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A Society Under Siege: A Study of Ben Okri's *Songs of Enchantment and Infinite Riches*

Ikechi, Emeka

Ignatius Ajuru University of Education

Port Harcourt, Nigeria

E-mail: emeka_ikechi@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper discusses A Society under Siege as presented in Ben Okri's *Songs of Enchantment and Infinite Riches*. The novels reveal many societal vices perpetrated by human beings and other forces against the weak and the masses in the society. The work reveals various levels and degrees of moral delinquencies in the novels. Episodes and instances of moral decay are also highlighted and an analysis of the experiences of the characters in the story uncovered. Findings show a society plagued by vices where the poor and the weak exist at the mercy of the powerful represented by Madame Koto, politicians and other supernatural forces. In criticising the siege on the society by evil forces as represented in Okri's *Songs of Enchantment and Infinite Riches*, we recommend a just, equitable and morally upright society, devoid of excessive and crude use of power which press the people down as demonstrated in the novels of Okri under examination.

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 situation has led us to unearth the many evils that have held society down as presented in Okri's *Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches* in order to bring the development 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.

Societal Vices in Ben Okri's *Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches*

There are many vices in the society of Ben Okri's select novels, namely: *Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches*. These evils in Okri's trilogy began in *The Famished Road*. Perpetrated by the powerful against the weak and the masses, these vices have given room to corruption, oppression, violence, election malpractices, witchcraft and other evils which debase man. 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, the police and the army to harass and intimidate the citizenry in the novels, many spiritual and other evil forces are also at 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, Silent Women, Black Dog, Cross-Eyed Spirits, etc. They connive with Koto to make life miserable for Dad and his family and others.

In presenting these vices, Okri agrees with Tanuri Ojaide that writers should "draw sensitivity to ideas about the environment and society which concern everybody". This way, people "will be more sensitive to what is happening" (326) in their society. Many of our writers demonstrate this thinking in their works, which establishes their link with our oral literature.

In also agreeing that “art is for the service of man” (212), Chinweizu et al state that an artist has a “professional responsibility to make his work relevant to his society and its concern” (522). In every good novel, Arnold Kettle also declares, “we must see its values as the quality of its contribution to man’s freedom” (Qtd. in Onuekwusi 213). As Jasper Onuekwusi puts it, the relevance of art to society is assessed against the backdrop that “if nothing is done, society will slowly but surely march to the precincts of insanity” (213).

In these novels, spirits dominate the world of men. They intimidate and control men and manifest in the forms of animals, birds, beasts, insects and other mythic and supernatural beings. In *Songs of Enchantment*, the eyes of the owl are like “the eyes of a watchful old woman ... worms had wings ... skulls had painted faces like old women at a fair ... jackals were dancing to the antiphonal music ...” (87). There are “men with the faces of three white women with disheveled blonde hair and dolphine eyes and bleeding lips” (27) and the compound is taken over by “spirits of the dead who speak with fulgent eyes” (254).

There are also instances of spiritual presence in *Infinite Riches*. Koto’s husband has “three fingers” (378) and the young “cultic priestesses in training ... Bore white basins with the legend ‘Koto’ on them (382). Pilgrims to Koto’s bar “came as ghosts first, a legion of shadow beings” made up of “the ghosts of sacrificed animals ... the spirits of the unborn ... spirit-children who were chained to one another and to one place” (213). These ghosts “came in silence, shadows without bodies, spirits without memory, and ghosts without dreams. They melted into Madame Koto’s bar and hung on the walls or floated in the air” (213-4).

Discussing Africa and evil tendencies in *Heart of Darkness*, G. D. Killam asserts: “Africa to Conrad, is an evil force which bends man to her dark purposes and reveals his dark soul ... the more powerful the servant of darkness he will become once his belief ... have collapsed” (85). The novels evoke aspects of Joseph Conrad’s perception of evil in *Heart of Darkness*. They are novels with the “vision of the evil which resides at the heart of human nature ...” (1). The thoughts of Koto, politicians, spiritual beings, etc in the story, fit into Killam’s opinion.

There is also the issue of Witchcraft in *Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches*. 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 became members of one secret cult or the other. This contributes to the many evil presences in the society.

Koto pours out incantations on a snake, “uttering strange sounds and a string of commandments at the snake ... the snake seemed to listen”. She is said to have “ritual power”. As the snake attacks her, Koto “seemed like someone else, like a secret self that we had never suspected was there, something quite monstrous, part-bull, part-

women, with black lips ...” (*Songs of Enchantment* 185). At death, she is attended to and buried by members of her cult group who perform the last rites for her led by the blind old man. Nobody except them witness “the secret preparations around Madame Koto’s body. We did not witness the plaiting of her hair ... And we did not know anything of the commotion that surrounded the construction of her coffin” (*Infinite Riches* 356). Azaro the spirit-child narrator confesses: “I dimly witnessed her initiation into the ancient cult” (361). Her bar he reveals, has “become a fantastical place of many spells” and he saw her women “who were now bar owners and cash-madams, all converts to her secret religion” (218).

