

Review

Ben Okri's Literary Experience

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Ben Okri is a Nigerian poet and novelist. Okri is considered one of the foremost African authors in the post-modern and post-colonial traditions, and has been compared favorably to authors such as Salman Rushdie and Gabriel García Márquez. In 1991, Okri won the Booker Prize with his novel *The Famished Road*. Okri won the Booker Prize for his novel *The Famished Road* (1991), the story of Azaro, an abiku ("spirit child"), and his quest for identity. ... Although typically not overtly political, Okri's works nevertheless convey clear and urgent messages about the need for Africans to reforge their identities. Ben Okri has brought the essence of Nigerian storytelling to a worldwide literary audience. A novelist and poet of great critical acclaim, he has made a significant contribution to the contemporary African literary canon. Mr Okri's novel *The Famished Road* won the 1991 Booker Prize for Fiction.

Key words: post modern, identity, Booker Prize, urgent messages contemporary literature

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Background

Okri's Novels or works portray the essential link in Nigerian culture between the physical world and the world of spirits which is a part of yoruban folklore. Okri's characters are liminal, their identity is either destroys them or helps them. His characters take on mythical proportion and the readers know them for their actions that for their inner thought process. This collection treats eclectic themes which are dispersed within Okri's fiction such as violence, corruption, poverty ...etc . In addition to this, his characters look on in wonder when electricity, automobiles or other modern wonders arrive in their village. His characters understand the trends of events and strive to make change.

To shed the light on the various views stated about Okri's techniques that he uses in his themes and characterization, miscellaneous interpretations and elaborations will be carried out. Okri seems to hold the keys to the universe "the world is not as we see it, the world as we perceive it" Okri stated this point in conversation at university of lyon (2004) . Okri also hit on the same concept in his book TFR (2003) when he stated that as human "we need to develop a new seeing ...to look at the world with new eyes" ... to see with the heart, see right to the core.

Critics have praised Okri for his ability to creatively experiment with new literary forms where the themes and characters streamlining in aharmonical way. In an interview with Chinua Achebe, he suggested that "the torch of Nigerian literature was currently being passed on from his generation to a new younger generation of African writers. When asked to explain who represented this new generation, Achebe mentioned Ben Okri specifically". Achebe's tribute to Okri therefore not only draws attention to Okri's extraordinary talent but it also signals the emergence of anew younger generation of writers who are charting new directions for African literature.

Okri has additionally received praise for his use of surrealistic detail, elements of Nigerian story telling traditions. In conversation with Vanity Fair's Anderson, Okri says I 'think one thing you need to know about Africa, for it's a great literary tradition. it is impossible to grow in Nigeria without being told about the world. it's the stories that introduce the world to you, So, in a sense you grow up in a mythologized universe. In an interview cited in (www.Hongkong.journey to imagination.com) Okri says:

Story telling is the oldest technology in the world. As away of making sense of reality, to shape our future. stories affect the reality.

In addition to the use of surrealism in his novel, he uses western literary canon. the word or the term canon as wolfeys (2011:336) points to in literary studies refers "to great books or the works of others who are considered as central to a literary tradition". The canonicity of Okri manifests notably in his use of western literary techniques of Magical Realism (MR). MR is based on a rational view of reality and also on the acceptance of the supernatural as reality. Okri has been compared favorably to authors such as Salman Rushdi (Midnight's Children 1981) , and Gabriel Gracia Marquez (one Hundred years of solitude 1967) for using MR in their novels . Okri's novel (the Famished Road) sparks with Magical Realism. This matter also placing Okri's works firmly within the tradition of post-colonial writing and favourably comparing them to those of such esteemed Nigerian authors as Chinua Achebe. Critics cite the universal relevance of Okri's writing on political and aesthetical levels, as Okri's has written "politics take their place beside myth and facts, each one in turn has ascendancy . people can say this is a triumph for the African novel if it gives them comfort, but I say it is a triumph for the imagination, for what Baudelaire calls voluptuousness, the textures of our sensuality". However, Derek (1994: 185) sees this matter differently:

"The realism of Okri's novels differ from that of his literary predecessors who have written novels based on in a more familiar reality that also confronts this political and economic strife in Africa from Ngugi Wathiongo's Weep not , Child (1964) to Ayikwe Armah's , The Beautiful ones Are not yet Born (1968) to J.M coetsee's , Disgrace (1999)".

