



Dream and vision as a journey in ben Okri's trilogy

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Abstract

The article proposes to exemplify the dream and vision as a journey in the works of Ben Okri. Ben Okri has added the flavour of their indigenous culture to the concept of dream thereby making this novel unique of its kind. Okri skillfully intertwined dream as a reality of life to highlight the trauma of the African people. Okri is one of the best known of the first generation Nigerian novelist who has described the process of Nigerian transition from colonial rule to independence. In his works Okri has experimented with new literary forms, different styles such as mixed realism, modernism and oral literary technical forms, especially those of Yoruba culture. Okri started as a social realist by expediting postcolonial themes. Like Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka, Okri has used his fiction to focus attention on the political injustice, institutional corruption, and economic dispossession. Ben Okri uses dream as technique to link traditional and modernity to prove the reader with an understanding of Nigeria. These dreams link with broader understanding of culture and society. This provides the indepth look at the society of Nigeria with hidden truths, independent culture, knowledge and continual shift in the trilogy.

Keywords: journey, dream and vision, episodes, hallucination, spirit world

Introduction

Okri is one of the best known of the first generation Nigerian novelists who has described the process of Nigerian transition from colonial rule to independence. In his works Okri has experimented with new literary forms, different styles such as mixed realism, modernism and oral literary technical forms, especially those of Yoruba culture. Okri started as a social realist by expediting postcolonial themes. Like Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka, he has used different innovative techniques in his fiction drawing attention on the political injustice, institutional corruption, and economic dispossession.

Okri in most of his novels presents the main character as a sensitive young man who is a representative of the country's future. He predicts the social chaos and violence of ordinary life and he finds himself in conflict with elder males, the fathers and husbands who are unjust, wicked and immoral. Whereas the female characters are often lonely, lovers, mothers who act as a source of strength and support for the protagonist.

Okri's *The Famished Road* portrays post-colonial Nigerian society. Various corrupting forces that hinder the growth of the nation is realistically portrayed in the novel. Social evils like racial discrimination, slavery, poverty, and famine are brought to lime light by Okri who skillfully reveals the stark reality by shilouette it with the narrative technique of magical realism. The young spirit child Azaro narrates the story. The story fluctuates between the real world and the spirit world. Though the narrative glides from illusion, hallucination, dreams, spirit, superstitious beliefs, the real crux of the novel lies in bringing out the stark reality of Nigerian society. Okri uses different techniques to reflect the society.

Okri in *Songs of Enchantment* interrogate the problems of the society. Some of the main causes for societal deterioration in the society are poverty, lack of education, oppression, corruption and political unrest. Okri portrays the deterioration and highlights the problems of the Nigerian society. To interrogate these predicaments Okri uses a magical enclave to mask the problems of the society. He employs dreams, spirits, miracle, ghosst, brings out the political situations in Nigeria. Okri evokes in *Infinite Riches* the trauma of politics and problem faced by the people. He has intertwined politics to depict corruption, child labour and poverty.

Dream

A dream is a combination of ideas, emotions, happiness and sensations that occur during the stage of sleep. It can have frightening, exciting, melancholic, and adventurous features. Dream is used as a narrative technique for several reasons by an author. They use dream to reveal several things about the character; for repressed desires; character's wish and fear of their future or past; to foreshadow things that might come; to set a mood; to reveal flashback. The characters in the novel are sometimes unaware of their repressed desire and it is the only way to reveal them through the power of dream. Hence dream is used to ease into flash back of the character.

Dream is a part of a life. They dream and hallucinate about a state of future independence. The novel *The Famished Road*, ends with the dream and Azaro says that "A dream can be the highest point of a life" (TFR

574). Azaro watches his father sleeping like a giant through the new season. Dad missed political parties' announcement, violent confrontation, eruptions and beggars who stayed on the road. The people "themselves seemed anxious to move on, to travel the roads to a new destination" (TFR 563). Azaro narrates what his Dad's dream.

He saw the world in which black people always suffered and he didn't like it. He saw a world of human beings suffered so needlessly from Antipodes to Equator, and he didn't like it either. He saw our people drowning in poverty, in famine, drought, in divisiveness and the blood of war He saw the rich of our country, he saw the array of our politicians, how corruptible they were, how blind to our future, how greedy they became, how deaf to the cries of the people, how stony their hearts were, how short sighted their dreams of powers He saw their long rule and the chaos when they were over thrown. He argued in three great courts of the spirit world, calling for justice on the planet. (TFR 564-565)

At the end of Dad's sleep, Azaro sees an angel flying over the roof. Dad suddenly woke up from the sleep and his new deep sad voice began to speak to his son and wife. Okri clearly explains the philosophy of life through Dad's speech. The description of Dad's dialogue proves that, "All roads lead to death, but some roads lead to things which can never be finished" (TFR 572) such is the condition of Nigeria.

