

## Myths and Dreams in Ben Okri's Songs of Enchantment

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### Abstract

Magical realism is used as a literary mode to bring out the significance of cultural intermingling, hybridity and transformation. In the Novel 'Songs of Enchantment', The Nigerian author Ben Okri in his narratives uses dreams, visions and magic as an attempt to connect politics and history in order to bring out the concept of African Consciousness in the postcolonial society. The paper aims to focus on the use of dreams and its purpose in the novel. The mode of magical realism in the novel helps the reader to view the postcolonial Nigeria through dreams which serves in two ways firstly through culture and society and secondly through hope of the postcolonial Nigeria. The aim of this study is to analyse the ways in which Okri encodes African consciousness versus Western epistemology and reevaluates history through dreams and visions. Further, the study tries to analyse how Okri redreams postcolonial Nigeria through the third eye in 'Songs of Enchantment'.

**Keywords:** Dreams, Visions, postcolonial Nigeria, culture and society, Songs of Enchantment.

### Introduction

Ben Okri, a renowned Nigerian author who uses dreams, visions and myths as a technique to focus on the history and politics of the Nigerian society. *The Famished Road* (1991), its sequel *Songs of Enchantment* (1993) and *The infinite riches* (1998) are famous trilogy written by the African postmodern and postcolonial writer. Brenda Cooper says that "The West African writer Ben Okri uses the Yoruba myths and belief systems from Nigeria to illustrate the effects of colonialism". (Cooper, 1998) Okri in *Songs of enchantment* focusses on the themes of post-colonialism such as displacement, colonial oppression, neo-colonial domination, change, cultural fragmentation, alienation, exile and identity.

The *Songs of enchantment* have the aspects of magical realism as the protagonist of the novel, Azaro keeps moving from the conscious to the unconscious world. The novel *Songs of Enchantment* is structured into four divisions. The novel enchants the readers with various cultural resources. The novel is a sequel to *The Famished road* wherein the protagonist realizes that the victory isn't the end of struggle. The family faces a lot of problems in the novel and the characters put great efforts to outwit Madame Koto, she bewitches Azaro's mother that changes her physically and mentally when she returns home. She seems oppressed and burdened by the hardships that the village faces. Azaro's father is blinded and the whole village is in turmoil. The politicians terrorize the village with adulterated food. There are too many evocations of evil throughout the novel that brings adversities, the father regains his sight at the end of the novel. The recovering of his health and regaining of his sight also symbolizes the revelation and regaining of Azaro's spirits and gives a reassurance of creating a nation beyond chaos.

## Magical Realism :Intertwining African Consciousness and Western Epistemology

Magical realism is a literary mode that characterizes two perspectives firstly, a sane view of reality and secondly, a supernatural reality. The aesthetic narratives that Ben Okri uses in his novel *Songs of Enchantment* enables a man to push himself to dream for a utopian world. The narratives that Ben Okri uses are culturally specific as it links traditions, myths and the modern world. The narratives are chiasmic as it “intertwines the naturalized supernatural and the supernaturalized natural.” (Marquez,1990) The author blurs the natural and the supernatural by making the novel more realistic. The use of magical realism in the novels tries to underpin the colonial oppression faced by the people. The dreams, visions and myths in the novel depicts the multi-dimensionality of the African postcolonial view in many ways. For example in *Songs of Enchantment*, the protagonist says that, “if anything we began to dream of them as draped in white robes; we saw them as our saviours, our friends. In dream they smiled at us, they made of our lives secure, they policed the realms in which fear and frustration ate up our hopes, they manifested themselves as the powerful ones who could protect us from our worst enemies, and who would fight by our sides in all our battles”(SOE, 1993). The narrative focusses on the social and cultural aspect of the African tradition and also opposes the colonialism.

As Brenda cooper suggests of magical realism: “Magical realism arises out of particular societies— postcolonial, unevenly developed places where old and new, modern and ancient, the scientific and the magical views of the world co-exist. It grapples with cultural syncretism and accepts it to a greater or lesser extent. Where syncretism is rejected, it is usually the result of pressure arising out of national disaster, which insists on the writer’s obligation to engage in national liberation” (Cooper,1998).

The *Songs of Enchantment* is made of fragmented stories of anxiety and fear of reality that is equally fragmented. The dreams that Okri uses in *Songs of Enchantment* uncovers the hidden truths of an independent culture offering a certain hope for Nigeria by intertwining both the past and the present, thereby creating a new identity that integrate aspects of African traditions through multiculturalism. The characters in the novel suppress their desires which are not acceptable in the society and therefore dream their desires in the subconscious mind. The spirit child Azaro is a protagonist who focuses on constructing the African world view with diverse cultures to reach his destiny. According to the spirit child, the Africans are enchanted or spellbound by colonial and neo-colonial factors. “Magical realism thrives on transition, on the process of change, borders and ambiguity. Such zones occur where burgeoning capitalist development mingles with older pre-capitalist modes in postcolonial societies, and where there is the syncretizing of cultures as creolized communities are created” (Cooper, 1998). Therefore, undermining the possibility of thinking beyond the unnatural ideological boundaries authorized by the African political nationalism. “We didn’t see the seven mountains ahead of us. We didn’t see how they are always ahead, always calling us, always reminding us that there are more things to be done, dreams to be realised, joys to be rediscovered, promises made before birth to be fulfilled, beauty to be incarnated, and love embodied. (SOE,1993). These lines focus on the nationalist ideology were the African nationalism promises higher goals of human aspirations and bliss. The spirit child Azaro’s struggles are never “finished” or “truly concluded” since the possibility of human regeneration is through redreaming life, and that life can always be used to create more light” (SOE, 1993).

