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**BEN OKRI:  
BETWEEN REALITY AND FANTASY**

**PhD Thesis**

- Summary -

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**Key words:** Ben Okri, England, Nigeria, Africa, Diaspora, border-crossing, displacement, home, hybridity, identity, immigrants, colonialism, slavery, Independence, the Civil War, Biafra, the city, the poor, the rich, tradition, modernity, darkness, corruption, indifference, unemployment, poverty, the old/ new generation, the inward eye, truth, Madame Koto, Dad, Azaro, abiku, the spirit world, art, artists, suffering, spiritual growth, imagination, silence, stories, story-teller, Surrealism, Remedios Varo, painting, quest, music, hybrids, magician, hybrid landscapes, environment, dialogue, interpretation, space, time, dreams, the book of life, inner world, esoteric, road, forest, the Invisibles, mimicry, delayed recognition, language, utopia.

Ben Okri is a Nigerian writer. In 1980, he left his African homeland and moved to England where he has been living and writing for over thirty years. During all this time, he has delighted his readers with novels, short stories, essays, and poems. His border-crossing from Africa to Europe echoes Azaro's, the narrator-protagonist of *The Famished Road* trilogy. Like the spirit-child who abandons the safety of the spirit world, Okri decided to leave the haven of his family and flee into exile, a world hostile to him. As if following his character's example, Okri escaped into the First World out of a desire to discover and explore its mysteries. Finally, he made this world of paradoxes his home. From London, the writer has looked back at his former homeland and narrated it in most of his novels and short stories. He has also depicted his experience as a black immigrant in the white metropolis.

Chapter one, *Ben Okri and the Diaspora*, is a short presentation of the black immigration to the United Kingdom since the arrival of the Empire Windrush at Tilbury Docks in Liverpool on 21<sup>st</sup> June 1948 to the present time. It is also a review of the terms with which the notion of diaspora operates: border-crossing, displacement, home, hybridity, and identity.

Upon the disintegration of the British Empire, a surprising but predictable movement started: the former colonized, termed by anthropologists the Other or Third World citizens, began to move towards the Western metropolises or the First World. The phenomenon caused waves of hysteria in the West where the authorities made efforts to defend their countries against the "invasion". Over the years, they have passed numerous laws in order to restrict the Third World citizens' rights to enter and settle down legally in their countries. Despite the harsh measures, consecutive waves of immigrants assaulted the Western metropolises and settled down there. Their desire to make a better life for themselves and their children reconfigured the face of Western Europe. The massive migrations from the former colonies turned the Western metropolises into spaces where multiple cultures and histories collide and intermingle. These

processes take place in the third-time space called the Diaspora, an extremely fluid space which denies notions of boundedness and fixity.

The notions of home and identity are strongly connected with the Diaspora. Homes, like nation-states, imply boundaries, rootedness, and a sense of communion between the ancestors and their descendents. For the subjects who, voluntarily or by force, left their homelands and moved to a new location, things are different. The distance that they put between themselves and their homeland re-shapes their life and identity. In the new location, immigrants are either able or prevented from forge(ing) a new identity. To make a home in the Diaspora, the immigrant needs to develop a new identity that helps him/her adjust to the demands of the new location. The identities forged in the Diaspora are fluid like the space that gave them life. They are split or multiple because the subject always straddles two or several cultures and identifies himself/herself with various homes. When the subject is marginalized or discriminated in the new location, he/she tends to cling to the homeland left behind. Such immigrants overidentify themselves with the old location and often feel the desire to return there. If it is impossible for them to go back physically, they may become overwhelmed with a sense of loss and return to their homeland in dreams. They fail to form a hybrid identity. Instead, their new identity is schizophrenic and dysfunctional.

