

Assimilating the Plurality of Culture in the Postcolonial context of
Ben Okri's *Songs of Enchantment*.

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Postcolonial theories popularized during the late 19th and the early 20th century after the emergence of the great literary critics of Postcolonialism: Michael Foucault, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayathri Spivak. Postcolonialism as the term refers to does not only mention the period after colonialism. It also refers to the transformations and variations that happened in the culture, social background, history, architecture, economic development and the way of life. Every colonized land suffered from a mass of transformation till the infinitesimal changes in the lifestyle. In history, the most affected colonized land could be seen as Asia, Africa, Australia and Canada. Among these colonized nations, Africa and in particular Nigeria had undergone a massive modification which make the people to survive in the land with their unique identity.

The most distinct changes that could be witnessed in the colonized land after the intrusion by the colonizers are the changes in language, culture and territory. The real identity got slowly departed and people unknowingly felt too comfortable with the culture seconded by the colonizers. They were more at ease with the institutions, the articulations and the governing force while at the same time felt hard at their burden upon them. They gradually unremembered their culture, history, tradition and the ancestral practices. When Edward Said's argument focuses on the West as a superior force trying to subvert the East comprehending as an inferior one, Homi Bhabha further develops Said's analysis as Culture

being in a state of motion. According to him, Culture is always in a constant state of change. As Homi Bhabha explains in *The Location of Culture* as:

The theoretical recognition of the split – space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an International culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity. It is the inbetween space that carries the burden of the meaning of culture, and by exploring the Third Space, we may elude the politics of plurality and emerge as the others of ourselves (LC)

Therefore to Bhabha, the binary characters that define colonizers from the colonized, centre differing from origin, civilized differing from savage and enlightened community varied from the ignorant are purely a fantasy. He explains that in order to wipe away the differences of superiority and inferiority there must be an intermediate space, a third space which stresses on the plurality of cultures. So, this space is where the colonizers and the colonized both meet and have a discourse negotiating and throwing away their past differences.

Majority of the Nigerian authors struggle for insisting their culture and tradition argue about their losses and sufferings under the heavy hands of the colonizers. Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan, Buchi Emecheta and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie confront the oppositional force demanding them a solution for the past age of torments, Ben Okri the eminent Nigerian novelist and a Booker Prize winner contributes his thought process on Homi Bhabha's interstitial space. He describes how culture transforms the natives living within it and how the inhabitants surviving within this society exist within the domain of plurality. His notion of writing to literature is claiming his identity as a Nigerian and thereby explaining how his people have adapted a diverse culture. He further reflects on life as a prism which demands a total liberality from the imperialistic control.

Ben Okri became so famous because of his '*abiku*' trilogy and this paper discusses the second fiction of the trilogy *Songs of Enchantment*. The distinguished aspects of plurality in the postcolonial Nigeria are clearly seen in this novel. The protagonist Azaro, a spirit child lives in an unnamed ghetto where the people of the entire locality lives within the clutches of the politics and the poor economic situation. Of all the people suffering badly, Okri shows some characters like the Old man, Madame Koto and the parties of the Rich and the Poor who treat the ghetto dwellers in a more submissive manner. Some people trying to achieve a

better social class abides their ways whereas some characters like Azaro, Azaro's dad and mom, Ade and the photographer try to turn the people's attention towards their ancient means advising them of their ancestral spirits.

According to the critics Ben Okri makes his fiction unique by means of 'magical realism'. But he rejects this criticism. According to him he declines the European way of calling it as a technique instead he forecasts it as the traditional practice of communicating with the sprits as their identity which will be no more a fantasy for the Nigerians. More of being a fantasy fiction, he tries to implement the inhabitants' way of living a 'double life' making the next generation disregard and disown their identity. Ben Okri does not want this to happen. So through his works, he tries to restore the lost identity and makes the future generation to remember their ancestral stories and life. Ben Okri says, "Stories can conquer fear, you know. They can make the heart bigger" (SOE 46) He believes on the fact that stories surface entirely from within and without. Stories develop any artist either be it a novelist, painter or critic everyone is developed from stories. His trilogy also comprises numerous stories which all end up teaching the moral values for the young ones in Nigeria.

As the fiction, begins Azaro was described by Okri as, "The spirit – child is an unwilling adventurer into chaos and sunlight, into the dreams of the living and the dead". (SOE4) He was not ready to come into this world when the king of the spirit land gave him a chance. But looking at the mother's cry and the father's struggle to grow him he came to this world. But at the moment he entered the land he was continuously being tortured by his companions of the spirit land. As Azaro being the narrator of the fiction describes, "In short my spirit-companions played havoc with my education. They made me seem strange to the other children, and so I didn't have many friends". (SOE5)

So, as a spirit-child Azaro suffers the torments of his companions and as a willing creature plans to remain in this world to observe things in the society. While Azaro was doubling his identity from being a spirit-child living in the human society, his father was trying to give the beggars a better education free of corruption and bribery. He calls the beggars for a party in his first book *The Famished Road* and promises them he would make their future a prosperous one. They believed his promises but since his father had become sick, he could not be able to endorse their hope. When he returns back to those beggars, they refuse his apologies and leave him abandoned.

Ben Okri all through his trilogies gives importance to things that are related to mark his theme strongly. His motif of bringing the images of forest, road and river are insistently portrayed just to make the readers comprehend that they are the chief identities of Nigeria. He also puts a point that the spirits still exist in the forest. In his *Famished Road*, he begins by saying that, “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.” (TFR3) Similarly in *Songs of Enchantment* he centers the importance of spirits existing in the forest as:

... when I looked up I saw that there were gigantic spirits everywhere. Their thoughts pervaded the forest like scented woodsmoke. I knew instantly that they belonged to the slow migration of the great spirits of Africa. Where were they going? I had no idea. Their dreams were impenetrable, locked and coded in gnostic riddles. In the time we had been running civilizations had risen, had fallen, had disappeared. Transformations are faster at night. In the same time great leaders had been assassinated. I heard their astonished cries (SOE26).

