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The Style of Ben Okri in *Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches*

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Abstract

This paper examines the style of Ben Okri in *Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches*. In many stylistic devices, the novelist makes a point against moral decadence in the society. The stylistic devices employed by Okri in the novels include: satire, register, cliché and pidgin. He also makes use of proverbs, figurative language, irony and symbolism. These literary devices enhance the aesthetics of the story and contribute to the understanding and enjoyment of the subject matter. They also shed light on the characters and the thematic focus of the author. Findings reveal a society overtaken by vices where the poor and the weak exist at the mercy of the rich and powerful. It is a society struggling under the grip of one moral decadence or the other. The novelist frowns at the moral decay of the society and recommends a morally balanced society devoid of corruption, injustice and inequality. The researcher also suggests an egalitarian and morally upright society for the good of all men.

Introduction

Literature presents life in a way to bring out the expected values in man. In Nigeria today, one reads and hears unbelievable and monumental stories of immoral and unethical behaviours of Nigerians. The media is inundated with stories of moral bankruptcies in economic, political, social and religious issues amongst our

countrymen and women. In contemporary times, the sanity of decent Nigerians is abused daily by what they see, hear, watch and read in the media concerning the persistent immoral attitudes of unrepentant Nigerians in their daily lives.

Unethical behaviour has since become the order of the day in Nigeria, manifesting in such vices as terrorism, militancy, religious and political crisis, rape, sexual promiscuity, embezzlement of public funds, lack of accountability and probity, assassinations, kidnapping, insurgency, political thuggery and godfatherism, etc. The list is exhaustible. Funds from oil and gas windfalls and excess crude incomes have not only made us lazy, but have increased corruption into the country.

Successive military and civilian administrations are yet to repent from embezzling Nigeria's oil and gas revenue. Each regime proclaims it will no longer be business as usual (an obvious indictment of a former administration for financial impropriety), only to be enmeshed neck-deep soon after in this "business" far deeper than the previous ones. In Nigeria today, there is also an upsurge in religious activities with Islamic and Christian sects increasing in number by the day. Disappointingly, one crime or the other is perpetuated not only in the larger society, but even in the mosques, churches and ministries.

Nigerian literary artists are not quiet over this situation. Our literature raises many issues of morality as represented in the works of Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Elechi Amadi, T.M. Aluko, Chimamanda Adichie and many others. This is also true of the writings of Ben Okri. His contribution in this regard in *Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches* is examined in his stylistic devices. Okri condemns vices in the society using the devices discussed in this paper. Outside the storyline, his style sheds light on his discourse of moral decadence in the society.

Stylistic Devices in *Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches*

Ben Okri employs many stylistic devices in *Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches*. The devices do not only enrich the works, but also enhance the readers' understanding and enjoyment of them. One such stylistic element is satire. M.H. Abrams defines satire as "the literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn, or indignation" (320). For Hugh C. Holman, satire is "A literary manner which blends a critical attitude with humour and wit to the end that human institutions or humanity may be improved" (473). Roger Fowler states that "In it the author attacks some objects using as his means wit or humour that is either fantastic or absurd" (167). As a form of writing, satire disapproves or ridicules persons, customs, ideas or objects, etc. It amuses while exposing vices, follies and stupidity. In employing humour, it derides and aims at waking men up to their responsibilities. The satirist therefore responds to the political and social events of his or her time.

In *Songs of Enchantment*, as the crowd chase after Ade, the narrator states: “while we pursued the deranged figure of Ade the diseased goats and chickens suffering from dropsy, stared at us” (195). The driver that fell Ade “had been seen wandering the streets talking aloud to everyone, recognizing no one, saluting and prostrating to goats, knocking away invisible flies from around his mouth.... He pursued chickens, calling them by the name of Madame Koto’s thugs and minions” (204). Koto’s thugs and guards are here likened to chickens who are not accommodated by the people. Like chickens, they constitute a nuisance to the environment. The people want them to be expelled from the society through their action.

The blind old man is also caricature in *Infinite Riches* as is the Governor-General turned writer. The old man is seen “stumbling down the street in his black hat, yellow sunglasses, red cravat and white suit” (176). This is a riot of colours. What is more, “He had a peculiar smile on his face revealing that most of his lower teeth were missing” (176). On his part, the Governor-General suddenly realizes the urge to leave the people he has exploited. He is completely depressed as he presses forward to trace the source of a melodious tune. The narrator states that a “yellow moth fluttered behind him... as he wandered towards the servants’ quarters” (184). This amounts to a ridicule of the Governor-General.

