



Emergence of 'Upwake' towards Decolonizing Nigeria in Ben Okri's *The Freedom Artist*

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Abstract:

Ben Okri, the well known eminent story teller and Booker prize winner produces the fiction *The Freedom Artist* (2019) with a deep and intense political thought. The fiction stands unique in the handling of two different narrations: one related to an African mythology and the other blended with an European style. The controversial issues that emerges in the usage of the terms 'freedom', 'liberty' and 'self' in the conversations among the individuals express the inevitable supremacy that underlies in the postcolonial nations. Besides being a writer who integrates myth and fantasy in his fiction, Okri's agony to exist in an imperialistic society is resonated in this fiction. He digresses from being a mere story teller and enters into a zone of seriousness in forecasting a hard reality of the postcolonial nations. This article centralizes the various forms of authoritative governance in a postcolonial nation and implies on the necessity for decolonization. Okri prompts to expose the dominance behind the political freedom and insists on an evolutionary change for further development. He exhibits the social manacles that seize people in a mentally anomalous condition. Having shown the different perceptions of the dominative strategies imposed by an invisible Hegemony, Okri instigates for an 'Upwake' and 'Uprise' from the spiritual sleep. The aim of this article is to project the immediate reality of a formerly colonized nation and expose the suggestive ways recommended by Ben Okri to form a regenerated society with a meaningful independence.

Keywords: Hegemony, Postcolonial, Decolonization, Liberty, Upwake

“It is not a dead society that we want to revive ... It is a new society that we must create, with the help of all our brother slaves, a society rich with all the productive power of modern times, warm with all the fraternity of olden days” (Cesaire 52). Aime Cesaire’s anticipation of a new society goes synchronous with the expectations of Ben Okri where he tries to integrate the ancient African virtues along with modern reality. Okri begins his writing career as a fourteen year old boy and it is his milestone to write about an ideal Nigerian society free from corruption, political underplay and poverty. As a blooming writer, he is able to recognize a clear distinction between the rich and the poor Nigerians. He traces the issues of supremacy, manipulation and bribery existing between the elite intellectuals and the natives. In this juncture, he questions that extant condition of independence in Nigeria. Hence, as a diasporic writer and postcolonial thinker, he attempted to analyze the validity of political freedom in Nigeria through his fiction *The Freedom Artist*.

Okri’s construction of the title for his recent fiction *The Freedom Artist: Who is the Prisoner?* implies the ironical truth behind a formal political Independence. While the fiction eponyms about a free citizen, Okri forms a subtitle asking ‘Who is the Prisoner? He corroborates the position of a liberated artist in a postcolonial society. The image of the unrecognized authoritative power that holds the people as prisoners, identifying the prisoners and providing a spiritualistic and moralistic way to unfetter them implicates the main theme of the fiction. Though moves in two different streams, the converging point of these narratives give out a better resolution for the issues of a colonized nation.

The ‘overture’ in the fiction describes the illusion of freedom as Okri says it’s “an age of disquiet” (*TFA* 5). Okri reminds the readers of Ngugi Wa Thiongo’s words. Thiong’o says in his work *Home Coming*, “No country can consider itself politically independent for as long as foreign interests dominate its economy and culture” (28). Okri projects one such society that exposes the governance by foreign powers. He exhibits the hardest reality of the society as he says, “all are born in prison” (*TFA* 3) and provides various forms of prisons. He says that the prison is “the body” (*TFA* 6), the earth, the universe and “the world” (*TFA* 8) “The world is a succession of prisons (*TFA* 15). He further describes that several other constraints like culture, heritage and traditions of a particular nation can also be accommodated under prison. Okri by mentioning the various definitions of prison questions the effect of political independence. According to Okri, the society which is in prison needs to be liberated. He portrays an epilogue of the condition of newly liberated nation under prison as,

Anything could be a crime: derivation of normal thought, unusualness in dress, questions about the nature of time, speculation about the nature of the soul, painting that distort reality, writings that cause unease, the inclination to think too much ... Ideas were communicated in grunts. Shrugs and facial expressions were the new vocabulary.

