



## **Social Contradictions and Change in Okri's *Dangerous Love***

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### **ABSTRACT**

Ben Okri is one of Africa's most experimental contemporary novelists in the Magical realist tradition through which he has carved a niche for himself. In this paper we critically interrogate his utilization of the magic realist form in *Dangerous Love* to examine the theme of contradiction and love. Through a Marxist dialectic perspective, the paper finds a parallel between the setting of the novel (Lagos City) and the wider Nigerian postcolony. Also through this materialist reading, we uncouple the post-independent realities laden in a seemingly fantastic narrative, which has extended a tradition traceable to Amos Tutuola, D.O. Faguwa and Wole Soyinka in Nigerian Literature. By applying a dialectical reading to the magical realist narrative the paper concludes that there is a thin line that separates the oddities represented in Okri's narratives and the everyday realities in the Nigerian postcolony.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Karl Marx maintains that with the possible exception of the societies of pre-history all the historical societies contain basic contradictions, which means that they cannot survive forever in their existing forms. These contradictions involve the exploitation of one social group by another. "In feudal society, Lords exploited their serfs; in capitalist society, employers exploit their employees. This creates a fundamental conflict of interest between social groups since one gains at the expense of another" (qtd in Horalambos and Holborn 200). Marx sees history as divided into a number of time periods or epochs, each being characterized by a particular mode of production. Major changes in history are the result of new forces of production.

Thus the change from feudal to capitalist society stemmed from the emergence, during the feudal epoch, of the forces of production of

industrial society. This results in a contradiction between the new forces of production and the old feudal relations of production. Capitalist industrial society requires relations of production based on wage labour rather than the traditional ties of lord and vassal. When they reach a certain point in their development the new forces of production will lead to the creation of a new set of relations of production. Then, a new epoch of history will be born which will sweep away the social relationships of the old order. These explanations illustrate the contradictions inherent in the social order of capitalist is the foundation of Karl Marx's Dialectical Materialism, where an antithesis cancels or nullifies an existing thesis resulting in a synthesis. This process occurs and re-occurs by building further contradictions, allowing each time for the emergence of a new order superior to the present one.

Paulo Freire (1993) sees contradiction as the dialectical conflict between opposing social forces inherent in the socio-political and economic structures of the society. Explaining the term further, John Peck and Martin Coyle (1993) posit that contradiction reflects in situations that are incoherent and divided and these features undermine an apparent tranquility. It occurs when one is faced with two or more differences in the society that cannot be reconciled. These differences are often seen between composite social elements in our society. The progressive elements within the social forces are in pursuant of societal wellbeing or positive change while the oppressors advance contradictory perspectives that engender hardship. Thus to Peck and Coyle (1993), the ideas of contradiction are often used by critics when exploring the politics and ideology of a text.

Social contradictions therefore are those contradictions in the society, which inhibit the liberties or freedom or a great majority of the population. It manifests through sufferings of the people and denies them avenues for self-fulfilment and self-expression. It inhibits their struggle for the derivation of maximum benefit from the society. They manifest through corruption in the land, receiving money to pervert the course of justice, making justice inaccessible, making the weak constantly susceptible to insecurity in terms of lives and property and in terms of job situations. It also manifests when it violates individual or basic group rights by ways of lack of freedom of expression, thoughts and actions. They are manifestations of socio-political arrangements that create conditions of inequality, exposing one segment to suppression and oppression by another segment as well as socio-

political arrangements that do not create conducive environment for human development.

The list of what constitutes social contradictions is not exhaustive. They are contradictions because they do not operate in harmony with basic expectations of justice, equity and good conscience. In other words, they are manifestations of an unjust arrangement, be it social, political or economic. In such circumstance, there will be agitation for change of all such structures that are inimical to man so that in their places, new ones will be created with the sole purpose of reversing this condition. Such deviation from socio-cultural norms is often resisted by the literary artist who uses his various art forms to redirect and reposition society for renewal. This supports Udentia's (1993) assertion that literature as a reflection of social reality and as a specific form of social consciousness, "...reinvigorates our sense of perception through the representation of certain social contradictions prevalent in our life and body politics, so that we think our means of imparting dynamism and change in the social social order".

#### **Social contradictions and change in Okri's *Dangerous Love***

In 1996, Ben Okri published one of his most popular novels, *Dangerous Love*. The novel, in a way, is a re-writing and re-visioning of *The Landscape Within*, a work published fifteen years earlier. Okri had stated in many contexts that he felt that *The Landscapes Within* was an incomplete book and was not up to the mark due to the lack of craft and finesse of a young writer. He expressed his relief for having "at last managed to free the spirit" of his earlier novel through the publication of *Dangerous Love*.