According to Abrams, a proverb is a “short, pithy statement of widely accepted truth about everyday life” (10). For Alex Preminger et al, it is “A traditional saying, pithily or wittily expressed” (994). Proverbs may be preserved by oral tradition or in written literature. They reveal a people’s culture and are expressions of witty, matured and experienced people. They also reflect the philosophic wisdom of our forebears and Bernth Lindfors suggests that proverbs “sound and reiterate major themes... sharpen characterization... clarify conflict, and... focus on the values of the society” (964). In addition, they imbue our speech with colour and beauty, wisdom of the old and intelligence.

In the novels under study, Okri laces their story with profound proverbs which add to their aesthetics. A blind old man tells Dad in *Songs of Enchantment*: “If you look too deeply everything breaks your heart” (34) and Dad reminds Azaro, his son: “Life is often like fighting and sometimes you have to draw power from your toes or from your heart” (44). The need for men to be accommodative is reflected in the proverb “the mind of man is bigger than the sky” (33).

In yet another proverb, a cross-eyed man warns: “WHEN A PERSON’S FAME REACHES ITS GREATEST AND STRANGEST HEIGHT, VACATE THE SCENE BELOW FOR THERE MIGHT SOON BE A GREAT CRASH” (172). Others follow: “All the songs in this world cannot stop the rush of a mighty ocean” (187); “Nothing creates more controversy than the truth” (209); “The dead are more alive than the living are” (231) and “When you see too much you become blind” (242). The

proverb “We had been living in death. Waiting to be born” (349) is presented in *Infinite Riches*. Others are: “After a great dream often comes great chaos” (228) and “... there is no greater breeding-ground for evil when a people’s reason falls asleep...” (329).

The novelist also makes use of figurative language. Holman defines this device as an

Intentional departure from the normal order, construction or meaning of words in order to gain strength and freshness of expression, to create a pictorial effect, to describe by analogy, or to discover and illustrate similarities in otherwise dissimilar things (223).

Figures of speech also referred to as tropes surprise and add something new to the way and manner language is used. Generally, they add to the aesthetics of language use and act as ornamental designs to beautify language.

The story of Azaro explored in Okri’s two novels under study begins with the imagery of the road in which life is compared to a river-road. There are other images: “When we were being taught mathematics under a dying silk-cotton tree the face of a penitent oppressor of our people stared at me from the trunk” (*Songs...* 4-5). The powers in the society are said to belittle others: “They keep us illiterate and when they deceive us and treat us like children” (8) and a “demon-girl moved into Dad’s spirit” (10). Dad describes Helen, a beggar as follows:

You have the head of a spaceship, your eyes are like those of the wonderful maiden of Atlantis, you belong to the angelic kingdoms beneath the sea. You are a moon-woman come to brighten the earth. Your skin looks like flowers from another planet. You are the mistress of beauty, princess of grace, Queen of the road (15).

Azaro also speaks of Dad’s love as “a love so powerful that it made him feel like a god” (17) and “the beggars were sprawled around him like gigantic insects in mid-transformation” (19). The beggars carry the body “of their wounded companion. Shuffling along on the rough earth, with their missing limbs, their soft-wax legs, their bulbous goisters, their monstrous faces of vegetables...” (21) and while “the forest is dreaming” (24), “the mighty sound of flowing waters, each wave murmuring with human laughter, gathered behind us, deep in the forest” (24). The creatures Dad saw in the forest reminds him “of green leopard referring to his defeat of the famous boxer from the land of the dead” (27).

The world Azaro presents in his story “seemed to be a nightmare of streets, a fiendish labyrinth of paths and cross-roads devised to drive human beings mad, calculated to get us lost” (32). With “his head bowed” (34), Dad looked “like a giant destroyed by the sun” (34) and the perfume of the prostitutes in Madame Koto’s bar

“was delicious to the nostrils and they bore themselves proudly, like a select people, or like members of a royal household” (36). Whereas “the owners of” loads kicked Dad “and called him a dog” (50), Azaro’s “teacher was a tortoise: (6).

In a rhetorical question, Dad asks in *Infinite Riches*: “when will our suffering bear fruit?” (5). A leopard is described thus: “It was old. Its eyes were like blue jewels” (8) whereas “Mum was dressed like a prophetess...” (13), “Madame Koto seemed quite insane” (15) and “was like a mad witch” (16). Dad states that “JUSTICE IS A BLACK GOD” (*Infinite...* 18) and also talks of “faces of erratic criminals. Some of them were evangelists” (26). In another simile, Koto’s cries were “like the sounds of certain musical instruments forbidden to human ears...” (28).

