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Death and Myth in a Dream Narrative: A Reading of Ben Okri's Novel *Songs of Enchantment*

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Abstract

Ben Okri is one of the leading writers in the Nigerian literature in English. *Songs of Enchantment* belongs to the *The Famished Road* trilogy. The novel pursues the life of Azaro, an abiku. The novel reveals the rich culture of Africa. This paper attempts to study the use of myth and death in the novel. It also studies how death and dream serve as both theme and technique. The paper also attempts to explore the dream background of the novel.

Key words: dream, myth, death, phantasmagoria

Introduction

Nigerian literature in English developed and expanded in vast ways over the years. Nigerian literature in English expressed the cultural, political, and social values and dilemmas of the country. Yoruba myths and African culture often found their way to the writing of authors like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and so on. Ben Okri is one of the leading writers in the Nigerian literature in English.

Ben Okri, a novelist who hails from Nigeria who had his earliest years in England and later returned to his country where he had to witness the Nigerian Civil War. The memories of war influenced him and his writings. He also wrote poems, essays and short stories. His first novel is *Flowers and Shadows* (1980), which is set in the city of Lagos and tells the story of Jeffia who finds the brutalities of his own father. *The Landscape Within* (1981) is a Künstlerroman which traces the life of Omovo who paints the corruptions of his society. His trilogy, including the Booker prize winning novel *The Famished Road* (1991), *Songs of Enchantment* (1993), and *Infinite Riches* (1998), depicts the life of the abiku Azaro which in turn sheds light on his life and the politics and culture of Nigeria.

Okri's writings are inevitably influenced by the Nigerian Civil War and the culture, and folktales of his country. *Poetry Foundation* quotes Okri's conversation with *The National*:

I grew up in a tradition where there are simply more dimensions to reality: legends and myths and ancestors and spirits and death. You can't use Jane Austen to speak about African reality. Which brings the question: what is reality? Everyone's reality is different. For different perceptions of reality we need a different language. (*Poetry Foundation*)

In his novels he blends the language of myth and dream to narrate the essentially African stories.

The Famished Road is the story of the spirit child Azaro and his father Black Tyger. The story mingles the real and the supernatural in a dream like setting. The novel sets the background for Azaro's spiritual traumas, Madame Koto's influence and the threatening presence of the political parties. It introduces the reader to the dilemmas faced by Nigeria as post-colony. *Infinite Riches* is the last novel of the trilogy. It gives a beautiful climax to the narrative. It concludes Azaro's journey, describes the death of Madame Koto, arrest of Black Tyger etc. *Songs of Enchantment* is the second book in the trilogy and is the one which bridges the two narratives. *Songs of Enchantment* narrates the political struggles, the spiritual world and the real life of poverty in the country through the perspectives of a spirit child.

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The story of *Songs of Enchantment* takes place in an unknown place. The novel is divided into four parts. This paper tries to analyse the mythical world provided by Ben Okri in the novel *Songs of Enchantment*. It also attempts to study death as a dominating theme in the novel and how the dream like setting of the novel enhances the impact of death and the supernatural in the reader.

The myth in the canvas

The mythical representations of the novel starts from the protagonist himself. Azaro is an abiku, a spirit child. Abiku is part of the African myths and can also be seen in Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* and Wole Soyinka's poem *Abiku*. Timothy Mobolade describes the concept of abiku as, "[a]ccording to the custom of the Yorubas, an *Abiku* is any child who dies and is reborn several times into the same family; hence, the life-span of an *Abiku* is characteristically very short indeed" (62). Abiku has connections with both the worlds, living and the dead. Taye Awoyemi-Arayela describes, "Abiku, which literally means "Born to Die" belongs to the spirit-realm of the living dead and oscillates between the unborn, the living and the living dead" (33).

Azaro is always in communication with his companions from the other world. They constantly persuade Azaro to leave the world of living and join them. He is tormented by his spiritual companions and thus has to stop his education. Azaro unlike other abikus choose to live in the earth, in the world of living. Azaro reasons his choice:

My spirit-companions had tried to scare me from life by making me more susceptible to the darker phases of things, and by 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. (Okri 267)

Azaro has certain powers, he can see spirits, can talk to them and can penetrate the dreams of the living and the dead.

He dreams the dream of the blind old man, Madame Koto and the dead carpenter. He sees the spirits while his friend and fellow spirit child Ade dies. He talks to Ade and Ade delivers messages from the other world to his friend. Clark, in his poem *Abiku*, calls the spirit-companions as 'kindred spirits'. It is part of the Yoruba myth that spirit child is often accompanied by certain companion spirits. They also mark the body of the dead child to prevent its return. Here in the novel, Azaro breaks the abiku cycle and lives in the world. Ade who is also a spirit child treated by various herbalists dies later. When he dies Ade confesses his mistake to Azaro;

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 that I didn't want to live. But now I know I was born to love the world as I find it. And to change 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. (183)

Even after death Ade visits Azaro and remains his companion and helper.

Apart from the abiku reference there is the presence of the blind old man who is a "master transformer" (87) and more or less acts as a prophet. His massive presence in the novel reminds us of the ancient prophet Tiresias and his renewed image in *The Wasteland*. *The Wasteland* describes the blind old prophet as, "blind, throbbing between two lives." He is an "old man with wrinkled female breasts." Even though he is blind he can foresee everything. In the novel *Songs of Enchantment*, the blind old man is a strong prophet and he foresees the future. He can sense Azaro's presence in his dreams. Here the old man reminds us of Tiresias. Azaro through the dream of the blind old man sees the transformation of the old man and his reincarnation as a baby who "regurgitated from the sea. His muscles were bunched-up, his head was mighty like a Nimba sculpture, his eyes were raw and intelligent. He had two sexual organs, his prick was monstrous and erect, his vagina was tiny, like a comma" (88). Through the prophetic dream of the old man Azaro sees a world full of famine, a world withered out of its very attempts for development. He sees a world of riots and madness.