(*TFA* 8-9)

Elleke Boehmer in *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* explains about the condition of decolonization. He says, “power hierarchies inherited from the colonizer have remained more or less intact; where in the face of state corruption and repression national independence has proved a farce” (212). According to Boehmer, decolonization is a fantasy in a postcolonial society. The national independence did not change the condition of a nation rather the hierarchy imposed by the colonial authority remains undamaged by the native elite society.

Okri having explained about the existing imprisoned situation of a newly independent nation. He describes the quest of the protagonists of the fiction Mirababa and Karnak. The loss for Mirababa and Karnak stimulated them to find the connotation of freedom. Their search for the loved ones heaves to a serious note when they become aware of an assumed ‘Hegemony’ and they realize that what they are seeking is beyond comprehension. While Mirababa prefers a spiritual emancipation, Karnak’s quest travels to unravel the identity of the ‘Hegemony’ to form an egalitarian society.

The revelation of the speculated ‘Hegemony’ made Mirababa and Karnak to break it by employing two schemes. While Mirababa employs a spiritual quest for shattering the authority, Karnak involves in a more realistic manner. Okri contextualizes the similarity of Mirababa’s search with Karnak’s search. The different dimensions of the society are explained through the suggestive ways undertaken by Karnak and Mirababa. The belief in the ancient cultural custom and the certainty in forming a rationalistic world offer an integrated tone of magical realism in the fiction. The inspiration for Mirababa to engross a spiritualistic way is seen from his grandad’s words,

Everyone has sought this elixir called freedom. They have sought it for thousands of years. There have been rumours that one unique person found it and passed on the secret in clues hidden in the ancient myths ... Find the elixir of freedom, and bring it back to the people, that we may all be free” (TFA 16).

Mirababa’s interest in the ancient cultural myths influenced him to read the manuscript of his grandad. The reading of the manuscript “*The Legend of the Prison*” (TFA 26) separates his soul from his body and ultimately he begins his imaginative journey along with the bards. The bards attempted to emerge a new myth maker in the society. Mirababa also observes the belief of the bards that “The old man’s death was the beginning of the boy’s life” (TFA 27). Throughout the travel, Mirababa meets many new strangers like bards, a young girl, a giant, a colossus, and finally he was taken to a mountain where he understands the book of destiny. Okri’s instruction that Mirababa receives to ‘go in’ insists on the spiritualistic awareness that every Nigerian failed to perceive.

Okri views the postcolonial society with an eternal darkness and he suggests that it would diminish ““when one person wakes up”” (TFA 53). The idea of waking up from sleep does not represent the physical slumber rather it signifies a spiritual

sleep that every people undergoes while walking with their eyes open. Ultimately, when Mirababa receives the notion of 'wake up', he questions "'Who am I?'" (TFA 91) The inquiry upon his own identity made him content and he arrives to a realization that the incapability of the individuals to ask this question made the world a prison.

Okri's insistence on the spiritual world gets redundant in his '*abiku*' trilogy, where he insists on the existence of the spiritual world in this fiction. The moment Mirababa meets the colossus, he comprehends an outlook on the space beyond the human world. Mirababa existing in that space looks down upon the miseries of the human world and attempts to understand the reasons for their sorrows. When he resolves to find the elixir of freedom, he was taken to a mountain by the bards and he was locked up in a sarcophagus. Inside the sarcophagus, Mirababa finds a way to get out but when he realizes it is an impossible fact of coming out he accepts the situations saying, "'Darkness is the same within or without. I will shut my eyes. My own darkness is familiar to me'" (TFA 127). Okri represents the approach of many postcolonial individuals in the society. Many people accept the darkness and had stopped asking questions.