In a metaphor, the dead carpenter “had stones in his eye sockets... and his gleaming body was the colour of palm oil” (29). Reacting to Koto’s ravings the narrator says: “like statues, we stood entranced by the flame of her words” (33) and Dad “saw faces of flames. Saw wood as flames. Saw the air as incandescent...” (59). The noise made by men were noises like the mindless grinding of teeth” (62). At a point in his life, “voices hailed Dad, calling him a hero” (68) whereas “He seemed so like a barbarian on a battlefield” (69) in another instance.

Azaro describes the reception of the photographer thus: “The bustle of bodies, and the waving of hands sent shadows flying round our room like maddened birds” (72) because “He was like a man who had witnessed a terror greater than anything he had seen on earth” (73). In reaction to the euphoria of the return of the photographer, “One of the women referred to the elite society as vampires...” (73). Little wonder that “The forest has been singing” (77) and “The black rock had grown curiously bigger” (94). “The forest began to laugh as well... Africa is laughing at us” (105). On a good day, “Dad rose from his chair and polished his boots till they shone like new steel” (118).

In a display of fear, Azaro “was covered in sweat that felt like molten metal” (134) and when Dad sat down, “his face was like melting bronze. His eyes were large, his nostrils were like bellows... (134). “The eyes of the emerald leopard... were like diamonds” (143). Nature is also described as follows: “invading night was green. Far side of the sky was a blaze of gold and pink which I had never seen before. Red moon. Yellow stars” (63). A “blind old man tipped his hat at women like a perfect gentleman...” (*Infinite...* 177). Koto is again presented thus: “she floated around with the dignity of a great ship loaded with exotic gifts.... The whites of Madame Koto’s eyes were so white they seemed like moonstones...” (*Infinite...* 199). These images point to Okri’s dislike of instability and oddity in behaviour and dressing. They suggest the presence of disorder and lack of harmony among humans and natural phenomena.

In yet another use of imagery, the following is said of the photographer: “That man is a demon, he is evil” (*Infinite...* 281). A host of enraged women “bounded towards me (Azaro) like an avenging army. A conquering battalion” (*Infinite...* 295). “The earth had eyes, the trees had eyes, and the river had eyes too” (*Infinite...* 305). This is in line with the mystic, mythical and gothic style of Okri’s writing. Azaro also reveals: “Like a pilgrim with a happy destination in his heart, (he) set off along the road that only voices travel” (*Infinite...* 312-3).

Another presentation of Koto captures her strength and gait: “Madame Koto stood in a bold gesture, one arm raised, the pose of a warrior” (376) and the narrator speaks of their long lamentation: “Our eyes were dry as the hearts of impervious stories” (*Infinite...* 378). In an obvious reference to immorality amongst girls, they are described thus: “they hissed like snakes. They ululated” (*Infinite...* 383) and one of the girl’s “fine breasts were oiled and looked like polished mahogany” (*Infinite...* 383).

Northrop Frye traces the history of irony from Aristotle’s *Ethics* and sees it as a term which “indicates a technique of appearing to be less than one is, which in literature becomes most commonly a technique of saying as little and meaning as much as possible, or, in a more general way, a pattern of words that turn away from direct statement or its own obvious meaning” (40). Whereas Holman defines it as “A broad term referring to the recognition of a reality different from the masking appearance” (279), Fowler sees irony as “a mode of discourse for conveying meanings different from and usually opposite to the professed or ostensible ones” (101). According to him, “irony is thus an art of indirection and juxtaposition relying for its success on such techniques as understatement, paradox, puns and other forms of wit in the expression of incongruities” (102). Okri also makes use of this invaluable literary device to enrich his discourse.

In an ogre of hallucination in *Songs of Enchantment*, Madame Koto’s “Movements became both fluid and definite” (241) whereas “spiders had also been listening to Dad’s story” (46). In politics, “it wasn’t surprising that the Party of the Poor tried to intimidate us back into the fold but, it was surprising that they tried to use the methods of the other party (The Party for the Rich) to frighten us into remaining loyal” (248). In obvious reference to an evil-ridden society, Azaro remarks: “it is said people need magic more than they need food” (131).

In *Infinite Riches*, Dad shocks his son: “My son, I feel as if I have just died and yet I have never felt more awake” (7). Koto’s aura also speaks of irony: “all around her was the sweet staccato music of her praise-singers, a music so piercing that it seemed to speak of an imminent death or an abnormal birth” (200), and while “the women closest to Madame Koto started singing... without reason, she began to weep” (227). The irony of life is presented here. Koto wallows in opulence and self-deceit, but death comes calling at her sweetest moment. Again, “A white man turned into a tortoise...”

(285) and Azaro tells of “the most beautiful little girl in the world. She was dressed as if returning from a wedding feast” (166).