The subchapter “Narrating Homeland from the Diaspora: Salman Rushdie and Ben Okri” focuses on the way in which the distance that the two authors put between themselves and their former homelands has impacted upon their perception of India and Nigeria, respectively. Rushdie discusses the issue of narrating homeland from the Diaspora in his collection of essays, *Imaginary Homelands*. There, he explains that the diasporic writers feel compelled to reclaim their past. Because they are incapable to recuperate the past in its smallest details, the writers deal with bits and gaps. They remake the past using memory and imagination as tools. The result of blending memory and imagination is an “imaginary homeland”. Rushdie and Okri create imaginary homelands in two novels which brought them the prestigious Booker Prize. *Midnight’s Children* and *The Famished Road* go back to the history of their authors’ homelands. They are neither historically correct (*Midnight’s Children*) nor specific (*The Famished Road*). But their authors did not intend to give accurate accounts of events or places. Instead, they map a certain state of affairs and the energies that it unleashes with their consequences upon the characters’ lives. As diasporic writers, Rushdie and Okri use their novels to voice their dissatisfactions with the homelands which they left. Their displacement enables them to look back with a critical eye. Their criticism, harsh at times, aims at raising awareness. It seeks to change mentalities as through their works, writers can stir emotions, instill ideas and ideals into people’s minds and

souls determining them to act. However, their task is not to offer solutions to the acute problems that they present in a literary form. Their endeavour is to disclose a reality which many statesmen strive to hide.

“Narratives of Displacement and Unbelonging: Leila Aboulela, Caryl Phillips, and Ben Okri” presents the disheartening experiences that immigrants go through in the white metropolis. These experiences do not only shape the writers’ and the immigrants’ consciousness but they also pave the way to the subjects’ forging a new hybrid identity that is meant to help them integrate into the new environments. Themes such as the invisibility of the immigrant in the white metropolis, rejection, marginalization, and discrimination because of a different skin colour or a different religion punctuate diasporic writers’ works. Okri is no exception. The theme of unbelonging as a consequence of displacement makes the topic of two short stories (“Disparities” and “A Hidden History”) and is treated tangentially in *In Arcadia*. In the metropolis, Okri’s protagonists must cope with a difficult milieu. The environment influences their disposition. They experience negative feelings: irritation, anger, disgust, frustration, and fear. They reject the white world and its alleged superiority but there is hope that they are able to find a home in the metropolis, eventually.

Like Okri, Leila Aboulela and Caryl Phillips are interested in the individuals’ way of dealing with the surrounding world, their diasporic experiences, and the way in which the passage from one world to another shapes their identity. Their female-protagonists leave their homelands for London. Both women experience a sense of loss and confusion in England. In the end, Leila, Phillips’s heroine, finds the strength to cut off all the fragile ties with England and return to the Caribbean. This shows that the English experience has generated in her a new awareness, that of belonging to a certain place. She has eventually understood that home is the place where one is always welcome, that home is not so much the location but the people who inhabit it. At the end of the novel, there is hope that after all the tragedies in her life, Leila will be able to find stability and develop an identity based on a sense of rootedness.

Unlike Leila, Najwa has no possibility of returning physically to Sudan, her homeland. She can do this only in her dreams. In the new location, she is adrift and her identity is schizophrenic. Luckily, she finds support and a family in the women’s community at the local mosque. Far from being a believer when she immigrates to England, Najwa turns to Islam in a foreign country whose majority white population has prejudices with regard to this religion. In this way, Najwa discovers that she belongs first, to a small community which accepts her as she is and later, to a much larger one, that of the Muslim world. Her new hybrid fully functional identity stems from a sense of rootedness and belonging. It is in the Diaspora that she becomes aware that

her home is not a person but a community whose members are spread all over the world. Like Leila, Najwa finds out that home is about people and not about places.

Chapter two, *Nigeria: From Slavery to Post-Independence*, is an analysis of the way in which Okri depicts four key moments of Nigeria's history. These are: slavery (*The Famished Road* trilogy, *The Landscapes Within*, *Dangerous Love*, and *Starbook*), the Independence (*The Famished Road* trilogy), the Civil War (*The Landscapes Within*, *Dangerous Love*, "Laughter Beneath the Bridge", and "In the Shadow of War"), and the Nigerians' plight after the conflict (*Flowers and Shadows*, *The Landscapes Within*, the short stories, and *Dangerous Love*).

