

Search Of Identity: A Thematic Analysis Of Ben Okri's Select Novels

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Abstract

A mundane reading and review of Ben Okri's fiction leads readers to believe and categorise it as fiction containing common post-colonial themes. A nation born out of shackles of colonialism facing cold war situation, the impending struggle between colonizers and the colonized, corruption, female subjugation etc. are few of the themes readers think are prevalent in Ben Okri's fiction. But a closer examination of his fiction ushers us into his techniques and literary style with a newness, interweaving simple plots and characters into complex ones giving it a unique identity. One can easily notice how his fiction which has deep insight of African traditional practices presented in a modernized way, shows myriad of themes with a blend of traditions and modernism or Bildungsroman and Künstlerroman, all covered and webbed in a quest of identity for a Nigerian who is relegated to oblivion, who seems to be lost since his birth, who has been downtrodden throughout his life, who has been oppressed and has endured atrocities of colonialism, who has been deprived of justice and social equality, who has bruised on his face whenever he has tried to object and question the people in power, who has been victim of political unrest and cold war, who hasn't lost his spirit and has refused to give in to the hardships of life. Versatility of themes, evident in the varied range of Okri's writing, right from novels to collection of short stories and poems, is a deep reflection of his thought processes, a testimony of his undying spirit and endeavours to establish an identity.

Key words: - Identity, Post-colonial, Oral narrative, Bildungsroman, Künstlerroman, Animist realism, Abiku.

1. INTRODUCTION

Identity of a person is a sense of connection, relation, belongingness or association with a particular group in a social structure. This group can be of a person's family members he is living with or colleagues he is working with. A person, since his birth, is always in search of an identity, he receives this identity from the people he is associated with. There are innumerable decisive factors, (family, language, religion, society, friends, area/nation even food) which determine and affect a person's identity time to time. This paper is an attempt to explore how Ben Okri with a distinctive combination of post-colonial themes, is in search of identity. Seemingly there are glimpses of evidences of common postcolonial themes in the works of Ben Okri, which makes the readers sense his simple and ordinary approach in execution of his ideas in written forms. He seems to give voice to poor, downtrodden, colonized who were subjected to constant humiliation in a civil war torn country. Ben Okri's writings inimitably are based on African social background in which people are constantly striving to be free from oppression. Exploitation and atrocities combined with political unrest are the key and fundamental elements, evident in the writings of Okri. Nevertheless, one can never ignore the distinctive style of presentation in his works. A creative progressive

experimentation and exploration is visible in his variety of works. With his extraordinary combination of traditional African practices he gives a Midas touch to his seemingly monotonous, ordinary and predictable themes. His usage of personal childhood experiences of racism and exploitation which are well depicted in his first novel "*Flowers and Shadows*" which he published at the age of 21 in 1980, is his attempt in his search of identity. Novel depicts the fusion of traditional and modern approach in society as bildungsroman. Protagonist's simple approach to become a teacher shows simple and spiritual approach of a common Nigerian to life. Disturbing and unsettling events in his life, stripping young JeffiaOkwe of his modesty, humbleness and innocence, are bruises of freedom aftermaths on the back of Nigerians.

Through Omovo the central character in the second novel "*The Landscapes Within*", Ben Okri shifts and extends his approach of presentation from bildungsroman to Künstler roman. Though the struggle of the protagonist remains evident here too. But there seems to be a shift in struggle too, the struggle is not between colonizers and colonized but the struggle of survivor for survival and to gain an identity. Omovo's struggle for bread and butter, emotional and psychological struggle continues with his struggle to acquire an identity through his painting 'scumscape', banned subsequently. With the portrayal of Omovo as an artist, Ben Okri progresses and develops the approach as aesthetic maturation which makes the readers take it as central theme of novel. Omovo's struggle for survival does continue in the "*Dangerous Love*" which is the sequel of "*The Landscapes Within*". Omovo's experience with corrupt practices in the paint company is similar to the encounter of JeffiaOkwe with ruthless, unjustified and unethical practices in his father's company. Description of Jeffia's longing for his Father's love and his grudge against malpractices combined with the incomplete love of Omovo for Ifeyiwa- a beautiful married woman living next door, shows how beautifully Ben Okri has interwoven the complexities of common people irrespective of the social conditions they live in.

Writings of Ben Okri are near perfection of manifestation of psychoanalysis, another major aspect to be highlighted. Sigmund Freud's theory of psychoanalysis best fits in his writings. Instances from BenOkri's childhood does reflect his hidden longing for an identity. His father, Silver Okri's untiring efforts to facilitate poor Nigerians to get justice, seem to be corner stones in his works. Okri's experiences as student at John Donne Primary School in London and back in Nigeria have significant impact on his works. His endeavours to experiment and combine his childhood experiences with the oral narrative of African culture have changed his literary style and provided him with a tool to write about his quest of identity. Oral narratives in return have been recorded in literature as they are given space in the works of many writers. Such narratives provide food for thought to writers, who claim to relive past through such oral accounts. These narratives are kept alive in functions, social gatherings, festivals and on special occasions. Ben Okri too, has used these narratives to showcase rich history and culture of Africa along with the ups and downs of common people of his nation to bring African identity to the fore. Such examples are evident in his writings which are further source for many readers who want to explore different areas. Transition in form and genre of writing, leads to shift in themes, style and approach of writers. In case of Ben Okri, transition does happen from writing novels to short stories and poems. With writing short stories, Ben Okri worked on a wide array of themes. Okri's own experiences as a child as well as expatriate in England, provided him enough thoughts to write about in short stories. Writers are free to present a single thought or a single issue in an effective way in short stories, where as in novels they present a single major issue along with web of many other minor issues. Writing poems is altogether a different scenario than writing short stories and novels. With the publication of his collection of poems "*An African Elegy*", Ben Okri