Some scholars and critics have noted that the seeming realism with which Okri depicts Abiku (the spirit child that born and dies repeatedly) as stated in his novel The famished Road (TFR) challenges the categorization as a post-modernist. However, for Okri, Nigeria is metaphorically an Abiku child who comes and goes at will. Despite the sufferings (violence, corruption, poverty) Abiku as Okri's voice believes that one day:

There will be changes. coups. soldiers every-where ...ugliness .. blindness and when people least expect it ; a great transformation is going to take place in the world ... suffering people will know justice and beauty . A wonderful change is coming from far away and people will realize the great meaning of struggle and hope, there will be peace, TFR (478).

Okri himself describes his fiction as obeying a kind of "dream logic" that answers the question of what is reality. Okri describes this as per (www.wikipedia) as follows:

"I grew up in a tradition where there are simply more dimensions to reality, Legends and myths and ancestors and spirits and death ... which brings the question: what is reality? Every one's reality is different, for different perceptions of reality we need a different language. We like to think that the world is factual and precise and exactly how we see it, but something erupts in our reality which makes us sense that there is more to the fabric of life , I'm fascinated by the mysterious element that runs through our lives".

Okri's language has been described as simple, lucid and image laden, it is use of language indicates his mastery of the English language and his indigenous language as well. Okri has eight novels to his credit, and two collections of poems and two collections of short stories, and a collection of essays.

Okri belongs to "Yoruba" (a tribe in the Eastern part of Nigeria. They have strong attachment to their ontological and cosmologic beliefs).

To be familiar with Okri as a creative and prolific novelist is to grasp his techniques of writing setting from his vision in stating his themes and characterization.

In this dissertation, different views are carefully stated and discussed with sufficient interpretation from the text where the author uses to express his view points on various representations and situations that African experimented in general and Nigeria in particular.

Statement of problem:

Undoubtedly, in a world marks with variation and cultural domination, only the creative writing, logical justification and profound visions that can help probe up the work, can stand tall and attract the people. The researcher believes that, the best way to understand Ben Okri's work is to expose to his way of thinking stemming from his literary movement of post modernism and post-colonialism. So, the researcher states that having thorough knowledge of Okri's work and his aims of using certain themes (violence, poverty, corruption) and characterization will help removing ambiguity. To make this matter, possible, the researcher is going to do a comprehensive analysis of these two elements (themes and characterization) in the three selected novels, namely, Flowers and Shadows (FAS), The Famished Road (TFR), and songs of Enchantment (SOE), Which are the base of this dissertation.

Questions of the study:

The study under investigation aims to answer the Following questions:

- 1\ Are there any common themes used in Okris 's novels?
- 2\ Are there any common characterization features in Okri's novels ?
- 3\ Are the themes and characterization in harmony ?
- 4\ Does Okri have any contributions to African literature ?

Objectives of the study:

The study under question endeavors to explore the themes and characterization in Ben Okri's three selected novels, namely, "FAS" , "TFR" , and "SOE" . In addition, the exploration of the harmonical uses of the themes and characterization in the selected novels. Moreover, it highlights the contributions of Ben Okri to African literature .

Rationale of the study

The facts behind choosing these novels "FAS" , "TFR" and "SOE" they shed the light on the question of the study which concerns with themes and characterization in Ben Okri's novels. In addition, the three selected novels reflect the scenario and history of the colonialism and the civil war in Nigeria and the challenges the Nigerian faced in terms of violence, poverty and corruption (political, administrative , moral , financial) which will be the intended themes of this research . Moreover , the author has artistically portrayed the characters who deal with dualistic behaviour and sometimes violent or ordinary and their identity either destroys them or help them and in a way that making the themes vivid and effective to draw effective to some irresolvable issues such as (violence , poverty and corruption) which are the topics of an hour now a days . Not only these, but also the three novels have received local and international recognition and contributed to African cultural renaissance by questioning the politics of Nigerian in particular and the African post-colonial in general. So, this study is a contribution to review themes and characterization in the three selected novels.

