements like visions and dream like journeys work as a means of adding personal to the political.

These words can be well opened with numerous thoughts and perceptions. This approach of writing in connection with the earthly world with the touch of human soul is highly



applaudable as a writer. Much of the charm of his novels stems from his own ability to make the magical seem every day and the everyday seem magical, his characters look on in wonder when electricity, automobiles or other modern wonders arrive in their village.

Ben Okri's language has been described as simple, lucid and image laden. His use of language indicates two things that he has a great mastery of the English language and his indigenous language. The former reference is explained by the fact that he has spent and studied most of his life in London. At the same time, he asserts his belonging to Africa in his choice of local words.

Okri also made it interesting to the reader's community with the influence of Yoruba culture and traditions, especially the term abiku. Abiku is a word that refers to children who keep oscillating between both worlds. Both worlds here refer to the world of the living and the world of the dead. Postcolonial reference is found in the setting of the novel. Ben Okri made it as world-wide theory of abiku, which preferably notices Nigeria. Thus the readers can further develop his thoughts through the author's paraphrase in the novel.

By extending the scope of the novel to include mythical dimensions, Okri participates in another redirection that is characteristic of contemporary postcolonial literature, he effectively redirects his narrative strategy to minimize the significance of the colonial master and maximizes the experiences of the postcolonial subject. Thus Okri faces many possibilities presented by the postcolonial condition, but he seems to side with the characters who maintain an idealistic, and spiritual perspective. Thus Okri extends his engagement of postcolonial issues to the realm of aesthetics by demonstrating that African aesthetic sensibilities, cultural traditions and narrative strategies will not allow themselves to be colonized by the literary norms of the colonial center.

Okri wrote his fiction under a question what is reality? According to him every human is looking out of the world through their emotion and history. Nobody has an absolute reality and that would be an absolute ending for every human's life. Reality itself is mysterious in nature and how to approach that reality changes and deepens from book to book. Okri has always married huge ideas with imaginative, sometimes mystical narratives, his style of narration is often dream like.

Okri focuses on the phenomenon of collective consciousness. The artist trajectory of his fiction leads from realism combined with modernist narrative methods. His works frequently focus on the political, social and economic conditions of contemporary Nigeria. Stressing his inclusion of African myth and folklore, emphasis on spirituality and mysticism, and focus on Nigerian society and the attendant problems associated with the country's attempts to rise above its third-world status, critics have lauded his writings for capturing the Nigerian world view. His universal relevance is found in the focus of political and aesthetic narrations. Okri



presents a world wavering between order and chaos, an ambiguous and mysterious world, of which human beings are but a part and over which they have a little control. The responsibility that one has toward others and towards nature seems to be fundamental in Okri's thought.

Thus the author's perceived disappearance does not make him less important because, for as long as the text is in existence, it is recognized as emerging from one author and one socio-literary context and not the other. For instance, Ben Okri's use of exaggerated archetypes of Nigerian citizens and his use of the image clusters which reveal poverty, crime and child disempowerment are unique to him as a Nigerian writer. Thus, Okri's socio-historical background as a Nigerian who has lived in the Nigerian urban area is evident in his fiction, making him an active participant in textual encoding as well as interpretation.

In Nigerian literature, the reader recognizes codes of prose-fiction from two levels, the point of recognition is from the point of an insider to the text's context and thus the reader recognizes certain social, cultural and linguistic codes written into the experiences and actions of the text's characters. The second level of recognition is that of the work as evidence of the novelist's interpretation of social and cultural phenomena. In that case, the text is not exclusive of social and cultural factors.

In reality however, Okri's focus is beyond the extrinsic values of postcolonial Nigeria. An insider to the cultural motifs in the novels understands, as he reads *The Famished Road*, Okri's conceptualization of the Nigeria urban citizen's spiritual alienation from God. Ben Okri's social and cultural experiences can incorporate a multi-dimensional perspective of existence. This authority is what keeps the author permanently within the text and makes the text an encoded convention not only of fictional creativity but also of social acts and conventions as context.

Ben Okri's naming as winner of 1991 Booker Prize for literature stimulates everyone to recognize him not only as Nigerian writer, but also as a writer of International stature, and thus of universal significance, and writing out of racial, gendered, and class. Okri delves deep into the particular style of writing in order to reach the universal. The unveiling of wonder and the realization of ordinary events in an extraordinary light drives every attribute of Okri's novel. His characters are archetypes, which at first adhere to traditional roles until inspired or shocked into diverse strengths and weaknesses. Okri explores the complexities of human character and how it transforms under the pressures and victories of existence, rendering the unpredictable. Okri's flourishing work resonates with a kind of universalism which haunts its readers with ancient traditions, while retaining a strong sense.

Part of the style of magical realism – a global term attributed to the author's works – is to hypnotically lure the reader into a kind of consciousness, and Okri weaves a vibrant tapestry



of multi sensual language which remains simple yet beautifully connected, allowing the English language to uncover itself without the added garnish of hyperbole. This choice of original language rather than a translation is not simply about its merits for publication (including a Booker Prize) but for increasing the trajectory of its voice and reintroducing an innovative form of poetics.

In her essay on the novels of E.M. Forster, Virginia Woolf writes: “Our business is not to build in brick and mortar, but to draw together the seen and the unseen” (167). Therefore Literature plays a wonderful role in depicting the society and bringing out the needs of unseen things. This entails adopting what Ben Okri calls new seeing which implies to look at the world with new eyes, to see with the heart and see right to the core. Narrative technique in the novels of Ben Okri is likewise not something superadded to the content but, rather, a fundamental and deliberate means of structuring perceptions. Evocative of this tripartite reading, in *Birds of Heaven*, Okri (1996, 42 and 1998, 126) states: “Maybe there are only three kinds of stories; the stories we live, stories we tell, and the higher stories that help our souls fly up towards the greater light.” Okri’s stylistic devices as exemplified above are appropriate to his episodes and circumstances. Through these devices, a better understanding of the story is achieved, and meanings and aesthetics achieved.

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