In the above mentioned works, Okri points to those negative aspects which are obstacles to the development of the young nation. In order to forge a better future for Nigeria and Africa, the writer urges the Africans to look at their past and learn from their forerunners' mistakes. Despite the troubled past on which he focuses, Okri rarely describes scenes of extreme violence. Rather, he registers people's reactions to the events. In all his novels and short stories, Okri portrays two social categories which are at great enmity: the poor and the rich. While the rich act like one, the poor are divided.

The rich are the white ex-patriates and the new black elites which emerged after Independence. They make an exclusive category. They live in expensive neighbourhoods, are corrupt and selfish, and have made a habit from exploiting and bullying the poor. Okri denounces the new black elites' complicity with the white colonizers which eased the latter's domination over the African continent and ruined its future after Independence. The poor are either victims of the rich or of their own passivity and ignorance. Okri shows how these two drawbacks turn the poor into easy preys for the rich. The writer also accuses the Nigerian old generation of complicity with both their white and black exploiters. In order to better their society, the young generation must sever their ties with their fathers. Another way of accomplishing this goal is the return to the pre-colonial values, to tradition. In Okri's works, tradition is symbolized by the forest as a site of magic and the village where the city dwellers go back to find tranquility or purify their souls which have been perverted by the corrupt milieu of the city.

In those works in which he narrates Nigeria, Okri has created a series of settings which he names, such as Lagos, in *Flowers and Shadows*, *The Landscapes Within*, *Dangerous Love*, and the majority of the short stories. In other works, though, such as *The Famished Road* trilogy and *Starbook*, the setting is not named but one can easily identify it as African. The writer's intentional choice of an African setting rather than a Nigerian one pinpoints his preoccupation with the fate of the black continent and his purpose to restore its values, name, and place in the world.

Chapter three, *Human Condition*, is an analysis of some of Okri's characters. Madame Koto and Dad are key characters in *The Famished Road* trilogy. The other characters analysed in the chapter have been overlooked by critics (Mum and the compound women from *The Famished Road* trilogy, Jeffia, and the female characters from *Flowers and Shadows*) or considered unworthy of attention (the characters from *In Arcadia*). The characters are arranged in a chronological order starting with Madame Koto who is presented as a metaphor of colonialism, to Jeffia who epitomizes the new generation that has the necessary potential to bring about positive changes in the Nigerian society, and to those characters that embody the paradoxes of modern life and possess the key which unlocks the realm of the inner Arcadias, those private spaces which are so dear to Okri.

Okri creates typologies. His characters are liminal like the space which they inhabit. Because of their liminality, their identity is a delicate issue: it either destroys them or helps them cope with a new location or social order. It brings Jonan's (*Flowers and Shadows*) and Madame Koto's downfall because they are the prisoners of the rigid colonial mentality and their ambitions which destroy them in the end. Omovo's father (*The Landscapes Within, Dangerous Love*), as the representative of the old generation, is the victim of the same type of mentality. These characters' disappearance reinforces Okri's belief that only by severing their roots with the past, can the new generation bring about positive change. For Jeffia, who embodies the new generation, the act of border-crossing from the colonial order to the new post-colonial one results in the forging of a new functional identity which helps him adjust to new times. Azaro's parents show that the attitude and the will to act are important factors which may trigger positive change. Dad confronts the landlord openly when the latter threatens to throw him and his family out of the room and increases their rent. Mum and the compound women do not only put up courageously with their poverty. They also engage in militant activities against injustice and corruption. Azaro's parents also voice their disapproval of the politicians' injustices. Okri makes them examples to be followed. The corrupt Nigerian society confuses its citizens. The most affected are those who live in the big cities. They become uncertain of their identity as the city is a liminal place where tradition and foreign influences collide and intermingle. Caught in this chaotic net the city dwellers fail to forge a viable identity that would enable them to live a decent life. Mrs. Okwe, Cynthia, and Juliet are Okri's survivors. Their lives gravitate around Jonan and are shaped by his strong but negative influence. As long as he is alive, they barely survive. His death frees the three women who are now able to reorder their life. In *In Arcadia*, the writer depicts the wretched condition of modern man in a set of characters, all of them professional failures. In spite of their desperate situation, there is hope for them because, as Okri demonstrates, they all have inside



themselves the buds of spiritual regeneration. They are capable to reach their inner Arcadia and dwell there.

