



Political Famine in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*

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Abstract

Ben Okri presents the gradual degenerating conditions of Nigerian Nationhood. He focuses on the dreams and aspirations of the common folk of the third world from their new born nations. The idea of nationhood is one of the most significant aspects in literary writings of the third world countries which primarily focus on the anti-imperial freedom movements for separate nationhood and the dreams and aspirations for the national identity. Here literature and especially the fiction writers perform specific role by presenting the morbid conditions of the people who have been languishing under the atrocities of colonial masters as well as from the injustices of the new elites. This literature succeeds in mirroring the national life of the oppressed masses which finally result into the large-scale de-colonisation of their mind. The works not only brought forward the pathetic condition of their people but also fought back to the imperialist attempts of maligning the natives as barbaric, uncultured, primitive, savage, and underdeveloped and brutes. While foiling the Western attempts of blackening the natives and its traditions, the writers revived their rich cultural heritage and traditions. The writers also depict the undercurrent which is strengthening against the corrupt authoritarian political leadership. The writers emphatically present the fast moving freedom struggles in Asian and African countries. The present paper critically examines the rotten political system presented by Ben Okri in his work *The Famished Road* where he focuses on the frustration of dreams of Nigerian people.

Keywords: Aspirations, atrocities, authority, development, dreams, frustration, independence, nation, rights, and violence, etc

Introduction

Nigerian soil; like most of the regions of the world is as fertile as the other countries in respect of its rich literary output. It is a land which is diverse and most of its literature is found in Igbo, Orhobo, or Hausa, Nupe and Yoruba languages. Igbo Yoruba and Hausa are the three prominent languages used for the literary expression by the Nigerian authors' dramatists, poets and story tellers. Igbo is one of the major languages of Nigeria; as large number of Nigerian people belong to this clan. These people traditionally are called as Hebo, Ebo Eboe or Eboans. The Igbo people not only found in the South Eastern parts of Nigeria but their presence can be felt in the neighboring countries like Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea and Gabon. The origin of these primitive groups can be traced to Niger delta. They are one of the most primitive plans found in most of the parts of African continent. Like every language Igbo has numerous dialects. It belongs to the Niger Congo language group which is mostly found in the fertile Niger delta region. Like other tribals Igbos also follow the rules of tribal leaders, there were many tribal dominions like Kingdom of Aboh, Nri and and Aro confederacy etc. after the British conquest most of the Igbos embraced Christianity but never broke themselves from their ties with the Igbo traditions and customs. Because of the strong ethnic identity, they led a movement for the separate nation which is known as Biafara which resulted into the Nigerian civil war after the Nigerian independence. The civil war has taken the toll of millions of innocent Nigerians who want to secede from Nigeria. Although the secession attempt was a failed one, it strengthened the ethnic identity of the Igbos.

Another prominent language spoken in Nigeria is a Yoruba. Most of the Western parts of African continent are dominated by the Yoruba language. Most of the Yorubas are found in Benin, Togo and parts of Nigeria. The three

countries are called as Yorubaland. It is the land of the origin of the Yoruba and their culture. Before the annexation of African continent by the European imperialists the areas inhabited by the Yoruba people that is Benin, Togo and Nigeria are identified as Yoruba country. the number of Yoruba was more than 55 millions. Another important language spoken by the Nigerians is Hausa. This language is spoken in the countries like Chad, Nigeria, Sudan and Ivory coast. This language belongs to the family of Afro-Asiatic languages. For more than 58 million people it is their mother tongue. Even the non-natives use it as Lingua franca. Ben Okri is one of the well known literary figures from the Dark Continent; belongs to a mixed ethnic group. He claims his Igbo heritage from his mother's side who is also not a full Igbo. His father belongs to the Urhobos, the community which is primarily found in Southern parts of Nigeria. Their presence can be felt in the delta region Niger river. Their number can be around 7 million and the vernacular is Urhobo. Like major Nigerian writers Ben Okri's father migrated from Nigeria to the land of his dreams i.e. England, as England was the most sought after destination for the migrants in Okri's time. He was just two years baby when his family immigrated to the United Kingdom. He was born on 15th March 1959. His schooling was done in London. His father was a renowned lawyer when Ben was just seven years old, his father decided to return to his motherland i.e. Nigeria. In 1966 Okri's father Silver settled in the Nigerian flourishing city Lagos and started his profession. these were the the years when the newborn countries witnessed civil wars which devastated lives of millions of people who succumbed to starvation because of the inhuman blockage by the Nigerian army of the turbulent region i.e. Biafara. Despite of excellent academics he didn't receive admission for Physics in University. But he didn't

get demoralized as he realized that his real talent lies not in Physics but in creative writing like novel and poetry.