In the same way in *Infinite Riches*, Okri exclaims about how the spirits get furious when the government cuts the forests for civilization. Thus Ben Okri narrates a series of events that would insist on the other world trying to have a discourse with the humans when science and technology disregard their presence.

Meanwhile Ben Okri also talks about the exploitation of politics in their everyday life. He describes how politics is intertwined in their mean habitual activities and it worked for the worse in their existence. When Azaro’s dad goes behind the beggars cursing his mum for not reminding about him the plans made for the beggars, Azaro’s mum goes and joins with Madame Koto, the representative of the ghetto dwellers to the superiors. When he was searching her unknown about her unity with Koto, he understands how Azaro’s mother suffers badly in the mist of political thugs. Even the place where she used to sell her things was replaced as she had not supported the parties. Thus political influence had a major role in the midst of the poor people of Nigeria.

Madame Koto’s portrayal of character depicts an unclear notification such that she helps the poor women of the community but on the other hand enlarges her bar and makes it as the centre for political discussions. As Azaro comments on her development as, “The bar had undergone another of its fabulous mutations ... Everyday was a celebration in her bar – a

celebration of power, an affirmation of her legend.” (SOC36) When Azaro was keenly waiting out of the bar for her mum, he could hear, “Women sang quivering about political songs that spoke of the new era of money and power.” (SOE 38) Whenever Azaro and his family get vexed, the only thing that encourages him is the stories that his mom and dad tells him. This could be witnessed as the personal influence from Ben Okri himself. He dedicates all his fiction to his mother Grace Okri and believes strongly on the power of stories. Among the entire ghetto dwellers Azaro’s family alone truss in the emergence of the ancestral spirits reigning between them. They also eagerly wait for a sign or a message from the forest. While Azaro was a willing child, loves to live in the human world, as a factor of juxtaposition Ade is his companion who hates to live in this world and does all sorts of things to get away from it. He literally hates being in this world which is filled with immorality and penalizing issues.

As the world gets transformed the anger of the spirit is clearly explained in the book II of the fiction. As Azaro being the narrator says:

While all this was happening the trees were being felled every day in the forest. We heard the stumps screaming in the evenings. The words went round that the spirits of the forest had turned vengeful ... The forest became dangerous. It became another country, a place of spectral heavings, sighs, susurrant arguments as of a council of spirit elders, a place with fleeting visions of silver elephants and white antelopes, a place where elusive lions coughed – a bazaar of the dead (SOE68).

Ben Okri never deviates from his narration though many sub events were taking place. Whenever he gets an occasion, he stands by his notion of stressing the value of the identity and cultural significance. He says creation by the colonizers were for men and even after their presence those creations were helpful to some extent but as like the colonizers, their culture gradually began to dominate the people and the natives started to be a slave for the ways that they had taught us. Through Azaro’s mum Okri explains, “Corruption came upon the people and grew fat. Diseases dwelled in them and Misery had many children amongst them. The world turned upside down. Creation became confusion.” (SOE 75)

Being a wanderer, Azaro has the capability of going into the dreams of any human being. Through this power he overviews the dreams of the Blind Old man and Madame Koto. He found that their dreams were thirsting for a nation that completely surrenders itself in the hands of the political thugs and the colonizers who stands invisible but makes the people as

puppets. Azaro says: “I was knocked about in the old man’s dream of a dying country that had not yet been born, a nation born and dying from a lack of vision, too much greed and corruption, not enough love, too many divisions.” (SOE91)

According to Azaro’s dad the political parties were stuffing too much of greed and corruption in the minds of the Natives which thereby corrupts the entire society. As the plot converses much about their aims, the preparations were made for the forthcoming elections. People became so busy about it. At this juncture Madame Koto’s car driver slays Ade, Azaro’s companion and the fiction comes to an end where Ade’s dad, the carpenter tries to kill Madame Koto but was brutally slaughtered by the Political thugs. thirst

Before his death Ade’s last words forecasts the longings of Ben Okri. He says, “My destiny was not to be an assassin, but a catalyst. The tears of a child dying of hunger in a remote part of the country can start a civil war. I am the tears of a child. I am the country crying for what is going to happen in the future.” (SOE196)

The elections were not also a great success. Both the parties argued and slashed with one another. As the fiction drives too its end, Ben Okri says, “Innocence fled from our community, and to smile was no longer an expression of joy, but of some hidden triumph over others.” (SOE208) After Ade dad’s death the world did not even care to bury him and the dead corpse lied there in front of Madame Koto’s bar. Azaro’s dad became blind. Ade’s spirit recommended Azaro to bury his father’s dead corpse. So finally Azaro’s dad burins the corpse but the consequences of burying it is further discussed in the third part of his trilogy. All through his trilogies, Okri demands a continuation in a clarified way.

Thus, on forecasting the lives of Azaro’s family, Ade’s family, the blind Old man, Madame Koto and the political thugs of the Rich and the Poor, Ben Okri says, “A good man first has to be blind before he can see.” (SOE242) He asks the Natives to see things spiritually at not physically. It is quite difficult to survive in a multi-cultural milieu but just surviving is not living. Living is the act of absorbing our true culture, relishing it and resisting it whenever it demands. Thus Ben Okri’s fiction *Songs of Enchantment* explains the characters’ existence in a society of plurality and their resistance thereby paving a way for defending the true culture, history and way of life for the future generation.

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