In this novel, Okri narrates the story of a young man, Omovo an office-worker and artist who lives at home with his father and his father's second wife, Blackie. In the communal world of the compound in which he lives, Omovo has many friends and some enemies. Most important of all his friends is Ifeyinwa, a beautiful young married woman whom he loves with an almost hopeless passion. Ben Okri in this novel recreates a vivid picture of Nigerian life. The life of the "compound settlement" with its complete lack of privacy, the gossip, the good times, the street life, the complex nature of family relationships and the kindness and treachery of friends. The compound in which Omovo lives is filled with unpleasant filth, stench, slime and noise:

*The airless trapped heat, the stuffy smells and the bustling noises crowded his senses. The cement ground was grey, dirty and full of potholes. Above the sky could be seen through the corrugated eaves... men were having an argument about something in the newspapers. Their nostrils flared angrily, arms were flung about, voices clashed (Okri 1996).*

The compound which is made up of twin strips of bungalow, filled with scum pools and dirt depict the poverty-stricken level of the “lesser” members of the Nigerian society who are denigrated and segregated as a result of the political leadership of the nation's “rich” who squander Nigeria's mass resources and treasury and perpetrating hunger and squalor among the ruled.

*Dangerous Love* is not just a story but is richly textured about the artistic crisis of Omovo. It is a moving narrative of what confronts African women seen through the eyes of a boy entering manhood. Arranged marriage, little education, wife battering, ritual killings, all tear one's mind as one reads. Then, there is the perceptions of what it means to grow up, defines one's manhood, earn a living, encounter friends who make hard existential choices like oneself in a confused third world setting. The painter hero, Omovo, deals with his tormented past and his uncertain future, while trying to find himself in the now and by metaphorical extension Nigeria itself.

At the heart of this hypnotic novel is a love story and the mystery of that love. Omovo has a doomed affair with Ifeyinwa, a young, beautiful and married teenager. Her husband, Takpo, is violent. She dreams of cutting his throat with a knife, perhaps as a way of venting her anger. The dream world becomes a context to compensate for her powerlessness. The love affair of Omovo and Ifeyinwa thrives in a setting which makes the tragedy of their relationship part of a broader movement of 'Loss and Change'. For this is a post-independence industrializing nation that has sucked peasants off the land and packed them into the sprawling slums of the capital. These dispossessed underlings struggle to survive in a world made miserable by petty officialdom, corrupt police officers and shady business men (Okri 1996). In the violent lives of the ruled exude the stench of crushed hopes and opportunities. This is evident in the discourse between Omovo and his manager at the chemical company where he works:

*... as matter of fact your salary has been increased... But you've been transferred to our mile twelve Branch... Meanwhile you give your nephew the benefit of employment. Well I'm not accepting the transfer. It's spiteful... Excellent. Put in your letter of resignation with immediate effect (Okri 1996).*

Omovo loses his job occasioned by the undue pressure on him by Mr. Akwu, his manager. His crime being that he refuses bribe from Mr. Babakoko and turns down his “request”. Omovo hopes are dashed after seeing the Ebony Gallery manager and Government officials seize his painting from the exhibition that Dr. Okocha has talked him into participating.

Why did you do that painting? You are a reactionary. You want to ridicule us eh?... You mock our independence. You mock our great progress... you are a rebel. Why did you shave your head? That's freedom, isn't it? Does it offend the National progress? Then we are going to seize this painting (Okri 1996).

He resigns from his poorly paid work at his office, refuses to accept bribe and he feels free. As a young man on the verge of adulthood, survival is a struggle and Omovo contains with hunger and disease and violence. He lives with his father who accuses his late mother of being the cause of his lag in life, in a poor neighbourhood of Lagos. With his talents as an artist, he aspires to a better life, he is always hunted by the uncertainty of that life. His colleague friends: Keme, Dele and Okoro, use the opportunities offered by education to improve their material position. Though dissatisfied, Omovo wants to paint pictures that show the corrupt and oppressive reality of Nigeria in the aftermath of the civil war. He wants greater personal and emotional freedom than anything he sees in the tense and destructive pattern of his own family life. His mother died of an incurable disease. His murderous father remarries an adulteress, while his elder brothers, Okur and Umeh abandon their home and leave for an unknown destination.

