



BEN OKRI: AUTHORITATIVE VOICE OF POST-MODERN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Novelist, short-story writer and poet Ben Okri (born in 1959 in Minna, Northern Nigeria) is a prolific and innovative, and completely at home in many modes of writing. Ben Okri has creatively experimented with new literary forms, different styles, genres and traditions. Taken together, Okri's fiction represents one of the most significant explorations of literary form in the canon of postcolonial African literature. Traditionally magical realism fuses a realistic narrative with mythical one. However, this paper examines that in Ben Okri's works there is not only fusion of realism and myth, but bold imagination, use of exaggeration and hyperbole, fantastical and metaphorical elements, detailed description of uncanny events, and exploration of limited zones and continually transforming characters. The paper reveals that Okri sees the magical events as an African form of realism in which the magical world is part of the real world and something that exists next to real world. The paper presents how, through his fictional and non-fictional works Okri charts new direction for African literature in strategies, techniques and presentation for depiction of the social, political and economic situation of postcolonial Nigeria and Africa. Okri uses metaphorical frames to present the notion of postcolonial politics in Africa. He uses them to present the social relationship that exists between Africa and the West.

Keywords: *Novelist, Poet, Myth, Realism, Magical world.*

INTRODUCTION

Ben Okri published novels and poetry with mixed realism, modernism, and oral forms, especially those of Yoruba culture. This style has been characterized as an example of magic

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realism with African flavor, although the author himself has emphasized the realistic dimensions of his work – myths and local beliefs are part of the real world, urban life-world, not that they exist next to the real world. While his magical prose has mesmerized readers around the world and defied categorization, Okri stresses that the novels germinated from short stories. He says: “*Flowers and Shadows* (Okri’s novel) began as a short story — I was writing a lot of short stories at that time. I was learning from the masters — from writers such as Flaubert and Maupassant — and I felt that the short story was the best training ground for a writer.” It was with the publication of his third novel, *The Famished Road* that made Okri a more familiar name in the literary world. Along with *Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches* called the “Azaro” trilogy fortified Okri as an authoritative voice of post-modern Africa. But beyond that, it was hard to classify Okri’s prose. For instance: “In the beginning there was a river. The river became a road and the road branched out to the whole world. And because the road was once a river it was always hungry.” That is how *The Famished Road* begins, drawing the reader into the incredible journey of the child spirit Azaro in an unnamed city seemingly in post-colonial Nigeria.

Okri started as a realist, with postcolonial themes. His first two novels *Flowers and Shadows* and *The Landscape Within* are both set in Nigeria and feature as central characters two young men struggling to make sense of the disintegration and chaos happening in both their family and country. Both these novels are written in the broad tradition of realism. The biggest difference between *Flowers and Shadows* and *The Landscape Within*, however, is that the later makes the philosophical exploration of aesthetics more central to its narrative. By making his youthful protagonist an artist, named Omovo, Okri extends the generic conventions of the Bildungsroman, which traces the aesthetic maturation of a young artist. Much like James Joyce’s youthful artist, Stephen Dedalus, Okri’s artist, Omovo, uses art as a way of creating order and meaning in a fragmenting world. Living the life of a lonely, uncompromising artist who is often at odds with his society, Omovo develops the detached observation and creative expression required of the artist. His aesthetic development culminates in a painting titled “Scumscape,” which portrays the miserable conditions of Nigeria’s urban poor, but the painting is quickly censored and confiscated because of its powerful social criticism. Instead of describing some abstract theory of beauty, Okri’s philosophical reflections on art emphasize the political dimensions of artistic production and destruction is a newly independent nation struggling to free itself from the quicksand of neocolonial authoritarianism. Both of Okri’s first two novels follow a similar strategy of creatively adapting European novelistic conventions to explore postcolonial issues. However, *The Landscape Within* additionally expands the scope of postcolonial African literature by augmenting its political engagement of social realism with the kind of aesthetic engagement found in many modernist texts.



Okri's earlier novels are not nearly as experimental as his later ones as they develop unorthodox narrative strategies that attempt to break from the tradition of social realism, which has dominated the African novel ever since it was first used by Chinua Achebe. Okri's next two works *Incidents at the Shrine* and *Stars of the Curfew* mark a new phase in his artistic development. The second phase can be identified by two significant changes. First, Okri begins writing short stories instead of novels; second, he starts experimenting more with African narrative techniques. Okri himself has drawn attention to the importance of his shift to writing short stories by suggesting that writing short stories is an apprenticeship for writing novels. He says: "*Flowers and Shadows* began as a short story — I was writing a lot of short stories at that time. I was learning from the masters — from writers such as Flaubert and Maupassant — and I felt that the short story was the best training ground for a writer."

