

Making Sense of the “Freedom Scapes” in Ben Okri’s *In Arcadia*

Majed Hamed Aladaylah¹

¹ Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts, Mu'tah University, Al-Karak, Jordan

Correspondence: Majed Hamed Aladaylah, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts, Mu'tah University, Al-Karak, Jordan. E-mail: aladaylah@yahoo.com

Received: October 9, 2012 Accepted: November 12, 2012 Online Published: January 28, 2013

doi:10.5539/ass.v9n2p305

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ass.v9n2p305>

Abstract

There is no doubt that one of the unresolved contradictions of representation in postcolonial fiction is that of the relation between the colonizer and the colonized. This issue generates a wide spectrum of critical hues, exploring how present circumstances shape a postcolonial narrative technique. The present paper explores Ben Okri’s *In Arcadia* (2002), attempts to display this innovative disturbing representation by investigating the narrative experimentation in the novel of Ben Okri. Okri’s novel reflects the dilemma of individual freedom and liberation, and the contemporary situation of fragmentation, rootlessness, dehumanization, displacement, and disorientation in a world where man finds himself suspended in a void of meanings. Okri’s response to this dilemma is given by those scapes which become the new responsible creators of their own world by shaping fresh values, lives, and realities, which is reflected in the reshaping of the narrative mode of a postcolonial and postmodern Nigerian novelist, tempered with the narrative form and its representation of the experience of reality. His fiction has subverted the narrative modes of representation thereby dislocating the structure of narrative technique through the juxtaposition of spatial fragments from different situations. Thus, the hypothesis was that it would be valuable to analyze and examine Okri’s narrative experimentation as a contemporary writer, in order to see the extent of innovative progression.

Keywords: freedom, scapes, self, amalgamation, metaphorical

1. Introduction

Ben Okri’s recent novel *In Arcadia* (2002) was a surprise book for those who expected the Nigerian post-colonialist to travel further down the “famished road” and explore ways of being free from the white man’s burden. The “sad fallings” of the seemingly antithetical work aroused such responses as “the ramblings of a stoned sixth former” (Brown, 2002), and “pseudo-philosophical piffle” (<http://www.calderdale.gov.uk>). No longer being grounded in the strife torn Nigerian soil and not representing its turmoils and angsts perhaps called for such misplaced condemnations. What was being missed out was the dialogical sub-text which was still rife with the perennial questions that have plagued the mindset of those who are suffering the brunt of de-humanizing powers-that-be resulting in the loss of dignity and freedom. Is not the evident allegory of the title a way of homing in on the quest for a more compatible future and the journey motif contained within its pages a search for a utopian destination and an implied destiny beyond the damned past and the living “inferno”? The subtle insinuations of foregrounding black against the white backdrop are yet another strategy of destabilizing the originary dialectics and working against the grain, to throw-up through contrast and alterity so to say.

2. Analysis

The literal that the members of the film crew take from London to Arcadia in the Peloponnese, Virgil’s mythic paradise, is also a metaphorical one and the two are simultaneously played out the one complementing and supplementing the other. The part narrator/protagonist Lao is African and his worldview is impregnated with African knowledge. Lao is the Okrian protagonist who tries to find his freedom, he is isolated familiarly and metaphysically. He tries to open up a space, and excavates a secret place, where he can generate a genuine freedom for the self. It is Arcadia where he experiences a lightness of being and realizes the latent potentialities within the external space of the place. There are six other members with him who have suffered the pressures of the post-modern world and are characterized by fragmentation, loss of identity and the delegitimization of the determinate beliefs and value systems. Given this assignment to film their journey by an “evil-sounding man” called Malasso, who no one ever sees or meets, they all cling on by “their broken fingernails to the rotten beams

of hope". There is the director of the crew Jim, a fat and balding man who has not worked for the last seven years and even when he did his films were the "worst on earth" (10). The "sound man" Propr is "tone deaf" and again is out of use for about five years. Husk is a researcher and general organizer who has worked on "all the dead-end television 'shows'" (11) followed by Riley the assistant cameraman and she too has not worked on any film for ages. Sam is a talkative first cameraman, Jute the accountant and controller of finances who is tagged as "the spy". These six along with Lao become Chaucerian pilgrims headed towards their Canterbury that might help them re-claim their fallen spirit and put them back onto a vantage from where they can regain an identity.