Okri's *Dangerous Love*, like his other novels, is remarkable in the sense that the novel treats diverse themes such as post-colonialism, modernism and the Nigerian civil war. His experiencing the civil war as a young child shaped Okri's desire to write on it. He recounts his horrendous experience of the war through his hero, Omovo, who tells Dr. Okocha:

*...like something I saw during the civil war... I heard gunfire far away, I heard people screaming. I had this desire to see things. I had this wanderlust. I was a child and war did not make sense to me. I thought that was only a game that children played... I saw the corpse of a dead man... his body had begun to swell. His stomach was a mess of flesh and green blood. He stank. The flies were thick all over him (Okri 1996).*

The horrific imagery of that war hunts Omovo, having witnessed the

great chaos and utmost disarray. He saw people get killed and having to hide. There was a lot of cowardice, people betraying one another out of fear. He saw blood, human blood being spilled like it did not matter at all.

Okri uses realism in *Dangerous Love* as a tool for communication. Omovo's paintings also become a medium for realizing that realism as they are used to capture the evils in his society. It is through him that Okri draws our attention to the realistic aspects of the lives of the poor masses, the corruption in the society, the injustices, the struggle for human survival, the groaning and yearnings of the dissatisfied, the despair and the hopelessness of their existence. He, Omovo, pours out his agony in his paintings. He confesses this when says: "my mother died. My brothers were thrown out of the house. I am not happy. Nothing is what it could be. I am a human being... I had to paint it, so I did (Okri 1996). The depth of realism in this novel is informed by Okri's experience. He said in an interview with Jane Wilkinson:

*I needed to experience suffering if I was to write truthfully... To me suffering is an aspect of the great promethean will, the thing in us which must make the spirit wake up. Modern literature is the product of too much false suffering. Too much false pain. Real suffering is like the dirt that miners dig up and carry away. It is necessary if we are to find the true gold that writers seek (Wilkinson 1991).*

Okri employs the stream of consciousness to explore and reveal the inner flow of thoughts of Omovo. He sinks into his thoughts and is fond of putting them down in his notebook. Sometimes he thinks aloud to himself, asks himself questions and answers them also "what can anybody or I do? Hide? Be anonymous? It's lousy" (Okri 1996).

He ruminates and soliloquizes the murder case and ritual killing of a young girl. The mutilated girl is symbolic of the social malaise in an impoverished social space made superstitious by years of misrule and avarice. The depth of this decadence and cultural derangement is foregrounded by the fact that the heartless murder takes place, not in the street, but in the church. This is a contradiction of the sacredness that the church itself represents. The author paints a depressing yet gory picture of the dastardly act:

*It was the body of a girl. Her head had been roughly shaved. The eyes were half open. Her mouth was abnormally pouted. Her teeth gleamed... her flowered cotton dress had been torn and was bloodstained. A white foul-smelling cloth had been used to cover her lower parts... she could not have been more than ten years old (Okri 1996).*

*Dangerous Love* is set in Nigeria, a society that is a labyrinth of official corruption. Being a love story, it shows that the society frowns at adultery. Okri explores Omovo's love life and satirises the society's attitude towards marriage. In the traditional African society, love and marriage seem to have their place. Excessive romantic feeling is usually frowned at. In the case of Omovo, the problems in his life are compounded by the fact that he and Ifeyinwa can never be together because the charming lady is not only married but also "owned". Her husband is abusive but has been a victim of the past. Ifeyinwa's love for Omovo is a protest against her loveless marriage to Takpo. In a rural environment, the wife might have had some recourse to tradition to limit her husband's power. But here in the city, marriage is an unending source of physical and mental cruelty perpetrated by a husband who himself has been twisted by the alienation of slum life. The tragedy lies in the paradox that Omovo and Ifeyinwa cannot be together but cannot live apart – like the many tribes of Nigeria itself:

*The Greeks have a saying that the skylark buried its father in its head. Burry this girl in your heart, in your art, so live my son, live with unquenchable fire. Let everything you're suffering now give you every reason in the world to master your life and your art. Live deeply fully. Be fearless. Be like the eagle – soar above your pain and carry the banner that the wonder of our lives to the farthest corners of the world. Build your strength. Destiny is difficult. The people without knowing it will always be on your side. They will nourish your soul. Never forget that the people suffer too and struggle and you will be safe in art (Okri 1996).*

Ironically, not even the countryside provides an escape. Undoubtedly, it is in her village, which she hopes will provide a refuge for her as she runs away from Takpo, her husband, that Ifeyinwa meets her fate. She is mistaken for an animal or enemy spirit on her way home to Ugbofia and is consequently shot dead by rival villagers during inter-village crisis (Okri 1996).