Azaro's father wants to save people from the selfish motives of the political parties and he dreams of a utopic nation where he plans to build a school for beggars. He understood the importance of education for the poor and illiterate people. He believed that "[T]hat is how the powerful people keep us down...They keep us illiterate and then they deceive us and treat us like children" (14). The unusual name of the beggar girl, Helen also has some mythic echoes. Her enchantment and command over the group of beggars is noticeable. Azaro's dad even falls in love with her and interprets the

moths surrounding her as butterflies. The book also mentions about the war of mythologies in the land; how the night fought the day and rain lashed the earth and so on.

The World of 'Death'

Death is a dominating truth in the life of an abiku. Abikus live in two worlds, they understand the language of the spirits and they know truths from the world of living and the dead. Parents of an abiku always fear the death of their child and its comebacks. Azaro is always persuaded by his spirit-companions to leave the world of living and join them in the world of the dead. Azaro breaks the abiku cycle and decides to live in this world.

Dad's story to Azaro describes how a man can conquer death through his good deeds. How his life can turn into many lives through love and kindness. Later when Azaro declares to Mum that "Death is coming" (73), Mum tells him a story. Her story describes a paradise where people never knew death. Man's miseries began when a man claimed the rainbow's ownership. His selfishness brought miseries and corruption to the world. God became unhappy and send 'Death' to the world. Death conquered the world and became the king. God became unhappy because of Death's disobedience and send 'Love' to the world. Through the story she tells that death can only claim those people who believes in his existence and do not keep love in their heart. Finally she declares, "Death is everywhere, listening, waiting to jump on those who believe in his religion" (75).

Ade's death haunts Azaro. The driver who caused the death of Ade goes mad and later dies. People believe that the driver was a "stand-in death for Madame Koto". Madame Koto, with her temporal powers, had transferred her own death to her driver. The driver's fate was interpreted as a warning to people that one mustn't get too closer to the powerful. The event of transferred death is a haunting episode in the life of Azaro, it created a fear in the life of people.

Later Ade's father tries to take revenge upon the death of Ade and he is killed by the thugs of Madame Koto. He was not only killed but also left unburied. The political parties deny his right for a decent burial. His body is left to decay, in the mercy of worms. The dead carpenter seeks justice from the people and asks for a burial. The political forbids the people from giving the dead man a burial. Azaro later enters the dream of the dead man. The dead man caught Azaro and he saw worms in the dead man's nostrils and uncoiling earthworms in his mouth. He begged Azaro to tell the world to bury him, through the dead man Azaro heard the voices of the unnumbered, unburied dead. Later Azaro's dad gives a burial to the dead man and does justice to him. Death has varied colours in this novel.

Dream as Theme and Technique

This novel has a dream like structure. It often moves in and out of the dreams. The novel has the features of a phantasmagoria. Real, imaginary and the supernatural blend and give a unique shade to the novel. In addition to the dream logic as a narrative technique dream also serves as a theme in the novel. Azaro can penetrate the dreams of the living and the dead. Azaro believes that for the dead, life is a dream. One of the chapters has the name "The dreaming forest". In the dreaming forest Azaro saw a group of spirits, "they belonged to the slow migration of the great spirits of Africa" (29). Their dreams were impenetrable, "locked and coded in gnomish riddles" (29).

The blind old man's dream is a prophecy and it reveals the deadly truth of the world. It prophesies the existence of a world of miseries. Madame Koto's dream reveals her lust. In the novel we can also see episodes of collective dreaming. Once they were awakened they lamented the loss of wonders they experienced through that dream. The dead man's dream revealed the agonies of the unnumbered, unburied dead whose deaths were not acknowledged. Through the dead carpenter's dream Azaro realised the pains of those dead who were denied the last rituals.

Through Azaro, Okri shares a beautiful concept about dream. A long passage in the novel describes the world of dreams:

ALL THE LIGHTS in the houses along our street were off but I knew that no one was asleep. I knew it because there were no dreams floating about in that moon-dominated air. Usually dreams floated from their dreamers and entered the minds of other sleeping forms. Sometimes dreams were transferred from one person to another. I remember once entering the dream of the carpenter's wife, who was encoiled round the solid post of her husband, and who was dreaming the dreams of the tailor across the road who found himself in a land of birds and who had been asked to sew the cloth of leaves into one vast garment that could make the earth more beautiful. (235)

This extract reveals the beauty of dreams in the poetic imagination of Okri.

Okri uses the environment of dream to show his social commitment, political ideas, and his love for African Culture. The dream logic helps him to express the dilemma of Africa as a post colony. Poverty, struggles and hope of the people are expressed through the dreams

Conclusion

Songs of Enchantment is a dream narrative written by Ben Okri. African culture and myths find its place in the magical realism of Okri. The phantasmagoria type narrative of the novel helps Okri to express the political circumstances of an evolving nation left behind by colonial powers. Poverty, political bargaining, selfish motives of the people and plays of the powerful etc. are powerfully narrated using dreams. Collective dreams and collective hope are essential for the survival of a community. Death and myth blend and give varied colours to the novel. African mythology and its rich reservoir of stories create an environment of magical realism. The super natural, world of the living and the dead come in a single canvas to give a poetic image. Death is not just a theme, Okri, through his novel and the stories within the story, intends to conquer death through love.

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