International Journal of Early Childhood Special Education (INT-JECSE)
DOI:10.48047/intjecse/v10i2.87 ISSN: 1308-5581 Vol 10, Issue 02 2018

Universal Vision in the Fiction of Ben Okri: The Quest for Love, Harmony, and Identity in a Chaotic World

S.Sasi Bhushan

Research Scholar in Andhra University and
Lecturer in English
Government Degree College for Men, Srikakulam
Mail id: sampathiraosasibhushan@gmail.com

Abstract

Ben Okri is a leading post-colonial and post-modern author, whose novels and short stories have a rich ability to explain the complex and confusing world of modern-day Africa. This paper elaborates on the thematic unity found in the works of Okri with emphasis on his Abiku trilogy (The Famished Road, Songs of Enchantment, and Infinite Riches) examining the manner of his construction of a universal vision in his work, which can be described as "spiritual realism" and "intuitive creativity" in his writing. The themes of identity, love and harmony are examined through the post-independence disillusionment, corruption and social oppression created by Okri. The trilogy is spun largely in the consciousness of Azaro, the spirit-child narrator, and shows that the process of transformation has to be internal, through a serious "Mental Fight" and the capacity to "redream the world". Okri concludes that the key to real universal civilization and peace is to get in touch with our shared spiritual depths and learn to love – harder than death.

Introduction

A prolific and versatile Nigerian writer, whose international breakthrough was The Booker Prize-winning The Famished Road (1991). His oeuvre, which frequently takes place in the volatile environment of the newly independent Nigeria, vividly portrays the horror and violence, the political injustice and institutional corruption, the economic dispossession and war wounds. His Abiku trilogy takes place during this time of political and social turmoil, "current political gimmicks, shenanigans, thuggery, dictatorship and domestic neo-colonialism.

Okri's writing style is a mixed genre of realism, modernism and oral expression, particularly Yoruba oral expression. He has been called "magic realism with African flavour", "spiritual realism" and "animist realism", because he combines local beliefs and myths into his narrative as a part of the real world rather than alongside it.

The tension and unrest that permeate the novel provide a somewhat disorganized background for a very philosophical search. There is much of this chaos in the early lines: the country continues to be referred to as "Dying from a lack of vision, too much greed and corruption, not enough love and too many divisions". The aim of this research is to show that Okri's choice of context is not only African but also a universal metaphor for the human experience, and his work goes beyond politicization of post-colonialism to an ontological examination of identity, love and the prospect of harmony in a broken world. It is a quest that requires a total transformation in the way one sees, a "redreaming ways of seeing," where Okri's ultimate universal vision emerges from.

The fact that Okri's fiction has been critically received, rather than being classified in one of the usual ways, makes it even more difficult to define his narrative style. Okri's characteristic method is his use of simple plots and characters in complex forms, and realistic and non-realistic images. The genre is often difficult to categorize, with critics remarking on how the traditional Yoruba myth has been melded with modern literary forms. It is the central character, Azaro, the abiku or spirit-child, who is essential to this hybridity. In Yoruba tradition, Azaro is a "one who is born to die" who is always between the worlds, living and dying. Okri foregrounds a sense of spiritual reality that is "more real than the world of the everyday", the abiku consciousness creating a "shifting and unsettling quality".

The tension between local and universal interpretations typically becomes the subject of the critical dialogue. The theme of the "failure of Nigeria as an independent nation state" and of neo-colonialism is often brought up in notes from the first few readings. Azaro's constant birth and death is sometimes likened to the cyclical nature of politics in Nigeria. Okri claims that "our country is an Abiku country". Existential and Postmodern Links: A number of readings extend the novel into a wider late-twentieth-century frame of reference, existentialist thought and postmodern fiction. Azaro's disgust and nausea at the chaos and violence in the human world is compared to the Ontological Horror of other writers such as Sartre and Kafka, who present the world as "obscene jungle".

