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The Reign of Evil in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*

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Abstract

This paper discusses reign of evil in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*. The novel reveals various levels and degrees of evil perpetrated by human beings and other forces against the weak and downtrodden in the society. In this work, moral delinquencies are presented and episodes and instances of moral decadence highlighted. An analysis of the experiences of the characters of the story is also uncovered. Findings show a society plagued by vices where the poor and the weak are at the mercy of the powerful represented by Madame Koto, politicians and other supernatural forces. It is a society struggling under the grip of one evil or the other. In criticizing moral laxity in the society as represented in Okri's *The Famished Road*, we recommend a just, egalitarian and morally upright society, devoid of the display of excessive power which characterises the society under reference.

Introduction

In contemporary society, we read and hear about the dominance of evil in our daily lives. In the media as well as in discussions in private and public places, the involvement of people and institutions in one form of corruption or the other is also presented. There are many cases of kidnapping, election malpractices, tribalism, cheating, armed-robbery, victimization, favouritism and looting of our common funds

by our leaders. Witchcraft, secret societies, cultism, poverty, thuggery, violence, corruption, child abuse, etc. are other evil practices in our society. Churches, mosques and other prayer houses abound in every nook and cranny of our streets and neighbourhood today. Religious preachings are also going on daily in our places of abode, markets, offices and in our public transport system, etc. Nigerians have indeed been praised as a very religious people here and outside our shores. Regrettably, all these have not affected our moral standing. They have not lifted our moral judgement above the tendency to do others in.

Our literature also raises many issues of morality as represented in the works of Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Elechi Amadi, T.M. Aluko, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and in the writings of many other authors. This is also true of the works of Ben Okri under examination. The development has led us to unearth the evil tendencies as perceived by Okri in *The Famished Road* with a view to bringing the situation to the attention of society. The aim is to uphold moral values in the society where every citizen will have a sense of belonging, and the fear of intimidation and suppression is removed and where everybody is free to exist without injury to others.

Evil Tendencies in *The Famished Road*

Evil is the opposite of goodness and it depicts behaviours that are against morality. There are many evils in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*. These evils are perpetrated against individuals and society by powerful people and forces. This has given room to corruption, oppression, violence, election malpractices, witchcraft and other moral vices which have debased man. Powerful people and forces have combined to pull society to its lowest moral standing. The poor and the less privileged are at the receiving end.

Outside the oppression and exploitation of the poor by Madame Koto and politicians who make use of thugs and the police to harass and intimidate the citizenry in the novel, many spiritual and evil forces are also let loose on the society. They are mostly agents of Azaro's spirit companions and other sundry beings. Such weird beings include The Great King of Abiku, White Horse, Boy King, Green Leopard, etc. These evil forces connive with Koto to make life miserable for Dad and his family as well as others.

In presenting these evils in the novel, Okri agrees with Tanuri Ojaide that writers should "draw sensitivity to ideas about the environment and society which concern everybody" (326) in their society. Many of our writers demonstrate this thinking in their works, which establishes their link with our oral literature.

Agreeing that "current Nigerian fiction writers have become even more incensed with the level of ... vices", and that "they cannot but be socially conscious" (540-1), Jasper Onuekwusi commends our contemporary novelists for not abandoning

“this age-long function of literature. In fact, no literature can, whether oral or written” [because] “a constant aspiration of literature is to change people and institutions by passing them through actions and events that expose vices and applaud virtues” (540). In such works, vices and their consequences are exposed with the aim of making people learn from the reward of evil deeds. In every good novel, Arnold Kettle also declares, “we must see its value as the quality of its contribution to man’s freedom” (Qtd. in Onuekwusi 213).

In Okri’s *The Famished Road*, spirits dominate the world of man. They control and intimidate men and manifest in the form of animals, birds, beasts, insects and mythic and supernatural beings. Azaro calls it the story of “the myths of beginnings” (6). The spiritual essence of the novel is captured in the early sentences of it:

In the beginning there was a river. The river became a road and the road branched out to the world. And because the road was once a river it was always hungry. In that land of beginnings spirits mingled with the unborn. We could assume numerous forms. Many of us were birds (3).

In this society, rivers are green, mountains are blue and a cat jumps through Azaro. Spirit birds alight on the roof of Koto car and a witch-turned-herbalist uses the tortoise to travel faster through the realms where speed is an eternal paradox. One of the spirits sent to bring back Azaro has four heads. There are “birds with a man’s hairy legs ... an antelope with the face of a chaste woman” and “an oldman (that) emerged from the anthill that had been following me” (Azaro) (243). This oldman “had hooves for feet (244), “two heads”, one has good eyes and the other has bad eyes (320-1) with green liquids leaking off his blind eyes.