Okri uses characters' dream as a technique to foreshadow the future Nigeria. Azaro as a spirit child is able to see dreams and has the power to go deep into other people's dream. He envisions a leopard in his dream.

I circled in and out of the dreams of the community. Circled in the dreams of spirit –children who keep coming back to the same place, trying to break the chains of history. Circled in the dreams of the dead carpenter, who grew bigger in his coffin, till his swelling body split his wooden encasement. (IR 10)

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Okri uses dream as narrative technique in his novel. Azaro circles in the dreams as a spirit child to identify the problems of the people and he could recognize how they are dreaming about the future. Azaro sees the dead carpenter's spirit revolving around the village, knocks on people's door, speaks with sensitive children and roamed around the kitchen. The spirit of the dead carpenter is not at peace as it clamours justice for its death. Azaro also has the capacity of visualizing his mother's dream.

She was dreaming about the time, many years on, when she would be serenaded by a man who sold cement. Her dream changed. She found herself with her mother, who had been dead for twenty years and was now living on another continent, near the silver mountains. In the dream she stood with her mother beneath an Elysian sky. Together they stared at the faces of great women sculpted on the rocks by nature. (IR 11)

Azaro dreamt about the future rulers who would save their nation by changing the government policies that curtailed the liberty of the natives. Azaro had the ability to realize the dreams visualized by the English Governor-General.

Twenty miles away, in a richer part of the city, on mattress that would be transformed into palatial beds, the future rulers of the nation breathed easily. They were reliving their ascension, their victories. Numbering their enemies. They were dreaming their nation-destroying polices in advance. Tribal dreams of domination that would ignite civil war. Thirty miles away, the English Governor- General, who hated being photographed, was dreaming about his colonial rule. In his dream he was destroying all the documents. Burning all the evidence. Shredding history. As I lingered in the Governor-General's dream a wave of darkness washed me to an island, across the ocean, where many of our troubles began, and on whose road, in a future life, I would wander and suffer and find a new kind of light. (IR 12)

As dream is used as a narrative technique and characters dreams are connected with one another. Azaro's spirit circles in Madam Koto's bar and he finds out that she is dreaming about her child.

She dreamt that her children had stabbed her from behind while she was walking through a silver forest. Then she dreamt that she was giving birth to a nation. An unruly nation, bursting with diversity. A bad dream of a nation, with potential for waste and failure as great as its enormous resources, its fabulous possibilities. (IR 233)

Azaro visualizes the dream of various people and finds out that everyone creates the nation according to their wish in their dream, though they are filled with "their fevered steel webs of selfishness and greed" (IR 234). Azaro's spirit travels on his journey towards the great white house of the Governor- General. He was dreaming that Africa was inhabited not by human beings but by a monstrous variation of black insects. The insects hindered his complete domination of the continent. In his dream he was surrounded by the jungle where primitive drums tapped out the ritual signals of cannibalism then he saw the black insects everywhere, gigantic in size. Insects had bitten him, the Governor-General then dreamt of a luxurious road over the ocean, a road that was fed from all parts of Africa insects flew above the Governor-General's sleeping form. It settled on his eyelid his dream changed again. In the new dream he became a luminous god who needed to drink souls and suck blood in order to regenerate the human race he became sun god he made worshipers for his people across the mystic ocean. (IR 235-238)

Okri generates the various dreams of the General and his aspiration of ruling the nation with his power and authority. The insect flew over his lips and he woke from his dream. He saw the white walls covered with black insects. "He fled from the house, half-naked, screaming into the night, startling me" (IR 239).