Cultural nationalism fractures the ideologies of political culture through Azaro when he says, “Sometimes my other lives would open and then shut, and what I glimpsed didn’t make sense. Other times I could see far into an aquamarine past; I saw places I had never been to, saw faces that were both alien and familiar; and my mind would be invaded with the black winds of enigmatic comprehension. The lives in me increased their spaces, languages of distant lands bore my thoughts, and I found I knew things I had never learnt. I knew the charts and tides of the Atlantic, I understood complex principles of higher mathematics, the sign-interpretations of the forgotten magis, the sculptural.” (SOE 1993).

Cooper poignantly points out that magic realism captures and contests polarizations like history and magic, the precolonial past and the post-industrial present. Moreover, it strives to depict the life against death (Cooper 1998). The passage emphasis on the need to expand and redream postcolonial Nigeria with intellectual tolerance and not on a particular signifier of life. Azaro life is shattered in the real world when the people are affected by the political thugs when they seek the parties of the rich and the poor in the postcolonial Nigeria , “increase spaces” the imagination of an alternative world shatters him and “breaks his

heart" (SOE 1993). Similarly, Ade dreams of spirit with four hands coming towards him. He says, " My destiny has been hidden from me and it was because of all the poverty, all the suffering in the world, the wickedness and the lies, it was because of all these I didn't want to live. But now I know I was born to love the world as I find it. And to change it if I can. I will get a better chance. But before then we will meet again and play in the fountain of rainbows and in the golden sea of music."(SOE,1993)

'Enchantment' is a word used by Harry Garuba that means 'fantastic desire to prepossess the future'(2003).The novel also emphasis on the hope of postcolonial Nigeria through characters dreams and visions .Azaro's dad works for the society he cleans the rubbish on the streets, he builds wooden bridges near the marshlands and dug the gutters and helps the poor with medicines and fruits for illness .The new identity that he acquires interrogates the patriarchal narratives that expects Azaro's mother to manage the domestic work as drudgery. As the critic Brenda Cooper comments that the 'African writers very often adhere to this animism, incorporate spirits, ancestors and talking animals, in stories, both adapted folktales and newly invented yarns, in order to express their passions, their aesthetics and their politics'. (Cooper,1998). Dad's confrontations with the evil spirits revamps him spiritually that makes him to take responsibilities on the people of Nigeria and concern over the dying nation. The political scenario of Nigeria is unstable that Azaro's dad condemns the corruption of the forthcoming elections criticizing the party of the rich for "terrorising" the humankind and the poor for their "vengefulness and cowardice". Azaro's dad is spellbound by spirits in creation of making Nigeria a better place to live. In his speeches in the novel he talks to them on human existences and in his visions, he attempts to reconstruct the new nation with an idealistic perspective and notion. In order to resist the culture of political impunity practiced and promoted by Madame Koto and her Party of the Rich, he uses romantic pictures of the ideal human existence.

John McLeod emphasizes on the socio-political nature that focuses on two major approaches he says that "'postcolonialism' recognises both historical continuity and change. On the one hand, it acknowledges that the material realities and modes of representation common to colonialism are still very much with us today, even if the political map of the world has changed through decolonisation. But on the other hand, it asserts the promise, the possibility, and the continuing necessity to change, while also recognising that important challenges and changes have already been achieve". (2000). Therefore, in the novel Songs of enchantment the protagonist deliberates himself to refuse the calling of spirit companions to come back to the earth to free people from the bonds of spirits. "My spirit-companions had tried to scare me from life by making me more susceptible to the darker phases of things, and making reality appear more monstrous and grotesque. But so far, they had failed. And they had failed because they had forgotten that for the living life is a story and a song, but for the dead life is a dream. I had been living the story, the song and the dream. (SOE 1993). Azaro's in his lines chooses the road of building an intellectual nation through dreams and fantasises the future world but he refuses to reinterpret the nation with a mind that provides him images of future that is sealed with certainty.

## Conclusion

Therefore, the article foregrounds the struggles and desire of a new nation through its narratives. The oppressive life and liberation are refracted through folk tales, dreams, myths and visions throughout the novel. Many critics have raised their objection against magical realism as it is considered by the western readers who are not familiar with the world which it depicts. Thus, enlightening several notions and concerns of the third world about its escaping reality. Critics like Brennan and Connell, questions the reinforcement of colonial thinking where they say the readers read with a colonial hangover. The songs of enchantment therefore uses magical realism through narratives of Okri has formulated new paths to life. Thus, focusing on and society and secondly through hope of the postcolonial Nigeria. It also encodes African consciousness versus Western epistemology and reevaluates history refracted dreams and visions through the "Third eye".

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