There is also the issue of Witchcraft in the novel. Witches, wizards and other strange beings roam the world of men. This leads to many unnatural situations in the society. To survive the onslaught on them by mystic forces, men become members of one secret cult or the other. This contributes to the many evil presences in the society.

Ade gives Azaro a spell which he throws into the ring during a fight between Dad and Green Leopard which renders the leopard’s mystic powers impotent as contained in Ade’s instruction: “My father gave me this strong spell. Throw it into the ring” (396). A witch hangs the dried heads of an antelope and a tiger and the skull of a boar including the paws of a dead lion on her door. Another witch disfigures a herbalist as we read in these lines: “A witch slapped the herbalist, whose face turned blue and then red where he had been slapped” (420).

Koto has scarifications on her face and an earthenware bowl in her room contains cowries, lobes of kola-nuts, a sprouting bulb of onion, feathers of a yellow bird, ancient coins, a razor and the teeth of a jaguar. Next to the earthenware are three

bottles of different contents and an upturned turtle, its underside painted red. The man in white suit “had curious tattoos on his stomach and amulets round his neck” (473). A policeman who took Azaro to his home after his involvement in accident belongs to a secret society with other officers. They all swear an oath of secrecy as they carry out their duties.

Okri’s *The Famished Road* is rooted in ancient mysteries and primitive practices of African societies where the fearful and impossible take place. Social evils, Christopher Nwodo writes, “are more or less results of human underdevelopment found in various degrees among every human society” (8).

The people are also exploited by the powerful and the dubious. Koto and politicians are agents of exploitation in the story. She manipulates the destinies of the people to make good their exploitation and is always at the edge of the forest offering sacrifices and making incantations against the people. She buries white beads into the earth in the forest at night and unearths them in the day. Azaro reveals that she “extended her powers over the ghetto and sent her secret emissaries into our bodies” (496). The compound women summarise Koto’s exploitation of the people:

They said she was the real reason why the children in the area didn’t grow, why they were always ill, why the men never got promotions, and why the women in the area suffered miscarriage. They said she was a bewitcher of husbands and a seducer of young boys and a poisoner of children. They said she had a charmed beard and that she plucked one hair out every day and dropped it into the palm-wine she sold and into the pepper soup she made so that the men would spend all their money in her bar and not care about their starving families (100-1).

She puts demons in her soup to attract customers and had special evening bath and rubbed a special oil against evening customers. Koto suffocates in evil. She is prepared to do anything to be rich and to massage her ego. It is all about the craze for materialism. Helen Chukwuma, in her discussion of corruption as a national problem, cynically describes it as “the fastest means of social mobility and wealth” (49). This is true of the Nigerian society where politicians kill, perform one ritual or the other to win elections, retain power, or remain in office.

Politicians also bewitch the people with their gifts, to effect election rigging and to confuse them. They give milk to the people which turn out to be rotten and poisonous. Thugs of parties also beat up the people that are not likely to vote for their parties and dispossess traders of their stalls for belonging to another party. In the story, Dad complains to members of his family: “Now they (politicians) want to know who

you will vote for before they let you carry their load ... if you want to vote for the party that supports the poor, they give you the heaviest load” (81).

The dried-milk given to the people by members of the Party of the Rich inflicts the people with sickness: “Men and women queued up outside the toilet and everyone complained of stomach trouble ... A man heaved and threw-up beside the well ... The compound people without exception looked sick” (130). The same party returns to the people later with garri, thugs, whips and clubs. In one hand they display charity but war and violence with the other.

Politicians and their thugs extend the battle to the market place: “if you don’t belong to our party you don’t belong to this space in the market ... Everyone else in this part of the market is one of us” (168). In the story, it seems man has imbibed the 666 spiritual restriction code of the anti-Christ in the bible to the affairs of men. This is a biblical allusion to the promise of the devil to his disciples after the rapture that only those with the mark ‘666’ will be given certain privileges. In Okri’s story, men must belong to certain evil societies or groups to be recognized or to make it in life.

Election malpractice is the order of the day. People are not allowed to vote according to their consciences but are intimidated and deceived. Politicians go extra miles to win elections, visiting violence on the people, using their thugs. In one such act of violence, Dad is nearly killed by thugs for not accepting to vote for the Party of the Rich and thugs of the same party unleash mayhem on the people for resisting to vote for their masters. Dad tells his family: “They were drunk. They asked who he was voting for. He said no one. They set upon him, took his money, were about to do something worse when the women appeared” (284).