It is here that Okri uses the first of his "invisible inscriptions" to expound the Black man's loss of self-hood, the "camera-scape". At Paris Lao has to suffer "himself being painted into being, becoming only a colour, not a simple complex human being like everyone else" (105). At the immigration desk Lao:

Had to make an awkward crossing, a crossing as difficult as fording a deep cold river. For now he had to ford human perception. He had to cross a terrain in the minds of people. He had to submit to one of his life's endless trials—the trial of colour. (104).

He knows that the contrast with others is so stark that it gets into the way of homogenizing; he is made to re-affirm how society has evolved invisible lines and nets, points of interrogation that determine between those who could live normally and those who have to be "bundled off to death camps" (107), and this in the name of cleansing society, of caution against terrorism. He experiences his freedom being imprisoned, and his bliss of creation being marred by the grading of pigmentation. Though Lao believed "that all are one" (105), he was reduced by a redefinition of color into a Manichean "other" through the eyes of *others*. The Eurocentric powers were at work to defy the very presence of those without their concentric parameters. He seems to echo what Toni Morrison observed in *Playing in the Dark* (1993) that a non-white is constructed in order to fabricate the idea of a white, it helps the later to validate his identity by foregrounding it. Homi J. Bhabha in "The Other Question" too asserted that the color of the skin is the "most visible of fetishes" (112).

Thus to be black is to have one's freedom questioned, and one's identity compromised as one in a sea of anonymity. Lao verges out at the camera that seems to be recording the "truth"; he calls it a "cyclopean head without a brain, with an eye that gazes insensibly upon what it witnesses" (19). The camera "imprisons" for constant vigilance thus objectifying a being, de-contextualizing him forever, taking power out of his hands to "play" him anytime, anywhere like a Foucauldian "panopticon" (*Discipline and Punish*). Such objectification is one of the discursive practices that colonizers were prone to adopt to take away from the colonized their essential freedom. The camera seems to be an agency that secretly conscripts the 'other' into complicity through fear, misinformation, lack of contact, casual demonization, distortions of history.... by certain pigmentational developments in photography (111). The camera becomes synonymous with the colonial gaze which looks at the other in such a way that he feels caught, trapped. Thus, to be "looked at" is to have one's stability and one's freedom threatened and to be reduced to a mode of being in-itself, a patient etherized upon a table ready to be dissected. Lao understands this and comments, "There are torments that we go through, because of a different sun. Society has an invisible hell which people like me are made to reside in, and it is normality" (109). This "normality" is normative and it negates individual identity and a freedom to a selfhood. The intersection of these metaphorical images form an entangled network heads toward transcendences of the self. Examines complex existential scenes about the liberal individual and the freedom of choice through the act of narration itself,

The second "scape" that Okri uses is of painting. As he says: "Painting is the still life of God's mind. It is a heaven of remembered things, the hell of forgotten things... It is legend frozen, memory's homeland" (188). When Lao contemplates the Poussin masterpiece in the Louvre, and the inscription on the tomb, "I (death) too lived in Arcadia", we re-affirm that even paradise is corruptible. The long "Intuition" on painting is also like the one on camera. This "mysterious metaphor" through which human beings can regain paradise, which is an epitome of 'human love transcending human forgetfulness' (189) is also a framed prison that feeds dreams and desires into the "spirits" factory for the production of reality'; but within the peace it "plants the seeds of restlessness, of unease, of subtle disturbance... filling your waking hours with question 'marks'" (203-206). This duality of perceptions, dream and reality, peace and disturbance, beauty and death get inextricably intertwined till Lao feels that he is in 'a labyrinth without any exit, it is closed' and he was among those who had to learn to live within it, and 'join those who develop wings and soar' (209). This is an epiphanic moment and had it only been this even then the novel would have qualified for Pater's "great art", that with a "design". It is this which makes it a sequel to *The Famished Road* (1992) and joins it to its Nigerian roots. The geographical dislocation notwithstanding, it is the pledge of one neglected by history to harness a nurturing myth of the human imagination. This alone can compensate for "what we have lost in spirit" (83), provide a way out of accepting someone else's authority. In Foucault's reading of Kantian Enlightenment (1994) it is "a modification of a