Even at the Juvenile age of fourteen he tried to express his experiences regarding the Nigerian political, social and cultural happenings. His sensitive mind found writing as a means of expression for his thoughts. But like most of the writers his works didn't get recognition by the publishers. He didn't get disappointed and he moved towards another form of literature i.e. he presented the subject matter of his earliest articles in short stories. His revolutionary thoughts did not go well with the government and it started criminal proceedings against him. At the age of nineteen he went to England and enrolled in Essex University. His Revolutionary views resulted into the discontinuance of government monetary assistance for further study. It brought him a lot of hardships but the adverse circumstances taught him much and his literary production is at its peak in this period.

Flowers and shadows is the first fictional work by the Nigerian English writer Ben Okri which is published in 1980. Most of his works present the political, social and financial conditions of the Nigerian as well as the African continent after the departure of the imperialist powers i.e. European and Americans. The newborn independent countries while enjoying its independence also fall in the ditches of persecution, vengeance, malpractice and ethnic violence. The natives who struggled against the colonial powers witnessed a totally different scenario even after the departure of the aggressors. Their own people frustrated the well cherished dreams of their own countrymen. Most of the people irrespective of the region and sex suffered at the hands of their people who grabbed the power. Okri's works present a fine admixture of reality and the much eulogized past which is found before the arrival of the Europeans. The reality is colored with African imagination and the Western literary traditions.

Like his Nigerian counterparts, Ben Okri presents the pathetic condition of his countrymen. Most of his works have the Lagosian background and majority of the actions take place in this Nigerian Metropolis. The novelist never specifies the location and the country about which he is narrating but most of the indications are suffice to prove that the land depicted in the work is none other than the Nigeria. The land is torn between various power hungry politicians who never bother to use it for their personal avarice .his work the Famished Road echoes the journey of the new born nation towards the goal of materialising aspirations of his people. He beautifully and realistically glimpses of a newly independent country which is moving from a troubled transitional phase. The country has witnessed massive sectarian violence as a result of the unending ambitions of the corrupt politicians. A land which is culturally rich falls prey to the greed of colonial masters as well as equally duped by its own handful people. The novel presents the political instability of Nigerian, which is stated as

The spirit child is an unwilling adventurer into chaos and sunlight, into the dream of the living and the dead. Things that are not ready, not willing to be born or to become, things for which adequate preparations have not been made

to sustain their momentous births, things that are not resolved.... They keep coming and going till their time is right. History itself fully demonstrates how things of the world partake of the condition of the spirit-child.(Okri, The Famished Road, 487).

The country after independence comes under the iron grips of military junta which brought untold miseries in the lives of innocent Nigerians. Most of the countrymen experienced large-scale violence, brutalities, starvation and genocide. The irony is that the pain inflicted not by the outsiders but their own people in whom the innocent countrymen had placed their trust. The people were expecting better tomorrow after the end of the shackles of colonial rule. There will be tremendous change in the political, social and financial conditions of the countrymen but the end result was totally different, the people were so frustrated that they thought that the colonial powers although outsiders and do not belong to them but much better than the new power mongers who pushed the whole country into poverty and civil disturbance. Political leaders who have shown the false dreams joined hands with the military and took control of almost all the resources of the land. The sham political parties perpetrated the inhuman acts and terrorized the innocent people by means of violence, detention and large scale killings. The people became alien to their long cherished dreams. an atmosphere of frustration ,dejections and anger engulfed the aspirations of the Nigerian masses. The independence becomes a hollow word for the countrymen; the real freedom in terms of exploiting the common men is enjoyed only by the few. The white masters were replaced by their own people. Nothing has changed. Even more and more torture and violence is experienced by the common man. The new rulers are more ruthless and brutal towards the people. In the Colonial period people took arms against the imperial injustice but now protesting against the authorities result into more and more violence and retribution, instead of listening to the demands of their own people in the power reacted with atrocities.

The present work is a trilogy along with Songs of Enchantment which is published in 1993 and Infinite Richest is published five years later i.e. in 1998. It is a story of Azaro, a Nigerian child. The book is a combination of the two worlds i.e. a world of spirits and a real world where ordinary men and women struggle to meet the vexations of daily life. The book is so much appreciated all over the world that it received the prestigious award i.e. Booker prize in 1991 .The young Ben Okri reached the zenith of popularity just at the age of thirty two. The protagonist or the central character Azaru is a spirit child which is known as abiku in Nigerian world.

Conclusion

Ben Okri is one of the prominent African writers, is considered as the mouthpiece of the subaltern and languished masses. His works are burning with the zeal of bringing transformations in the current rotten political system. He is known for his radical ideas and he has the will to end every kind of injustice, exploitation and discrimination from this planet. He vociferously takes arms against all forms of evils.

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