Douglas McCabe suggests that New Age spiritual discourse is the theme of The Famished Road. The concept is heavily based on a "millennial vision of world history" and "spiritual evolutionism". The ideas of the father, also expressed by Okri himself, are philosophical in tone, similar to New Age philosophies such as loving monism, co-creative idealism, and self-

actualization, all of which are based on the premise that “human beings are gods hidden from themselves”.

The key to realizing this vision is "intuitive creativity". Okri states that a new vision needs a "new form": a redreaming of ways of seeing. The process, reflecting the intricate "landscapes within", enables the artist (and humanity) to tap into proto-reality and to awake his/her consciousness to universal truths. In the analysis section, the specific characters will be synthesized to show how they represent the chaotic context, yet continue to strive to find the universal ideals of love, identity and harmony through transformation.

Okri's fiction – quest for love, harmony and identity

The search for identity is what moves Okri's story: the individual search of Azaro (to choose life) and the collective search of Nigeria (to become politically self-sufficient). This identity-seeking is deeply bound up with a search for love and harmony amidst a constant barrage of chaos. The central image of the abiku is the metaphor for identity lost and regained in a cyclical and chaotic world. While his spiritual brothers and meals await him, Azaro's dilemma of preferring life in the world echoes the dilemma of post-colonial Nigeria. Azaro is adamant that he must stay on earth because of his "personal and familial ties," namely the wish to "make happy the bruised face of the woman who would become my mother. This act of suffering and love is a resistance to his spirit companions who call him to keep his promise and go back to the "land where fasting knows no end".

The political chaos is viewed as a continuous cycle of birth and death, like the abiku's cycle. That things get “worse and better” is an ongoing process, says Ade, and that's the march of the country of struggle and hope. The politicians are stuck in this vicious circle, and they tend to engage in the "homogeneous corruption" that started with the "second birth" of the continent. Okri vision of harmony is not passive but is created through a brutal defiance against oppression and disillusionment within himself. The chaos triggers the disenfranchised, or what we could call the "lumpenproletariat," to everday forms of resistance.

The father of Azaro is symbolically the Black Tyger, the champion of the people, who fights against exploitation, corruption and evil. His engagement as a boxer is his corporeal occupation, which represents physical resistance. His fights with thugs (such as the Yellow Jaguar and Green Leopard) are hyperbolic and mythical, signifying his titanic fight against the forces of the elements that would destroy man's soul.

But Dad's defiance reaches a critical breaking point when he undergoes a spiritual and political transformation. After defeating Yellow Jaguar, he enters a trance-like state to reimagine the world for himself as a shaman. He advocates justice in the spirit courts, but understands that it can't be achieved by one individual: "He understood that he can't be a visible or invisible Head of State alone.

When he wakes up, dad becomes the 'new age' searcher, with a universal vision of spiritual potential, connectedness. He announces that "music and mathematics" and "continental, and international events" must be a part of the education of all citizens. Dad's philosophy is an anti-cynicism, anti-fear philosophy: a universal truth: "It is more difficult to love than to die. It is not death that human beings are most afraid of, it is love". This declaration is the highest aspiration of living in harmony in the midst of chaos: to fight the fear of real connection and vulnerability.

Azaro's mum is a silent symbol of strength, resilience, determination and unconditional support, which are all the things "true Africans" are characterized by. Her identity quest moves "from an obedient and subservient to a resistant and protesting character". She is the "mainstay of the family" and a universal "miracle of forbearance". She resists the landlord who is threatening her, but in subtle ways – like staring at the candle that is wavering, in a way that challenges him – these are "everyday forms of resistance" that give a voice to the will to live.

Mum doesn't have a vision for a particular type of harmony, or universal harmony, but for absolute, universal harmony: In a dream her mum tells her, "Beauty will rule the world. Justice will rule the world". In search of her father, she goes to the pit of her inconsolation because she is overcome by her caritas (spiritual love) for the family in the midst of deprivation. Her search for a "good place to live" and for suffering to "bear lovely fruits" takes her own suffering to a universal prayer for transformation.