preexisting relation” (305), an act of courage in a process of change wherein the actors take a decision voluntarily. The Arcadian vision symbolized by Poussin’s painting, is an aestheticized version of Enlightenment, it has the potential to rectify the present situation and to pave the way for freedom.

The third “scape” is the journey itself, from the claustrophobic London to the open fields of an imaginary paradise. Though not attained it is neither lost for the hope is bolstered and freedom made a possible entity despite the miles to go. In an interview with Judith Palmer (2002) Okri had made this metaphor clear when he said, “We inhabit a middle track we call our lives, but on either side Arcadia and Death are also running concurrently, and we are never far away from either plane. The book tries to encompass all these three layers” (p. 121). So the ‘middle track’ is the present, the literal journey being taken by the film-crew; the past is what it has been for Lao, a living death, a heritage inscribed with pain, a memory of the de-humanization his race has suffered. Punctured by the camera which acts as the reveal all and glossed over by Poussin’s painting that shows a way ahead, the future is yet to be. Still it is a journey of self-discovery, and a journey though riddled with dark tunnels towards the light of freedom.

Okri has recreated the past and structured it according to the needs of the present, the past is placed critically, not nostalgically in relation with present, surrounding the nature of identity and subjectivity. He thinks of the outer world, of the full space, the knowledge of freedom from Arcadia. The liberation of the self can only be accomplished by means of human action in the outer world. Okri has used all the three times simultaneously, he does not use space as a relief from the ongoing action of time, rather, his spatiality lies in the composition and the purpose of his novel, that the element of time as an organizing structure is abandoned. In discarding the linearity of narrative, juxtaposition is the substitute, the juxtaposition of disparate spatial images creates a synthesis of meaning between these spatial images and this supersedes any sense of temporal discontinuity. Sukenick (1974) has argued that, “the art field is a nexus of various kinds of energy, image, and experience. What they are, and how they interact may in the long run be the most profitable area for criticism: the study of composition” (435). In view of this, the reader loses track of the linear time in the dense, slow and close-up attention to detail, for this, the passage of time from one point to the next is unimportant, the relevant dimension is spatial. Gerard Genette (1966) observes in his essay that “Language, thought, contemporary art are spatialized”; Language spaces itself so that space, in itself, becomes language, is spoken and written” (101). Okri has found himself reborn, with the aura of another world, so Arcadia is a new beginning a creation of a new space for himself.

This freedom that Okri so variously explores is very integral to the “color polemics” that he uses as an undercurrent which threatens to ground swell at any time. It becomes the “aporia” that he is trying to deconstruct, in fact, he is deconstructing the world he is creating, all the multiplicity of its developmental meanings are present within the text. For Okri’s existential journey to self-understanding is a traveling out of the enclosures of isolation, a journey through the enormous walls of loneliness. The seeker traverses a landscape of inner and outer spaces that metonymically oppose each other and does not character a lot of physically navigable territory. Michel De Certeau (1988) has argued that: “Every story is a travel story—a spatial practice” (115).