seems to explore a whole new area of imagination. Writing poems provided a divine touch to Ben Okri's approach and imagination, with the publication of variety of genres, Ben Okri was placed in the line of main stream writers. By writing poetry, Okri showcased his expertise to develop a thought in a single strand whether the theme contains a background of his own experience or any other matter picked up from any social scenario. He mastered his skills of developing oral narratives in written form, giving them artistic shape. Expression through various forms and genres helped Okri a lot in understanding various themes and plots and backgrounds. While writing short stories, Ben Okri kept a keen observation of all influential events in his surroundings. Such thoughts and events irrespective of the situations, provided Okri with a new range of techniques to learn plot, setting and dialogues. After understanding and attaining deep insight of the theme, Okri learnt to present these in a unique way. While writing a novel, short story or poem, writers keep in view their style of presentation. Usage of language and appropriate background along with impressive characters, matter a lot in presentation. Ben Okri used regional language to create a magical impact in his various writings. With this he was able to reach a variety of audience and readers. Okri used his own childhood authentic experiences which gave him an authentic and honest approach to develop a common and simple idea in a new unique, subtle and complex way. That's why his works which seem to be monotonous and mundane at first glance prove extraordinary when presented after combination of effective plots, with a variety of thematic issues and reader friendly language, which seems easy but subtly interwoven.

Ben Okri has time and again denied his identity as a post-colonial and post-modern writer, though his writings only make readers and critiques believe him to be so. Another identity which he is repeated associated with, is animist realist. Magical realism and animist realism are dominating features in his famous works, that's why critiques while appreciating his works, attribute these elements to him. In seminal works of Ben Okri the latest addition is "*The Freedom Artist*". A novel which he published in 2019, is a story of a lover's search for his beloved in a world full of human machines. Novel is set in the backdrop of a society in which people are oppressed and fear stricken who are not allowed to question the authorities. They thus become walking machines who are bound and forced to follow a monotonous routine and life style, and to not object to any wrong doing and become prisoners of the social norms set by the authorities. Objections and questions in their lives means invitation to unpredictable repercussions. Ben again has attempted to give voice to the underprivileged and tried to search the identity of the common people. Ben Okri's best work till date is undoubtedly "*The Famished Road*". A novel which he published in 1991, brought laurels to Ben Okri and made him winner of Man Booker Prize. This recognition in 1991 helped him emerge as an internationally acclaimed writer, whose writings were widely appreciated post publication that novel. "*The Famished Road*" is a perfect example of animist realism. The Roots of success of this novel lie in the central theme, which is connected to the age old culture and traditional practices of African society. The story revolves round the protagonist Azaro, who is a young Abiku boy. Ben Okri has thoroughly explored and exploited the African myths and mythologies in this novel. Abiku, according to African mythologies is a boy who seems to be in contact of a spirit as well as mortal world. Abiku is a boy who takes birth to parents whose other children have died at the time of birth or after a few days or months of birth.

The child who survives after the death of other children is said to be an Abiku, as his spirits choose to come in the mortal world after long struggle. It is believed that the same spirit after earlier futile attempt to take birth, becomes successful and survives the complexities of mortal as well as spirit world. Such spirits or children after long struggle take birth, but are forced by other sibling spirits to return to spirit world, thus keep contact with both spirit as

well as mortal world. Effective and charismatic usage of Abiku myths by Ben Okri makes readers view this work as an example of animist realism. In the novel Abiku protagonist is Azaro who is always in dilemma whether to stay with his parents who are extremely poor or to return to spirit world. He is continuously harassed by these spirits which keep calling back him, after he decides to live with his parents. His father is a poor man who carry loads to earn a living for his family, where as his mother who lives a low profile life works as a hawker to support her husband in family income. His father becomes a pugilist later and fights spirits furiously in his brain. Such Presentation of characters helps Ben Okri to bring the core traits of Nigerian characters on the main front. Though in this novel also, Ben Okri shows the survivor's struggle for survival which is a very common theme in many other novels of Africa. But with the Abiku child Azaro, Okri has established identity and undying spirits and of Nigerians who have not given up, come what may, after enduring tormenting atrocities of colonizers. Azaro's father's strength (physical, emotional and psychological) and his readiness to take any challenge for the sake of his family, reflects the strength of Nigerians which is justifying and is appropriately portrayed by Ben Okri. His mother's unconditional support for her family, silently though firmly shows the determination, commitment, hard work and resilience, which is again reflected by Okri as character traits of true Africans. A journalist's attempts to record, report and unearth ruthless practices of political parties to gain favour and legitimacy among the voters, by emerging out of nowhere, time and again, shows one's belief and strong conviction in honesty, truth and goodness. Madame Koto who runs a bar in the town, employs Azaro, who she think will bring luck to her, doesn't miss a chance to earn money for her family and the community people.

2. CONCLUSION

Extra ordinary blend of African traditional practices and modernism in this novel, which is near perfection of animist realism and a quest of identity, brings Okri success and critical appreciation. Ben Okri, it seems, after writing novels, short stories and poems, is able to hone his skills of experimentation of giving oral narratives a written form. He has mastered his expertise to use and combine traditional myths with political dynamism and strong social issues as a theme in the background. Writing on various themes in a variety of works, giving his personal authenticated, experience based touch makes him great among the most prolific and versatile writers of the modern age, who is always in search of an identity.

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