The world's chaos and suffering is directly because of the lack of perception, or loss of the "language of the spirit," and the way to universal harmony is a renewed perception, through art and imagination, Okri suggests. The use of dreams and visions is an important narrative device in traditional and mythical African reality, as it connects with the modern consciousness. Dreaming, for Okri, is active and "engages and shapes reality". Azaro can "enter into others dream and vision" which opens up the psychological truths and desires of his community, which are hidden. This search for harmony asks the artist (as in The Landscapes Within Omovo) to investigate the "landscapes within". Creativity is the means to achieve the

"Moment" of enlightenment. Azaro's spirit surrounds the community's dreams to try to break the "chains of history".

The photographer—Jeremiah—is a symbol of the artist's function as a witness to and an opponent of reality. He documents the chaos, ("political scandals and corruption") and the resistance, ("photographs of women at the market being attacked by thugs"). However, the photograph alone is not enough, social realism is "not enough to express the reality of the African land". Okri believes that universal genius is spread globally and it is reflected in the idea of the “great jigsaw”. The universal equality is echoed in Infinite Riches, in the writings of the governor-general and the voice of the deformed woman in the forest. The "jigsaw of humanity" implies that no one can be their own when they meet and learn to love one another.

Okri's vision, which is universal, is centred on internal love and reconciliation rather than political success, and is crystallized. “our country is an Abiku country. Like the Spirit Child it comes and goes, one day it will choose to stay, it will grow strong.” (p.547)

The statement of the political condition of Nigeria, from Dad, brings the political condition to the mythological/ spiritual dimension of the history of the nation, from a purely objective perspective. The instability, corruption, and political setbacks (the “vicious circle” in which the country is unable to progress towards a “self-sufficient, self-governing state”) are not seen as ultimate failures but as properties of an ongoing, but underdeveloped entity. The abiku identity is an invulnerable one; an indomitable one that does not "bow to life's adversities". The "universal vision" is encapsulated in the words "One day it will decide to remain", which means its permanence, strength and true identity shall be realized when Nigerians rise above forgetfulness and re-dream their past to heal their future. It translates the national quest for identity as ontological issue into a potential spiritual solution.

This is a statement made by Dad after a sleep that was both profound and shamanic and represents the moral system of the universal vision Okri has. After struggling and suffering through the "darker side of human nature", Dad believes, the biggest challenge to human harmony isn't anything outside of us – not the politics or the material suffering – it's our internal resistance to true connection, our resistance to loving. This fear of love, or emotional exposure, keeps humanity from accessing its tremendous spiritual capacities ("The heart is bigger than a mountain. One human life is deeper than the ocean"). Okri sets the highest standard for achieving universal harmony by making the personal, internal quest paramount to any political reform, and by establishing love as the most difficult, but most essential, spiritual potential.

She even programmed bits of the Great Jig Saw, which the creator distributed to the various peoples of the world, suggesting that no one ethnic group or people could have the full picture or monopoly on the ultimate possibilities of human creativity. (IR 128)

This is taken from the sophisticated web of narratives that the old and misshapen woman (a symbol of wisdom) and the transformed Governor-General weave together, and is the credo of Okri's cosmopolitanism and the road to global harmony. It directly faces the forces of destruction; tribalism, nationalism and racial superiority (chaos of divisions). Interdependence is needed when the "jig saw" is broken up. According to Okri, this unity can only be achieved if other people are united as one nation and are confronted with their shared condition and shared love. This proclamation of common human genius in all the varied peoples of the earth provides a vision of healing, and reminds us that if we are willing to "live it gently, with fire, and always with hope", suffering can become "wonders of the earth".