Okri’s novels are 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 exploited by the powerful and the dubious. Koto and politicians are agents of exploitation in the story. Koto manipulates the destinies of 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. She preserves her life with the death of her driver. The narrator explains that she “had transferred her own death to her poor driver” (*Songs of Enchantment* 205). She asks the people:

What does it take to make you people fear me, eh? ... My enemies will turn to stone, will go mad, go blind, lose their legs and hands, forget who they are ... their wives will give birth to children who will torment them, and some will give birth to goats, rats and snakes. The rock is my power (191-2).

Her bar transforms into “an almost magical enclave”. Azaro laments that Koto “had completely entered the realm of myths. She was a colossus in our dreams; her power over us became demonic” (36).

In *Infinite Riches*, Dad cries out: “... our suffering is growing ... when our suffering will bear fruits?” (5). The suffering of the people in *The Famished Road* is still with them. Koto confesses to the people: “But, yes I sit on the head of my enemies. I take power where I find it and if you sleep and let your spirits float about unprotected, I will drink in their secrets” (30). Nkeonye Otafor must have had the likes of Koto in mind when he stated that men are “dominated by selfish drives” in their efforts to cheat and undo others. A society as the one Okri writes about “would stand on the abyss of moral nihilism” resulting in “chaos, disorder and meaninglessness” (39).

Politicians also bewitch the people with their gifts, to affect election rigging and to confuse them. They give milk to the people which turns 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. Dad laments thus in *Songs of Enchantment*: “That is how the powerful people keep us down. They keep us illiterate and then they deceive us and treat us like children” (8). Concerning their promises, he remarks that “they had heard ... promises a thousand times” (9). Rallies and campaigns are pretences. As Azaro puts it, “The forth-coming elections had already be forewon” (112). Dad regrets that, “there is a bit of madness in politics” (133). Power, he reasons “should be about freedom and food, not about frightening people into voting for one side or another” (123). Politicians are agents of evil intimidating the people to vote for them. Ernest Emenyonu sees them as “the ebullient, loquacious and grab-maniac politicians that succeeded the white imperialists ...” (107).

The driving force to politics is presented in *Infinite Riches* where future rulers of the people “dreamt of power. They dreamt of bottomless coffers to steal from. Houses in every famous city. Concubines in every major town” (11). In another part of the city, “they were relieving their ascension, their victories. Numbering their enemies. They were dreaming their nation-destroying policies in advance. Tribal dreams of domination that would ignite civil war” (12). As they “blared out their contradictory promises ... malnutrition devoured the children, while poverty crushed the hopes of the inhabitants, while the women grew haggard from the sunstroke, the crippling domestic duties and no freedom” (200). We find in these novels as B.E.C. Oguzie does in Festus Iyayi’s *Violence* that “the author articulates in strong terms the injustice meted out to the poor” (249).

Election malpractice is also the order of the day. People are not allowed to vote according to their consciences but are manipulated and deceived. Politicians exchange votes for gifts, ranging from milk to garri, money, etc. They go extra miles to win elections, visiting violence on the people, using their thugs. In these novels, violence is a weapon of politics. At the peak of their campaign, two parties clash. This is presented in *Songs of Enchantment*: “Everywhere the thugs of the two parties clashed in their endless war of mythologies. Everywhere machetes brought sparks, chantings became frenzied and people spoke of war as if it were a human being” (206). The suspended beating of Dad in the first episode of the trilogy is made good here: “And when they realized that Dad had been struck blind and when they saw him casting about, they set upon him with sticks and metals and proceeded to give him a savage beating” (217).

Human activities are brought to a standstill as the parties’ parade with their thugs and other agents of death. As the war of supremacy intensifies, “people bolted their doors. Children were forbidden to go out. Those who heard about the troubles in advance had fled to their villages” (*Infinite Riches* 251). Politicians were also boastful: “WE WILL CONQUER THIS COUNTRY! bellowed one of the men in a microphone ... VICTORY IS OURS ALREADY, WE HAVE WON ... THOSE WHO VOTE FOR US WILL ENJOY, THOSE WHO DON’T WILL EAT DUSTBINS” (261-2).

According to Ikenna Nzimiro, “The history of mankind has been one of conflicts often violent and bloody ... Man has been plagued by violence ... Human societies are therefore in constant conflict induced by ... search for material existence” (18). In the novels above, political parties outdo each other in violence to retain or clinch power and to excel in acquisition of material things.