*Dangerous Love* brings out the destructiveness of individual lives caught in the maelstrom of change in a third world country. And for all its concern with individual lives, the novel is intensely political, though not heavy-handedly. An example is the description of Okoro's room. The windows are kept permanently shut to keep out the smell of sewage also:

On the blue walls there was a picture of Fela Anikulapo Kuti, hand raised in a revolutionary gesture. Next to the poster was an Airways calendar – with bright pictures of London, New York, Paris and

Amsterdam. The calendar was two years out of date. A large bed occupied most of the living space. There was a small round table next to the bed. There were two chairs. On the floor were scattered pairs of shoes and slippers. At the foot of the bed was clothes rack, weighed down with the latest fashions. Omovo sat at the only big table in the room, on which an impressive stereo stood. The crest of the space on the table was taken up with application forms, cassettes, keys, address books, brochures of American Universities, the correspondence course booklets (Okri 1996).

The details above capture the contradiction of the newly educated would-be elite, attracted to revolutionary politics out of resentment of the country's position in the world, yet also drawn towards the glitter of consumerism symbolized by western and in particular American society. Okri's style of writing is pleasing to the mind as his language conjures apt imagery. This can be evinced in the following words: "...to escape the traffic jam of his thoughts" and "his illumination became tumble of words spinning in him, erupting in thoughts and speech, in being and words, in visions and emotions deeper than the urge that made him paint. Okri's imagery and characters are quite unforgettable. The mutilated girl who is used for rituals, the complex description of the scumpool symbolizing dirt and decay and the traffic jam indicating chaos in the political system and leadership in a new colonial state are so tangible that they cannot be ignored.

In *Dangerous Love* as in *The Famished Road* and his short stories, Okri takes one into the spirit world. The proximity of this world to tangible existence in some instances makes one to wonder about the location of the narrative experience. This narrative style is a credit to the author for it brings together an enchanting mix of the modernist narrative strategy and the "African" oral tradition. In this way there is undeniable kinship that Okri's narrative strikes with Tutuola, Fagunwa and Soyinka. At the end of the novel, Omovo's life is shattered by personal and family disaster. He is skeptical when his friend Keme claims that:

*We are betrayed generation, a generation of burdens, we will be the inheritors of bad faith and the cost of all the waste and the corruption. We have to sort out the mess our parents made of the country, the opportunities we missed, the oil boom that they pocketed* (Okri 1996).

Nevertheless, Omovo, "shuddering as if he felt a wind from the future", senses new possibilities lying before him. It is this sense that

the past is not doomed to repeat itself that gives the novel its power. With regard to the foregoing, it is also pertinent to note Frantz Fanon's emphasis on the collaborative relationship that should exist between leaders and followers in the new nation in his *The Wretched of the Earth* (1983). He insists that:

*The duty of those at the head of the movement is to have the masses being them. Allegiance presupposes awareness and understanding of the mission, which has to be fulfilled, in short, an intellectual position, however, embryonic. We must not "voodoo" the people, nor dissolve them in emotion and confusion. Only those underdeveloped countries led by revolutionary elites who have come up from the people can today allow the entry of the masses upon the scene of history.*

He warns against the formation of a privilege class, which he sees as more inhibiting than foreign domination, because, once privileges are created and people have tasted them, it becomes difficult to persuade them to let them go for the sake of higher national goals. Fanon therefore sees the need to oppose vigorously and definitely the birth of a national bourgeoisie and a privilege caste. To him "to educate the masses politically is to make the nation a reality to each citizen: it is to make the history of the nation part of the personal experience of each of its citizens" (Fanon 1983). This ideal has eluded most, if not all, the newly independent states. In this situation contradictions and change become inevitable. *Dangerous Love*, a story of an impossible yet fierce love between an aspiring painter, Omovo, and his love Ifeyinwa who is trapped in a loveless marriage, supplies so many emotions that at times it is difficult to know what to feel, be it anger, pain, happiness or simple bewilderment. Omovo moves through this dispossessed and corrupt world haphazardly caring for only two things within it: his painting and Ifeyinwa, to each of which he ascribes fantastic and as the title suggests dangerous love.

## CONCLUSION

In a place and situation where romanticism is very often forgotten in preference for the immediate necessities of life, Omovo is a unique individual and his love for Ifeyinwa although not the only adulterous affair mentioned in the novel, is clearly unique also. Not only is his love dangerous, but his whole life which is plunged in crisis by the seizure of one of his displayed paintings at Ebony Gallery. The narrators seem to connote that there is a unity between his love affair and his entire life as expressed in his paintings. In this paper we have....

## RECOMMENDATION

Studies in African Literature generally require different and peculiar hermeneutic practice, because of the continent's peculiar cosmology and historical antecedents. We recommend here that in reading and analyzing Okri's novels one should stay close to that African world-view that sees life/reality in the super-human, and how these two worlds mutually define existence. It is only in this regard that one can find the true metaphoric value of what we now refer to as magic realism. Within that magical world we find dynamic ideological import which can help in explaining the complexities in the African postcolony.

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