In fiction, especially the Abiku trilogy, Ben Okri transforms the particular traumas of the post-colonial chaos in Nigeria into a strong universal vision based on the immense strength and spiritual possibilities of the human being. The process of looking for a nation-state to bring stability to a nation is elevated to a higher ontological level, one of looking for identity through self-discovery, love through radical empathy and harmony through shared consciousness with the help of a Yoruba hybrid narrative, which combines Yoruba myths with existential themes.

The chaos is seen as an indication of a more serious spiritual ailment: the absence of the "greater perspective" and "trapped in their own labyrinth, their lovelessness, selfishness". The cure is the relentless quest for inner truth, which is expressed in Dad's call for a "Mental Fight" and Azaro's innate intuition. In the new age of awareness advocated by Okri, we must "redream this world and make the dream real". This universal civilization is built upon the understanding that the “whole of human history is an undiscovered continent, deep in our souls.” The pain that has been experienced is only the "bitter fruits of time" that can only be "sweetened" by taking the "liberty of limitation" and becoming "full of the love of Him" – the most difficult thing of all.

Conclusion

Okri's fiction is, in short, a reflection that peace and understanding in the world is similar to a complex puzzle. As pieces of the 'great jig saw' are given worldwide, pieces of 'Infinite Riches' (harmony and identity) are not given where the external political victory has taken place, but

where the internal readiness to connect, reconcile and love the chaos into a harmonious truth has occurred.

References

1. Abrams, Dominic. "Social Identification, Self-Categorization and Social Influence." *European Review of Social Psychology*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1990, pp. 195-228.

2. Bargna, Ivan. *African Art*. Java, 2000.

3. Barthes, Roland. *Image, Music, Text*. Hill and Wang, 1977.

4. Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. Penguin Modern Classics, 2008.

5. Brubaker, Rogers. "Beyond Identity." *Theory and Society*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2000, pp. 1-47.

6. Bulkley, Kelly, and Carol Schreier Rupprechit. *The Dream and the Text: Essays on Literature and Language*. State University of New York Press, 1993.

7. Chadwick, Charles. *Symbolism*. Methuen, 1973.

8. Gray, Rosemary. "The creative imagination in Ben Okri's The Landscapes Within (1981)." *English Academy Review: Southern African Journal of English Studies*, vol. 30, no.2, 2013, pp. 21–31.

9. Hieatt, Constance B. *The Realism of Dream Visions: The Poetic Exploitation of the Dream Experience in Chaucer and his Contemporaries*. Mouton & Co Print, 1967.

10. Kundera, Milan. *The Art of the Novel*. Faber and Faber, 1988.

11. Margaret, Cesar- Thompson. "Beyond the Post-colonial Novel: Ben Okri's The Fam-ished Road and its Abiku Traveller." *Journal of Commonwealth lit.*, vol. 31, no. 2, 1996, p. 43.

12. McCabe, Douglas. "Higher Realities: New Age Spirituality in Ben Okri's The Famished Road." *Research in African Literature*, vol. 36, no. 4, 2005, pp. 1-21.

13. Moh, Felicia Oka. *Ben Okri: An Introduction to His Early Fiction*. Fourth Dimension Publishers, 2001.

14. Okri, Ben. *The Famished Road*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1991: London: Vintage, 2003.

15. Okri, Ben. *Infinite Riches*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1998: London: Vintage, 2003.

16. Okri, Ben. *The Landscapes Within*. Longman, 1981.

17. Okri, Ben. *Songs of Enchantment*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1993: London: Vintage, 2003.

18. Okri, Ben. *Wild*. Random House, 2012.

19. Quayson, Ato. "Unthinkable Nigeriana." *Redrawing the Map: African Journeys*. Ed. Gabriel Gbadmosi, & Ato Quayson. London: Print, 1994.

20. Rai, G. “Post colonialism: Its Meaning and Significance.” *The SPIEL Journal of English studies*, vol. 1, no. 2, July 2005, p. 1.

21. Wright, Derek. *New Directions in African Fiction*. Twayne, 1997