Significance of the study

The researcher believes that, this study under question has great significance because it focuses on one of the prolific and talented African writers who has globally been recognized through his thematic representation, characterization and his technique of writing setting from his literary movement of post modernism and post – colonialism which have created harmony in his novels. In addition, Okri is categorized as a contemporary hybridized novelist who has managed through his literary artistic and creative style of surrealism or magical realism to find a place on the universal literary scene. His themes touch human current problems directly such as identity, love, corruption, reality. poverty, violence and alike. Moreover, his writings have compelled the European and African critics to appreciate him as a creative novelist. consequently, he has received numerous international prizes, and his works have been translated into more than twenty languages. Furthermore, Ben Okri's is said to be the leading contemporary practitioner who has largely affected by the works of Amas Tutuola (one of the most enigmatic figures in the history of modern Nigerian literature). Therefore, it is logical to benefit from his precious treasure of literary art and from his lively themes such as freedom, identity, violence,

corruption, change...etc. Not only these but also his technique of depicting his characters is of great significance and creates harmony for the intended themes and characterization. These novels can be taught at schools and universities to instill the sense of belongingness and, unity and identity in the coming generations. Besides, African leaders and politicians have to read these novels to find suitable solutions for the social, political and economic problems in their countries, such as violence (resulting from wars, sectarianism and tribalism) poverty due to instability and economic turmoil and corruption whether (political, social, administrative, moral or financial). So, this study is of great value not only for the students, leaders, politicians and readers as I have mentioned above, but also for critics who will dig deeper to bring out the dimond in Ben okri's novels as well as it is of great value to those who are concerned with literary studies worldwide and because also this is the first thesis ever written in Okri's themes of (violence, poverty and corruption) in particular along with characterization. Other theses focus on other literary devices.

Theory of theme

'Theme' is very important device in any literary work. It is a central idea or statement that unifies and controls an entire literary work. Theme is the author's way of communicating and sharing ideas, perceptions, and feelings with readers. The theme can also be defined as the meaning of a story, what it reveals about human nature.

The 'theme' is a story's underlying message, or 'a big idea'. In other words, what critical belief about life is the author trying to convey in the writing of a novel, play, short story or poem? This belief or idea transcends cultural barriers. It is usually universal in nature. When a theme is universal, it touches on the human experience, regardless of race or language. It is what the story means. Often, a piece of writing will have more than one theme (what is the theme in literature. www.study.com).

As per (www.theme.wikipedia.org) in contemporary literary studies, a theme is the central topic a text treat. Themes can be divided into two categories: a work's thematic concept is what readers "think the work is about" and its thematic statement being what the work 'says about the subject'.

A theme is also defined as per (www.litcharts.com) as universal idea, lesson, or message explored throughout a work of literature. One key characteristic of literary themes is their universality, which is to say that themes are ideas that not only apply to the specific characters and events of a book or play, but also express broader truths about human experience that readers can apply to their own lives. All works of literature have themes. The same work can have multiplied themes.

The most common contemporary understanding of theme is an idea or point that is central to a story, which can often be summed in a single word (for example, love, death, betrayal). Typical examples of themes of this type are conflict between the individual and society, coming of age; Humans in conflict with technology, nostalgia, and the dangers of unchecked ambition. A theme may exemplified by the actions, utterances or thoughts of a character in a novel. Such as the thematic idea of loneliness in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. A story may have several themes. Themes often explore historically common or cross culturally recognizable idea, such as ethical question, and are usually implied rather than stated explicitly (ibid).

Themes are sometimes divided into thematic concepts and thematic statements. A work's thematic concept is the broader topic, it touches upon (love, forgiveness, point, etc.) while its thematic statement is what the work says about that topic. For example, the thematic concept of a romance novel might be love, and dependency on what happens in the story, its thematic statement might be that "love is blind" or that "you can't buy love". Themes are almost never stated explicitly. It can be cited in theme (www.literarydevice.com) that as a literary device, theme is the central topic or idea explored in a text, usually the theme of a work of literature can be stated in one word, such as "love" or "poverty". A word of literature can, and often does have more than one theme. The theme is generally not stated explicitly in the text, but instead is expressed through the character's actions, words, and thoughts.