Chapter four, *Art: Order and Meaning in Ben Okri's Fragmenting World*, is an analysis of the writer's view on art and his aesthetics. It traces the artistic and spiritual development of his artists: Omovo, the young painter-protagonist from *The Landscapes Within* and *Dangerous Love*; the photographer from *The Famished Road* trilogy, Mistletoe, the paintress from *In Arcadia*, and the maiden from *Starbook*. It also shows that the invisible protagonist's journey through the Invisibles' city in *Astonishing the Gods* is a replica of the aforementioned artists' spiritual and artistic growth. Finally, it focuses on Azaro as a synthesis of Okri's artists.

With the photographer's exception, Okri's artists are very young. They go through a process of artistic and spiritual growth which is predicated on suffering. Okri expresses his conviction that "art cannot come from the happy and contented, from the lucky and the beautiful, from the blessed and the whole..."(83). True art springs from the depths of a troubled spirit and is the vehicle which helps the artist find his/ her peace. His artists' process of growth is tough. They have to put up with loss, injustice, weakness, addiction, fear, and lack of self-confidence. Along with their artistic and spiritual growth the artists acquire a stable identity which connects them with the surrounding world.

Okri's artist-protagonists are his own embodiments at different stages in his life. Both the writer and his artists are permanently on the move. It is intimated that they evolve constantly, that they journey permanently. Omovo is the teenage writer who, while in Nigeria, is still uncertain about his artistic path and looks at the great artists/writers of the world for inspiration. Azaro (*The Famished Road* trilogy) stays for young Okri who left Nigeria in search of spiritual illumination in England. The maiden represents the still immature writer who works hard to forge his own style and credo. She can embody Okri at the stage when he was writing the short stories which precede his famous trilogy with its astonishing hybrid prose. The photographer stays for the militant writer who does not hesitate to point accusingly to the political leaders, denounce their lies, and kindle the masses' wish to fight for a better life. Mistletoe is the mature artist who has found his way in the world of art, who is self-confident because he is aware of his potential but who also knows his limitations. Now, he can teach the others the art of life because he has discovered his inner Arcadia, that place within any human being that is constantly touched by gods.

Chapter five, *Of Times and Spaces*, is a synthesis of the types of space which Okri creates in his writings. Time completes them. The results of the artists' creation are the works of art. Whether they are paintings, sculptures, or books, they delimit a space of their own: the space

of the work of art which is constantly linked with the outer world. On one hand, it is the artist's playground. On the other, it should always be in touch with the consumers of art. They can either enrich it or minimize its merit through interpretation. Okri emphasizes the importance of the collaboration between the artist, the work of art, and its consumer. In the absence of the reader/onlooker/art critic, the artistic activity becomes meaningless. Both the artist and his works must reach for the outside world.

The act of writing generates the inner fictional space of the books. This space is the sum of several subspaces: the real space, the imagined space, and the story space. Dreams make a special category of Okri's imagined spaces. They enrich his characters' lives by connecting body, soul, and mind. They project the characters into another dimension which would remain inaccessible to them otherwise. The writer uses dreams in various ways. They are premonitory and nightmarish such as Mrs. Okwe's dream in *Flowers and Shadows*, Ifi's dream about her death in *Dangerous Love* or the salesman's nightmares in "Stars of the New Curfew". They warn the prince and the maiden from *Starbook* about their future plight as slaves in foreign lands. Dad's act of redreaming the world in *The Famished Road* shows him the present and the future fate of his homeland and it also provides him with the solution to heal their diseased society. Dreams and visions connect ordinary people with the book of life, mankind's immense and inexhaustible reservoir of knowledge and inspiration. In *Starbook*, the tribe of artists create from dreams.

The artists' inner world is another important category of Okri's imagined spaces. It is in these special retreats that their imagination finds the freedom to fly through times and spaces and unleashes the inspiration which they need in the process of creation. The artists' private worlds are their inner Arcadias, the only places where, according to Okri, man's spirit can rest during his lifetime.