Okri has suffused extended existential scapes to generate space for the crew in Arcadia from where they were detained, the movement of their interior space was casted in relief and their inner implosion culminated in exterior explosion. In effect, they did not seek escape from the narrative order, on the contrary, they were set in pseudo-space. It is pseudo-space because it is imposed on them and becomes a purely constrained, constricted and dreadful space. Thus, they tried to carve out a space for their freedom by rejecting this pseudo-space. They excavate a secret place, a place where they can generate a genuine freedom for the self. It is Arcadia, where they experience a lightness of being and realizes the latent potentialities within the external space. The intersection of these spaces form an entangled network heads toward transcendences of the self. Joseph Francese (1997) held that “The subject exists by dint of its projection of interior reality onto an exterior world whose function is to document the subject's self-expression” (p. 33).

The concept of freedom first finds reference in 13th century literature in the “tale of two monks” of St. Thomas Aquinas (Weigel, 2002, p. 121) where it connoted an ability to exercise both reason and will to satisfy a natural longing for “truth and beatitude”. This moral implication was gradually extended to include the freedom of choice or what Nietzsche was to later call “will to power”. Down the line in the Age of Enlightenment liberalism rejected many of the assumptions that had earlier dominated and we find John Locke developing the concept of natural rights, “life, liberty and property” a forerunner of the modern “human rights”. Hegelian freedom too was welfare liberalism and these newly formulated ideologies provided the justification for both the American and French Revolution. It was Rousseau who subsequently argued for natural freedom for mankind in his *The Social Contract* (1988) and Kant in *Critique of Pure Reason* (1965). For them freedom consisted in not being forced to

accept anything unless one's conscience, will and reason gave consent. By the end of the 19th century it started being felt that freedom included access to food, shelter, education, and protection from exploitation. It was further argued that in order to achieve this governments were required to act as balancing powers.

3. Conclusion

Thus we see that freedom itself has undergone many interpretations and has been experienced in multiple ways. Metaphysically speaking, it stands in opposition to determinism and politically it emphasizes individual rights and equality of opportunity. Just as different ages have had different notions about freedom, different countries in different phases of their development have looked at the concept differently. For long periods of time it was expelled from Asia and Africa, Europe regarded it as a stranger and the concept of slavery affected it gravely. Tied with the politics of these countries freedom largely was understood in Hegelian terms (*Philosophy of Right*, 1996) that only they were free who contributed to the achievements of their city-state. Since both Asia and Africa were under Imperial domination there was no question of the native/indigenous people having a say in the running of their governments, of being able to lead life as they wished. Personal freedom too was jeopardized resulting in anguish, frustration, disillusionment and anger leading to a crisis and subsequently struggle and revolt.

It is this that most postcolonial literature is about of how subjugation, oppression, derogatory denomination subversive of freedom leads to major political, cultural and moral repercussions. The motif behind such writing is "to reclaim the right, usurped by imperialist domination" (Cabral, 1973, p. 43), to be free of a foreign yoke, one which Ben Okri so succinctly captures in his fiction. His endeavour is to "look at ourselves differently". He goes on, "we are freer than we think... We can re-dream this world and make the dream real..." (*Famished* 498). As a characteristic postcolonial writer from the third world his quest for freedom increases manifold because of the particular circumstances of his originality. Africa where his roots are was even denied a place in history as George Lamming in "The Occasion for Speaking" points out (*The Post-Colonial Reader* 16). This "petrified ideology" (Memmi the Colonizer and the Colonized, XXXVIII) had dehumanized his countrymen and this myth of inferiority had taken them even beyond the pale of "othering". It was in this context that Fanon had broken out, "a Black is not a man." (*Black Skin* XII) and it has been Okri's consistent effort to so revision his compatriots that they are restored to the human condition, and their 'humiliated consciousness' is embalmed with the surfacing of a sense of freedom—freedom from dehumanization, demonization, alienation and invisibility. Okri has stated that "welter of meanings and signs and auguries", in which the individual subject has been left with a "loss of belief" and a sense of an 'empty universe where the mind spins in uncertainty and repressed terror" (Okri, 2002, pp.118) . It is "a life lived at speed, with many gaps in perceived reality" (Okri, 2002, pp. 119, 120).