A political night of evil is described by Azaro thus: “In great numbers the thugs ... poured over the road of our vulnerability, wounding the night with axes, rampaging our sleep, rousing the earth, attacking compounds, tearing down doors, destroying roof tops” (178). Writing on violence, Yusuf Maiangwa states: “Post-colonial politics are invariably based on a substratum of violence, an acceptable weapon in the fight for power” (78). In this novel, violence is a weapon of politics.

A follow-up to the terror unleashed on the people is their brutalization by the police. This agent of the state takes pleasure in battering the people. They masquerade as agents of peace and the law but are actually those of terror who continuously drive fear into the hearts of the people. They display brute force against helpless citizens and inflict pain and suffering on them at the slightest provocation.

The police is a tool in the hands of the rich and powerful. Landlords order them to beat up their tenants for no justifiable reasons. A tenant narrates that on the accusation of burning down his house, the landlord “hurried away and returned an hour later with three policemen. They fell on us and flogged us with whips and cracked our

skulls with batons” (10). The people stage a riot against police brutality and are crushed, many of them missing.

Mum looks for Dad after the riot and finds him in “a police station ... imprisoned for taking part in the riots ... He had been beaten by the police and there was an ugly cut on his forehead, bruises on his face and his arm hung beside him like a diseased appendage” (29-30). The photographer is also arrested by the police, suspected of burning down a party van. According to the narrator, “He waved at us as they dragged him away” and after three days of incarceration, he narrates his ordeal: “He said he had been tortured in prison ... He told us stories of his imprisonment and of how he had survived fiendish methods of torture inflicted on him to get out the names of collaborators, planners of riots, destabilisers of the Imperial Government and enemies of the party” (155-6).

Examining social evils in Nigeria, Onuekwusi has this to say:

Immediately there was political independence, the stories again became lamentations of the humiliation, instabilities of governments, the vicious circles of corruption, bribery, nepotism and generally man’s inhumanity to man brought into our society by an elite class that abdicated its responsibility (85).

Arising from the situation above, it is important that writers should redeem our society from the many social malaise that plague it. This view is shared by Kolawole Ogungbesan when he declares that the novelist must function “to protect a future which will redeem not brutalise, the masses ...” (7). Chinua Achebe amplifies this thinking in believing that the writer’s duty is “to explore in depth the human condition” (8) in order that “the permanent values — justice, freedom, human dignity” (5) are restored. This is true, after all, what should be celebrated in a society without morals?

No society is completely evil and that of Okri’s *The Famished Road* is not an exception. In this story, there are some instances of good neighbourliness and love displayed by Dad and other characters. He sticks out his neck for justice, balance and beauty, and condemns the many injustices and oppressions in the society. He is always ready to share the little he has with others. Dad shares the boar meat he caught with neighbours, friends and strangers and throws a party for Azaro’s return after he got lost. Another party follows after he recovers from illness and yet another, after beating Green Leopard in a fight. He did all these, regardless of his poverty. Dad was also an environmentalist who organized the compound people to clean up their surroundings.

Another good character in this novel is Mum. She is exemplary even in poverty, always ready to do her best for others and offer help whenever needed. Mum is industrious, ensuring that she feeds her husband and son. She sells different wares, trekking long distances to reach her customers. She shows love and understanding to

her suffering husband and others that came her way. Jeremiah, another good character in the story, exposes vices in the society with his snapshots. He plays the role of the artist in a quest to correct the evils in society. In another show of morality, the people riot against politicians and engage them in a fight for justice.

From the issues raised above, the world of Okri's *The Famished Road* reveals the prevalence of evil in the society and the poor and weak are at the receiving end. As Blessing Diala-Ogamba puts it, "there is no justice for the poor ... no one will even believe or listen to the poor whether the person tells the truth or not" (305). This scenario calls for the intervention of arts in human affairs in order that justice, equity, love and good neighbourliness are restored. Charles Nnolim corroborates this view when he writes that "Beyond just teaching and delighting, literature exists in the man as a corrective to human folly, as a humanizing agent ... literature appeals to our sense of order, restraint, discipline, imparting in its wake a sense of humility" (183). Ikenna Kamalu and Oyeh Otu agree with this view in their thinking that Okri "employs the medium of art to raise national consciousness on the fading glories of his culture and religion" (588).

The society of Okri's *The Famished Road* is indeed in bondage. The people are suffocated by evil in every aspect of their lives. This agrees with what is obtainable in our society today and herein lies the relationship between art and society. Literature sheds light on the evils in the society for moral uprightness to be enthroned. Okri's effort in reviving moral rectitude through his writing lies the relevance of the novel.

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