Azaro floats in his dream in crowded space of the atmosphere and gentle breeze blows to him from the old woman in the forest. She was dreaming of a new breed of human beings. The creator-god was melting down the wicked forms of existing men and women, and inventing better ones, with finer minds and a universal sense of humour. She dreamt good dreams that were disguised as bad ones. She dreamt of the chaos to come, of the short reign of colonial domination, of the fevers and the awakening spirits which would break out on the nation. She dreamt of the suffering to come which would either waken people to the necessity of determining their lives or make them dependents of world powers, diminished forever. She dreamt of new forms of government based on

the old, open to inspiration from all over the world she dreamt of an age of fire, when the sun had moved closer to the earth and burned through the protective atmospheres. Her dream made my spirit hot. (IR 239-240)

Hence Okri uses dream to fore shadow the future problems that native might encounter. The dream “also seems frequently to be used as a unifying device, tying together seemingly unrelated material by means of the sort of association and transformation typical of dreams” (Hieatt 11). By including dream in the novel “the author chooses to convey something that would lose its desired effectiveness if directly stated, simply represented or incorporated into the main narrative stream” (Bulkley 2). Okri creativity resembles in his style of writing. He uses dream as a technique to reveal and interpret the characters motives. They fulfill their desire in the dream world; whereas in real world it is not possible. Azaro’s spirit after visualizing the dreams of other people, he goes to his body again. Okri has proved through Azaro’s ability of being a spectator of other people’s dreams. Azaro is presented as a spirit child. He can realize the dreams of other people thereby he can understand their character. Illusion, day dreaming, nightmares, hallucination, imagination are features that enslave the events his novels. He is saved by his mother from the nightmares of the forest and he says to his mother, “The dead carpenter asked me to bury him” (SOE 260). Azaro is able to visualize in Madame Koto’s dream. Azaro says about Madame Koto’s dream thus: “She was dreaming that all her enemies were turning into trees and that the trees were growing on the island of her body, fastening her flesh into the earth with their relentless toots” (SOE 260).

Okri interprets that “A DREAM CAN be the highest point of a life; action can be its purest manifestation” (SOE 275). Dad is courageous enough to face the evil forces that disassociated the people from their community. His voice gathered one by one, “penetrating the ears of dreamers who lay on beds bristling with the invisible broken glass of poverty” (SOE 276). His patriotic vision makes once to realize that they are in need of freedom and dignity.

SOE Azaro slips into the magical enclave, out into the adventures of darkness and dreams. He nearly fainted to see the mysterious appearance of the carpenter’s dead body in his dreams suddenly started to scream. His madness becomes more intense by seeing the serene spirits and nightmares which surrounded his subconscious mind.

Okri depicts the importance of the forest as a representation of the beginning of dreams and he exemplifies how it gives life and future to all the people.

The forest once represented the beginnings of dreams, the boundary of our visible community, the dreaming place of spirits, the dwelling place of mysteries and innumerable old stories that reincarnated in the diverse minds of human beings. The forest was once a place where we saw the dreams of our ancestors takes form. It was once a place where antelopes roamed with crown on their heads. It was a rich homeland of the spirit. Its nocturnal darkness was the crucible of all our experiment in imagination. (IR 83)

The forest governs the universe. Okri in his mythical expanse connects panoramic stage of the forest with consciousness of man, interspersed with regions of darkness, marshy places, phosphorescent lights, spaces of silence, and dwelling places of the ancestral spirits. The felling of trees is a bad sign in African consciousness. The trees are disappearing very fast and their ghost wails their loss, disturbing the sleep of men:

At the same moment the explosion, quaking the earth and the seas, disturbed the forest and woke a giant spirit from its long slumber. The spirit woke up, and found that it had been made homeless. Confused, it began to wander through the forest looking for its moss and serene lianas. And the agitation of the wandering spirit started a wind which blasted Mum back as she entered the forest, following the noise of the tree cutters. (IR 121)

The destruction of mighty tree is very pathetic and frightening to Azaro. Azaro remarks, I stood swaying before the most beautiful ancient god of a dead tree that I had ever seen. Blood was streaming down my head. The blue and yellow bird was circling the air above me. And I gazed in awe at the magnificent tree. It was the length of ten elephants and its flowers were in full bloom. Bird nests were scattered around and silver eggs broken on the red earth. (IR 113)

Azaro’s ecological crisis shows the importance of nature. The wounds of the earth are very hard to heal.

Hence Okri’s *The Famished Road* is all about, the dream of life, rejoicing in the infinite mysteries of human existence; imagination charter for the wretched of the earth, the *abiku* societies, to rename and repossess the world, remember their past and invent new memories of the future. (Zezeza 64)

Azaro moves into white man’s dream, who comes to Koto’s funeral. He saw the pictures of Madame Koto as a young girl. “She was beautiful and had that peculiar green light in her clear eyes which had been an early indication of her unusual birth and destiny” (IR 360).