Besides inner spaces, Okri creates outer spaces, too. They are: the room/ the house, the compound, Madame Koto's bar, the road, the forest, the spirit world, and the city. They make up his characters' palpable reality. Their slightest change alters the characters' perception of the world and consequently, their identity. This happens in the trilogy when the forest is cut down to make room for modernity. Its destruction symbolizes the disappearance of the African ancient traditions. The room/ the house is most times forced open by unwanted intruders. Instead of protecting its inhabitants, it exposes them to outer negative influences. The compound is a liminal space between the forest which it protects and the city. Madame Koto's bar is a site of epiphanies, situated between the world of the living and the spirits' realm. It is a border where the two worlds collide and intermingle. As a border space, Madame Koto's bar can be an image of the space of

the Diaspora. The presence of the road in Okri's works is natural as it is always connected with journeys and encounters, two themes characteristic to diasporic writers. If Koto's bar stays for the Diaspora, Okri's outer spaces represent landmarks of the diasporic writers' journeys. The room/ the house stands for the writer's homeland which he leaves either forced or by his own will. The road represents his journey which entails the act of border-crossing. Finally, the city with its numerous temptations and traps stays for the new location where the immigrant artist must forge a new identity and find a home.

In the short stories, Okri gives life to the world of the esoteric which he brings to perfection in *The Famished Road* trilogy. The presence of this realm has urged critics to label Okri's work as magic realist. The writer has repeatedly denied such categorizations by explaining that the world which he depicts is not the product of his imagination. Although it has much in common with the fantastic worlds conceived by the magic realist writers, it is *real*. To describe it, he drew on ancient African beliefs. According to them, the world which people can perceive with their physical eyes is paralleled by several others which are all *real*. One of these multiple realities is the place where the dead go on living after their earthly life is over.

Chapter six, *Style and Techniques*, is a short analysis of Okri's style tracing its development from his earliest works to his latest novel, *Starbook*. The writer's style mirrors his evolution as a diasporic writer. His earliest novels, *Flowers and Shadows* and *The Landscapes Within*, are examples of mimicry. The inexperienced writer looked at the European models because he did not have a personal style, yet. He still had a lot to learn. The short stories represent the stage when Okri experiments with various influences in search of a personal style. It is here that he uses, for the first time, the technique of interweaving the real and the esoteric which he refines in *The Famished Road*. The beautiful poetic prose of the trilogy with its African and European influences shows that the writer has perfected his artistry. The works which he has written after the trilogy bear the signature of his unique style.

Over the years, critics have placed Okri's works within the category of the postcolonial or the magic realist writings. The writer has rejected such labels arguing that

...[what] shapes the piece of work...[is] something about the age you live in, but it's something more to do with your secret true orientation to life...That's where writers have their true affinities. That's why I reject utterly the way in which my work is placed within the whole context of the margin, the periphery, postcolonial and stuff like that...[b]ecause it completely situates the work within a time/ historical context and not within a context of self and inner necessity...and beyond that. (Okri 43-44)

Okri does not deny the influence of the social and historical factors upon the work of art but he sustains that any piece of art is the product of the artist's self which has been shaped by the epoch in which he/ she lives. It is this personal touch, the writers' "true affinities" (Okri 43) which makes them belong together. What connects all diasporic writers is not so much their origin and the common experience of migration but something more subtle which manifests at the level of their innermost being. They share common objectives whose ultimate aim is to better the world by revealing the truth which many times is concealed under the world leaders' lies. It is these common goals that gather together the artists in a big spiritual family to which Okri feels that he belongs. That is why the artists' works cannot be confined to categories which restrict their message and goal. As products of the artist's self that exceeds the boundaries of countries and epochs, the works of art aim at universality. They are created to reshape the world in their turn. In his essay "Redreaming the World", Okri emphasizes the artists' obligation to tell the truth, to "learn from the world and teach the world to learn from them" (131). He reinforces this idea in an interview on *Starbook* where he opines that, "I think maybe the purpose of what we try to do in arts finally is to enchant the human heart and human mind into a sense of its true kingdom of its magnificence". A statement which summarizes both his aesthetics and the purpose of his art.

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