However, Mirababa's condition is not the same. He gets reminded of the words of his grandad who inspired him to find elixir of freedom. He remembers the urge to 'Upwake'. Mirababa's realization of the word made him to come out of the sarcophagus and ultimately he understands the power of the word. He comes to a conclusion that when a human being gets spiritually awakened from the sleep he could easily break the clutches of the world and could be able to come out of the prison. Okri appeals to the strengthening of the spirit by keeping it more alert and watchful.

Mirababa in his spiritual journey could be able to encounter the values of the spiritual world inspiring the human world. Okri tries to reveal the fact that when a spiritual world is able to influence the human world, the vice versa is also possible. Hence, Okri insists of a spiritual 'Upwake' in the fiction. In the viewpoint of Ben Okri, the spiritual awakening to look things deeper can help in decolonizing the Nigerian society from Hegemony. The grandad of Mirababa also tells him that the initiator of this spiritual awakening could be done by a child (Mirababa), a madman (people in the psychiatric hospital), a woman, a girl (Ruslana), a lover (Amalantis Karnak's lover), a thief. The continuation of the narration from Mirababa's spiritual quest to Karnak's realistic quest is clearly seen when Mirababa's grandad had told him about the loss of Kranak's lover Amalantis.

When a small boy Mirababa had undertaken a spiritual journey, it is at the other end Karnak had lost his lover Amalantis. Amalantis was taken away by the authorities for thinking about 'Freedom'. Amalantis and Karnak lived in a society where "any tale, ancient or modern, that extolled originality was forbidden ... uniqueness, individuality, curiosity became invidious qualities. They made enemies of the state" (39). As a child, she was quite weird in her behaviors. She predicted the future and explained the dreams of her parents. Though the parents were not

successful in understanding her, they did not refuse the attempt. As she grew, she found out that she is imprisoned within her. After she was taken away by the authorities, Karnak begins his search and comes across a book shop girl Ruslana. Ruslana's only motive in her life was "to overthrow the Hierarchy, destroying thee tyranny" (209). When the whole world considers "reading as a suspicious activity ... To read books was considered dangerous" (93), it was Ruslana who preserved the ancient myths and older books. She even explains to Karnak the reasons for the loss of books. She points out that book is the initiator of thinking; they give out originality and innovation which the 'Hegemony' is contempt of. Ruslana further exposes the ideas of the world to Karnak. She says,

Poetry died. People couldn't think symbolically. They turned against myth. Realism became the only truth. The written word became poorer than conversation. It was no longer necessary to read because books no longer nourished, they only informed. But technology could do that more easily. (104)

Surviving in this world, Ruslana with the help of her father preserves the ancient myth that had been recorded in books. Through Ruslana, Karnak understood that the Hierarchy had restricted the people to ask questions believing that asking questions would ultimately make them disobey the Hierarchy. Karnak decided that it is his ambition to break down the Hierarchy. However through the mob he understood that the Hierarchy remained invisible for generations as Okri says, "No one knew what the Hierarchy looked like. The people had been governed by them for generations, but they had never seen those who governed them" (326).

The appearance of Hierarchy was only felt by the populace and they know that they are governed by some force as "it was the power that governed, dictated, enforced" (326). When the people came to know that the Hierarchy is going to make its first appearance in the mountains, everybody gathered. They could not believe the fact that they were the Hierarchy and their faces resembled those who governed. When they understood that they were the Hierarchy, they recognized the flaw that had been committed in the past. When the banner 'UPRISE' was held forth by Ruslana, the bookshop girl and Karnak the mob began to think factually.

Okri insists that individual thinking and independent comprehension is important for a contemporary society. When people are held up with several prisons of life, the fact of independence becomes a myth. Okri through the integration of spiritual awakening and social consciousness insists on an uprising that would decolonize the society from the rich and the powerful. Through the perceptiveness of the political, social and economical conditions, Okri believes that decolonization is possible. Thus, he attempts to exhibit a completely independent nation free from the clutches of technology and westernization by spiritually instigating the power of realizing the milieu within and without.

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