Various episodes in the novels deal with the actual dreams that Azaro experiences in the trilogy. In Dad’s dream or entering into Mum’s dream it is always told that dream is through Azaro. Azaro narrates what Dad tells him of his long dream at the end of *The Famished Road*. Whereas in Mum’s dream, Azaro enters into it and dream about the future. Ade’s vision of the future is also witnessed by Azaro in his vision. This occurs periodically throughout the novels, when Azaro experiences the dreams and visions of other character in the novel.

All the lights in the houses along our street were off but I knew that no one was asleep. I knew it because there were no dreams floating about in that moon-dominated air. Usually dreams floated from their dreamers and entered the mind of other sleeping forms. Sometimes dreams were transferred from one person to another. I remember once entering the dream of the carpenter’s wife, who was dreaming the dreams of the tailor across the road who found himself in a land of birds. (SOE 255)

In the above passage Okri clearly mentions that Azaro is only capable for occurring in other characters dreams. He can also feel and experience the dream of others. But other characters in the novel cannot experience the dream and vision of Azaro and others. According to Okri dream is a part of reality. It floats around from one consciousness to next and becomes a part of everyone's life and thought. Okri implies that dream is a new hope of sunlight and is processes of social growth and change in Nigeria.

Vision

Azaro's dream and vision incorporates with the cycle of time. Okri has joined the past with the present and the future. This time axis constantly appears as a part of the trilogy. This shows the impression that time is recurring or moving along space of the action in the novel. In *Songs of Enchantment* Azaro speaks about time as follows, "I sat on the platform of our housefront and saw the future invade our street. The invasion took place silently. No one noticed" (63). This illustrates how time works in the novels, moving backwards and forwards with the same path of the present feeling of cyclic repetitive movements.

Okri's dream and vision infuses the novels with the sense of traditional and supernatural elements. Quayson suggests that Azaro is unconsciously responsible for the mysteries of the spirits and quotes that,

For Azaro the problem is that he does not always enter or exit these realms through acts of his own volition. The matter is often entirely out of his control. Rather, a spirit potential is posited as inhering in all things and this potential is shown to be able to manifest itself arbitrarily. Because the narrative is focalized through the consciousness of the *abiku* child who is himself radically decentred, the whole work has a shifting and unsettling quality. (150)

Thus Azaro enters into others dream and vision when the characters is awake and in sleep. The dreams of the character allow them with hope of willingness to full fill their desire. In *The Famished Road* Azaro mentions as, "There are many reasons why babies cry when they are born, and one of them is the sudden separation from the world of pure dreams, where all things are made of enchantment, and where there is no suffering" (4)

In *Infinite Riches*, the rally of the crowd becomes strange and they hear an isolated laughter. Azaro through the eyes of the blind man witnesses,

I saw them now through the eyes of the blind old man. They were in front row and on the walls. Some of them stood alone, but most were in groups. And they were scattered everywhere in the crowd. They kept laughing. The dead found everything funny. They laughed at the politicians in their stiffened dignity and forced affability. They laughed at the politicians and their promises, their claims about the glories of the past, the glories to come, and the blessings of their paternal rule They laughed at the Governor-General who said something in a strangled voice about the future greatness of the country and the hope of continued co-operation in business and culture. The dead laughed very hard indeed, and the dead carpenter was chief amongst them. I saw children who had died in our street. I saw the adults who had been felled by malnutrition and diseases, by political thugs, and hopelessness. (IR 272- 273)

Okri brings the "dead" in the form of illness, discrimination, poverty, hunger, cruel laws, injustice, bad harvest, madness, famine, poisoning milk, road accidents, died of malaria, fear, malnutrition and hopelessness of the people. The laughter of the dead creates chaos among the politicians. They "sent the blind old man into paroxysms of fantastic rage, reduced the mountainous Madame Koto to tears of despair, and made the Governor-General come out in a beetroot coloured flush" (IR 274).

Hence Okri's trilogy travels with Azaro's spirit world and reality. The political problems of the natives reveal the real state of Nigerians. The change of the leader and political justice render the solution to the problems of deterioration. Okri's re-inscription of spirituality into the discourse of Nigeria's nationhood, through the re-articulation of the *abiku* myth helps in creating a deeper understanding about identity, inter-group relationship and humanistic pursuit of the common people.

Okri's text is loaded with real and supernatural, animal and human, spirit and ghosts, past and present, but never loses its political relevances. In Okri's novels transformation and change is quite extensive. People transform themselves into animals, spirits transform themselves into people and inanimate object are given ability to transform. Thus dream is a part of individual life.

Abbreviations

TFR: The Famished Road **SOE:** Songs of Enchantment **IR:** Infinite Riches

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