However, Okri's mix of realism, modernism and the reworking of an African oral storytelling tradition in his later novels set him apart from the earlier generation of social realist Nigerian writers. His style could be described as a classic example of magic realism with a distinctive African flavor as in his works myth and local beliefs appear along with the urban cosmopolitan life. Okri employs magic realism in his novels to critique the obliquity of corruption and violence in contemporary Nigeria, creates voice for the poorest and most powerless members of African society, and to explore the ongoing cultural confrontation between foreign indigenous traditions in postcolonial Africa with greater insight, imagination and complexity. This effort to create literary forms modeled after the narrative strategies of African oral traditions is best presented in *The Famished Road*, which won the Booker prize for Okri, and its sequel *Songs of Enchantment*. These two novels brilliantly demonstrate Okri's ability to combine the techniques of realism, modernism and African oral traditions. In these two novels, Okri describes the adventures of Azaro, an abiku spirit-child who equally possess a spiritual and earthly dimension. Like Okri's previous novels, these later novels also explore the consciousness of a child protagonist as he progresses toward maturity. *Infinite Riches* is the third and final volume of the *Famished Road* cycle. Okri's personal politics seem much closer to the surface in *Infinite Riches* making blunt objects of the mystical imagery and storytelling he set up in the first volume. The novel seems to go on and on recycling the same images from *The Famished Road*, images that feel like they lost their steam back in the first volume.

As a combination of a careful craftsman and a prophetic narrator, Okri manages to touch that very essence of existence with his dreamlike prose that moves back and forth in time and space, reflecting a reality that is in front of us yet seems far beyond the normal perception. It soon becomes clear that as with the written word, Okri is equally the master of magic when he speaks: "What is literature? It captures that which is obvious, that which is concealed, that which is growing in the seeds of time; that which is locked away in the psychology of the



people; that which is hidden in their dreams; that which seems to be non-existent but a particular event or time will come and reveal it at once.”

In *The Famished Road* trilogy, Ben Okri engages both myth and reality to create his version of magical realism. The fusion of the Yoruba myth of abiku and realism that consists of everyday life experiences of the people in the ghetto offers him the necessary aesthetic for the depiction of the socio - political situations which keep Nigerian masses in the state of perpetual suffering akin to the endless death and rebirth of an abiku. The aesthetic also enables Okri to offer hope to these poverty stricken masses as well as urge them to rise against corrupt politicians, the business community, and landlords who are responsible for their predicament in order to end the status quo. Ironically, the success of Okri’s resistance and the fulfillment of his hope lie in the same abiku. The abiku-child Azaro’s decision to end the birth-death-rebirth cycle as well as his choice to defy his spirit companions in order to bring happiness to his family, symbolizes the possibility that there will be an end to suffering in Nigeria. The magic in this text looks more natural because it springs from the Yoruban belief system. Azaro’s spirit-child status is not utopia but real in the eyes of the author and the readers who share the abiku-belief.

In the Abiku trilogy, Okri points to those negative aspects which are obstacles to the development of the young nation. In order to forge a better future for Nigeria and Africa, the writer urges the Africans to look at their past and learn from their forerunners’ mistakes. Despite the troubled past on which he focuses, Okri rarely describes scenes of extreme violence. Rather, he registers people’s reactions to the events. In all his novels and short stories, Okri portrays two social categories which are at great enmity: the poor and the rich. While the rich act like one, the poor are divided. The rich are the white ex-patriates and the new black elites which emerged after Independence. They make an exclusive category. They live in expensive neighborhoods, are corrupt and selfish, and have made a habit from exploiting and bullying the poor. Okri denounces the new black elites’ complicity with the white colonizers which eased the latter’s domination over the African continent and ruined its future after Independence. The poor are either victims of the rich or of their own passivity and ignorance. The writer also accuses the Nigerian old generation of complicity with both their white and black exploiters. In order to better their society, the young generation must sever their ties with their fathers. Another way of accomplishing this goal is the return to the pre-colonial values, to tradition. In Okri’s works, tradition is symbolized by the forest as a site of magic and the village where the city dwellers go back to find tranquility or purify their souls which have been perverted by the corrupt milieu of the city.



CONCLUSION:

Ben Okri, remains one of the foremost African authors in the post-modern and post-colonial traditions and has been compared favorably to novelists such as Salman Rushdie and Gabriel García Márquez. One of the most powerful messages the Abiku trilogy hints at remains that, given the cultural disruptions and dispossessions that have conditioned the history of African nations, Okri is always careful to deploy the rich resources of magical realism in the service of challenging colonial power and in favor of giving traditional African societies and cultures a new life. The very fact of extending the scope of the narrative action to encompass mythical realms, dreams and other African rituals diminishes the significance of the imperial master and capitalizes on the survival of the postcolonial subject.

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