A follow-up to the terror unleashed on the people is their brutalization by security personnel. These agents of the state take pleasure in battering the people. They masquerade as agents of peace and the law, but are actually partisan instruments 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. In the story, soldiers are seen hitting “women till they become a mass of writhing worms”. Azaro watches and confesses: “The pain went through me again and the scene transformed and I saw men bound to stakes, the great ocean behind them, soldiers with guns in front of them ... the soldiers shot the man ...” (*Songs of Enchantment* 88-9). Soldiers are seen “in armoured trucks rolling into the city ... till our history became an endless rosary necklace of them, each new bead an assassinated head of state, or the secret members of failed coup-plotters, executed at dawn” (89).

In *Infinite Riches*, the police let loose in the first episode of the trilogy return with their brutality. The carpenter dies in the hands of political thugs and Dad is arrested instead. Azaro states: “When I got home, five policemen, acting on rumours spread by the Party of the Poor had come to arrest Dad for the murder of the carpenter” (17). Eight women who went to the police station to look for Dad are arrested. The police also spy on Dad’s family. They watch every movement around his house: “Policemen in mufti would hang around outside our compound, watching our movements. The secret policemen spied on us, thinking we were agitators” (88). Azaro reveals.

In a rally organized by Koto’s party, security operatives go beserk and lash out at the people: “Soldiers with guns paraded the edges of the crowd. They also had batons and canes”. On their part, “policemen with riot helmets and guns and horsewhips were there too” (260). They seem to be at war with the same people they are paid to protect. 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 brutalize, 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.

No society is completely evil and that of Okri’s two novels is not an exception. There are some instances of good neighbourliness and love displayed by Dad and other characters. In *Songs of Enchantment*, Dad single-handedly fights vices in the society.

He takes on Koto, spirits, politicians, thugs, the police, landlords etc. He also steps up his good works for the people as he engages in community deliverance and restoration. Dad equally cleanses society of the stinking odour of the carpenter's corpse as he singly buries him in the forest. In order to bring hope to the hopeless, he forms a political party to counter the evils of other parties. His party gives the masses and the beggars hope and he promises to build a school for beggars. In his poverty, Dad also treats an old beggar-woman of her sickness.

People who live in the same compound with Dad rally round him when he is harassed by the landlord and they get the shylock and wicked landlord beaten up. In another instance, people of the street rise to Dad's rescue from Koto's thugs. At the close of this episode, Ade sees wise spirits on a journey to the world of men to teach them love. This is Okri's attempt to show that goodness will overcome evil. Ikenna Kamalu and Oyeh Otu see Okri's writings as creating "a picture of the hopelessness of life on one hand, and on the other he subverts it through a vision of hope and possibilities of change" (575).

The doors of Dad remains open in *Infinite Riches*. His arms remain outstretched to others in a show of love and brotherhood against the impunity of the ruling class and the powerful. Mum is not only loving and beautiful at heart, she is also caring, brave and courageous. She matches to the police station in search of her husband after his arrest and is joined by other women and school children. They end up releasing other police inmates.

During her protest against government establishments, again, other street women take care of her son, Azaro. The street people also boycott Koto's funeral. They refuse to cry for her death. Instead, they see it as a relief from her evil and tyrannical disposition. At the end, Koto is killed by members of her occultic group which signifies the exorcising of evil in the society. This agrees with the view of A.V. Ado et al, that the concept of goodness "reflects the ... elimination of the factors impinging upon human dignity and constricting opportunities for self-realisation" (168).

Jeremiah the photographer, intimidated out of the society by the police, reappears, records and publishes pictures of protesters against vices. He goes a step further and introduces a lawyer to Mum and other women to defend them while he provides his services free of charge. He also preaches social justice to the people. Azaro survives the spiritual and physical attacks by his spirit companions and Koto, thereby, overcoming the abiku phenomenon. The faces of women also become lighted from their husbands' look and their eyes shine as men "lost their vaguely stupid expressions". Azaro reveals that "an inexplicable pestilence had been lifted from our collective air" (*Infinite Riches* 392).

Writing on the duties of the people in an evil society, Joseph Omoregbe states thus: "... it is the duty of the society to prevent the strong, greedy and unscrupulous

few individuals from exploiting the weak and over-riching themselves at their (the weak) expense” (7). He continues: “Every men has a moral obligation to do good and refrain from evil” (19) because negative actions are “self-destructive...” (41).

The issues raised above suggest that the society of the novels is in bondage, visited and controlled by evil men and women, and other sundry forces which unleash various degrees of vices and evil on the people. This agrees with what is obtainable in our society today and herein lies the relationship between art and society.

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