Holman sees symbolism as “the use of one object to represent or suggest another” (520) and Kola Ogungbesan states thus:

A work of art should speak for itself. Yet, because the more successful it is, the more symbolic it becomes, every work of art invariably carries more than one meaning. All the great creations of literature have been symbolic, and thereby have gained in complexity, in power, in depth and in beauty (93).

Okri also decorates the novels with symbolism. One of the striking symbols revolves around the spirit-child phenomenon known in Yoruba mythology as Abiku which “are wandering spirits born only to die young and then return to be born again to the same mother... theirs is a rebellious nature” (Oladele Taiwo 166). They are spirit children who oscillate between the world of the dead and the living. Azaro and Ade are the two indisputable abiku of the story under review.

Azaro symbolizes Nigeria. His experience is synonymous with the nations’ historical experiences. Like a child, a nation has the capacity for growth and development but ours as the novelist suggests neither grows nor advances. After birth, Azaro like Nigeria chooses to fight for existence. Though the status of nationhood was imposed on Nigerians by the colonialist, having become one nation, the people have continually resisted separation. Azaro is like a nation that runs in cycle of birth, betrayal and death.

The Road is also symbolic. The narrator explains that the stomach of the King of the Roads was washed off by the rains into the road and the King is the predator with insatiable appetite preying on everything and everyone for his own self-preservation. The Mighty Green Road stands for the unending “cycle of risings and fallings of hopes and betrayals of our society” (Felicia Moh 77). Generation after generation, we repeat the cyclic dance with more costly mistakes.

Traditionally, the road symbolizes the path of communal mode of transportation using the beasts of burden as the agent of transporting goods and services. It is the harbinger of colonial presence in Africa as well as a mediator in the people’s bid to communicate with their gods. It is used as a platform of sacrifices to the gods. The symbolism of the road is so important to Okri that he engraves it into the title of one of his novels, *The Famished Road*.

Madame Koto represents the exploitative class. She is a nou-veau riche who derives her affluence, joy and power by pauperizing the masses. The narrator reveals in *Songs of Enchantment*: “Soon after Madame Koto’s reappearance three trucks came

down our street and distributed powdered milk, flour and bags of garri to the different houses. They were from the Party of the Rich” (173).

In *Infinite Riches*, Azaro tells us:

The evening made the faces of the crowd into masks. There were a light wind and the universal commotion of traffic. Madame Koto got into a van with her protectors; the van drove through the crowd, cutting a path through the density of bodies.... I felt... terrified by the heated smells of their intolerable lives. Madame Koto’s van disappeared among the bodies (259).

Through her, Okri shows another angle of moral laxity in our society. In this society, power, respect and affluence are achieved through brute force and physical intimidation. She is the incarnate of the monster-predator King of The Road who must devour others to stay alive. Like Koto, Nigeria is also obese. She is large, grotesque and unwieldy. She sucks the blood of the young the same way the blood of youths are wasted today in Nigeria.

Dad is yet another symbolic personality. He is depicted as the conscience of society. He symbolizes the few in our society with human feelings who crave for justice and equity. He is also a symbol of revolution against his landlord, politicians, Koto, animals, thugs, spirits, etc. who he engages in boxing bouts and the society generally for maltreating the beggars. He fights injustice, poverty, corruption and deprivation. Okri uses him as a stereotype character who struggles against political and economic oppression.

On her part, Mum represents the suffering women. She is morally upright though decayed economically, unlike Koto who is strong materially but morally decayed. She directs her violence against the oppressor. Harassed and ejected from her stall, she hawks her wares in the streets and hardly makes sales. She maintains her morality in accommodating the beggars whereby displaying the virtues of brotherliness and warm-heartedness which the rich lack.

The symbol of the Old-Man-Child also portrays the vision of the nation. The beautiful Boy-King is capable of growth and has the resilience and energy of the lion, capable of a fulfilled life. Corruption and ineptitude on the part of government has transformed him into an ugly old man and his resources has become an anthill. He is symbolic of our nation which has become famished, a wasteland where nothing positive grows even with our abundant resources.

Jeremiah the photographer symbolizes the artist. With his camera, he records vices in the society and is arrested by the establishment for exposing it. As a prisoner of conscience, the people see him as their hero. He is not just a photographer, but a

recorder and preserver of social realities. He is a potent voice of the oppressed, brave enough to take photographs of the corrupt and dubious activities of politicians and other government agencies. The government and party thugs go after him and inflict wounds on him.

Okri's stylistic devices as exemplified above are appropriate to his characters, episodes and circumstances. Through these devices, a better understanding of the story is achieved, and meaning and aesthetics deepened.

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