Okri has offered brilliant spatial metaphors that blur the trajectory of narrative order and shape the human experience against a narrative template. Lao tried to carve out a space for his freedom by rejecting the stable narrative, and by pushing the limits of narrative logic to serve the demands of horizontal evolution of his consciousness that produced the modes of extra-narrative form of understanding, making more freedom to locate his own reality that exists outside a narrative-bound sense of identity. Thus, the amalgamation of these word groups has succeeded in generating a spatial freedom and swept over the legitimation of text narrative. Initially, they shutter the notion of dehumanization, exploitation, and colonization. They nullified the illusionary space and tried to disregard the controlling metaphor of the colonizer; moreover, the dislocation of the travelers has achieved its function by visiting a secret place that assigned earlier, where they could achieve freedom and independence.

While Ben Okri's work has undergone many transformations in the choice of literary tropes, devices, and its spatio-temporality, there remains a common thread that coheres the woof and warp of all that he has written, and this is the idea of freedom. He knows that just as the achievement of this humanizing discipline needs consistent efforts he understands that it also needs many "scapes" for its projection. So he weaves out like a craftsman chiseling and honing his means that can wield a voice of *victory*. Okri's novel is explicitly a new style, he uses a highly juxtaposed prose style, with multiple scenes tumbling into the text. He undergoes a transformation of the self, stands on the threshold of the journey into the inner self. His innovative narrativity has been used as an outer space for transmitting the inner space, the inner freedom.

References

- Ball, M. (n. d.). *A Review of In Arcadia by Ben Okri*. Retrieved from <http://www.compulsivereader.com/html/index.php?name=News&fate=article=36>

- Brown, H. (n. d.). Review of In Arcadia. *The Independent* (cited in Ben Okri (1959)' Books and Writers). Retrieved from <http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/okri.htm>
- Cabral, A. (1973). Identity and Dignity in the Context of the National Liberation struggle. In Africa Information Centre (Ed.), *Return to the Source*. New York: Monthly Review.
- Fanon, F. (1968). *The Wretched of the Earth* (Tr. Constance Farrington). New York: Grove Press City.
- Fanon, F. (2008). *Black Skin, White Masks* (Tr. Richard Wilcox). New York: Grove Press.
- Foucault, M. (1984). What is Enlightenment. In P. Rabinow (Ed.), *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984* (Vol. 1). The New Press: New York.
- Foucault, M. (1985). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison* (Tr. A. M. Sheridan Smith). Hamondsworth: Penguin.
- Fox, R. (2005, July). In Search of the Postmodern Utopia: Ben Okri's In Arcadia. *Portal Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies*, 2(2). Retrieved from <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/portal/splash>
- Franchise, J. (1997). *Narrating Postmodern Time and Space*. State University of New York Press, Albany.
- Genette, G. (1966). *Narrative Discourse, an Essay in Discourse* (Tr. Jane E. Lewin). New York: Cornell University Press.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1996). *The Philosophy of Right* (Tr. S. W. Dyde). New York: Prometheus.
- Kant, I. (1965). *Critique of Pure Reason* (Tr. N. Kemp Smith). New York: St Martin's Press.
- Lamming, G. (1993). "The Occasion for Speaking" *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. In Ashcroft, G., & Tiffin Morrison, T. (Eds.), *Playing in the Dark. Whiteness in the Literary Imagination*. London: Picador.
- Okri, B. (1992). *The Famished Road*. New York: Doubleday.
- Okri, B. (2002). *In Arcadia*. London: Phoenix.
- Palmer, J. (2002). Ben Okri: Great Art Tries to Get Us to the Place of True Enchantment. *The Independent*. Retrieved from <http://enjoyment.independent.co.uk/books/interviews/story>
- Rousseau, J. J. (1988). *The Social Contract* (Tr. GDH Cole). New York: Prometheus.
- Sukenick, R. (1974). Twelve Digressions toward a study of composition. *New Literary History*.
- Weigel, G. (2004, March). A Better Concept of Freedom. *First Things*, 12, 14-20.