Theory of characterization

Characterization is the most important element in the composition of any short story or novel. It is the process of conveying information about characters in narrative or dramatic works of arts or everyday conversation which is distinctive of each character according to way of expression which will help in portraying the characters or interpreting or communicating certain values and messages to readers.

Historically, realistic characterization has only intermittently been considered an essential part of good writing. At times when allegory and didacticism become more important than realism. Characterization disappears. For example.

Chaucer's the Canterbury tale, began in 1387, has considerably more individualized and realistic characterization than the anonymously written works which were composed only a few years later. Shakespeare's works, written between the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth, have subtle characterization while pilgrim's progress, written in 1678, has virtually none.

The term has its derivation from the word "character", which is etymologically, derived from the ancient Greek word "Kharacter". The earliest use in English, in this sense, dates from the restoration period, although it became widely used after its appearance in Tom Jones in 1749 (Astone and Savona, 1991 and Harrison, 1998).

Baldic (2001:37) says:

"In literature, including African literature, a character is a restoration of a person in a narrative or dramatic work of art such as a novel, folktale, play or film. It is a mode of communication or vehicle which conveys special message from the author/narrator to the reader/audience which denotes that characters are the basis from which themes of a novel or work intentions of the author are drawn. Since 19th century, the art of creating characters, as practiced by actors had been called characterization"

Character development is very important character-driven literature, where stories focus not events, but on individual personalities. Classic example in African literature include Solomon Mutsaers' "Devil Thrown, (1956)". Wilson Chakaip's "The lonely One of the ten arrows, 1958" and Wilson Katiyo's "A son of the soil, (1976)".

It is true to say that historically; stories and plays focusing on characters became common as part of the 19th century Romantic Movement and character-driven literature rapidly supplanted more plot-driven literature that typically utilizes easily identifiable archetypes rather than character development.

In African literature before colonialism, characterization served mainly as a didactical mode to perpetuate African's indigenous knowledge system and moral values. Even the first generation writers continued to use characterization as a didactical tool; but abusively as a tool to downplay African traditional religion and all traditional systems that belong to Africa.

Characterization has been used in African literature, particularly oral literature, since the time immemorial. As Baldic (2001:39) notes: "characterization was not only a subject or aesthetic consideration but has positive epistemological and moral impact to the audience"

As cited in wikispaces.com Bernardo, (2013) says that,

"What does characterization do for a story? In a nutshell, it allows us to empathize with the protagonist and secondary characters, and thus feel that what is happening to these people in the story is vicariously happening to us: and it also gives us a sense of verisimilitude, or the semblance of living reality. An important part of characterization is dialogue, for it is both spoken and inward dialogue that affords us the opportunity to see into the characters hearts and examine their motivations. In the best of stories, it is actually characterization that moves the story along. Because a compelling character in a difficult situation creates his or her own plot"

Martin (1998: 7) explains the historical background of this term by stating that:

"....since the end of the 18th century, the phrase 'in character', has been used to describe an effective impersonation by an actor. Since 19th century, the art of creating characters, as practiced by actors or writers has been called characterization".

Here Martin seems to be more concerned with previous two quotations, the device of 'characterization' and its eventual development as a literary term. Indeed, the term has number of definitions.

Beatty (2002: 222) defines characterization as "the art or craft method of presentation or creation of fictional personage that involved in a similar process".

Martin (1998: 51-2) on the other hand, defines characterization by saying:

"Characterization is the art of creating characters for narrative including the process of information about them".

Senngupta (2011) is inclined to discuss characterization in Buzz.com. He thinks that: "characterization is one such literary device used randomly in almost every literary work to define the attributes of characters either directly or indirectly".

Farlex (2009) as cited in Wikipedia Encyclopedia provides the following definition: "characterization is a representation of a character or characters on the stage in writing, especially by imitating describing actions, gestures or speeches".

However, Wiedhardt cited in (www.readwritethink.com) believes that: "characterization is the representation of persons in narrative and dramatic works".

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