

Cultural Contention in Disorienting the African Identity: A Postcolonial Framework of Ben Okri's *Dangerous Love*

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Abstract

Culture is an institution of being and becoming. It is the holistic combination of national, social, political, religious, and traditional factors that form the individuality of the populace. The fundamental strength of a nation is the perpetuation of culture. Besides economical, geographical and national development, culture signifies the identity of the nation. After political independence, culture of the native colonies underwent constant change. This change further resulted in disorienting the native identity. The transformative process not only condemns the culture of the natives but also threatens the continuity. Due to these issues, it became a necessary and immediate need for the postcolonial critics to pay more attention to unearth the factors that disorient African identity. The researcher through the lens of theoretical facts propounded by the contemporary postcolonial critics like Aime Cesaire, Frantz Fanon and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o attempts a microscopic examination of Ben Okri's *Dangerous Love* to expose the African cultural ideologies narrated in the fiction. In spite of the cultural bomb by the West, the protagonist's struggle to live a life against the transformation is clearly exposed. This paper surveys the contention between the landscapes within and landscapes without and exposes the longing of Okri to forward the glories of African identity to the next generation.

Keywords: Change; Culture; Disoriented identity; Holistic; Hybridity; Native.

"Culture, in its broadest sense, is a way of life fashioned by a people in their collective endeavour to live and come to terms with their total environment. It is the sum of their art, their science and all their social insti-

tutions, including their system of beliefs and rituals" (Ngugi, 4). Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, the Kenyan poet, dramatist and critic reflects on the derivation of culture in his work *Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture and Politics*. Being an African, Thiong'o contributes his works predominantly discussing on the importance and the perpetuation of native cultures. He states three facets when observing African cultures. He says African cultures can be seen as the totality of cultures before conquest, cultures during colonization, and cultures in the postcolonial period where it strives to attain a self-image. While the initial two periods is impossible to recuperate at the present moment, the African postcolonial critics like Aime Cesaire, Frantz Fanon and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o tries to find the importance in the depiction of the specificity of native cultures. They moreover, struggle to uphold national culture. They attempt to remove all the factors that disorient African identity as Thiong'o says in his work *Homecoming*, a completely socialized economy, collectively owned and controlled by the people, is necessary for a national culture: a complete and total liberation of the people, through the elimination of all exploitative forces, is necessary for a national culture. (13)

The insistence of national culture has become a significant discourse in postcolonial criticism. This is due to the impact of colonial legacy that is keenly felt by the natives after colonialism. In the view point of natives, political independence that assured social economic and administrative liberation is purely a myth and vanity and hence liberation from cultural imperialism is also equally demanded because Thiong'o says in *Moving the Centre*, "Culture has rightly been said to be to society what a flower is to a plant. What is important about a flower is not just its beauty. A flower is the carrier of the seeds for new plants, the bearer of the future of that species of plants" (75).

Frantz Fanon, the Algerian critic claims that during colonialism the national culture was considered barbaric, sly and worse. In the postcolonial era, when revolutionaries insist on recuperating national culture, the native feels awkward because their mind is filled with the partial knowledge shared by the West. In their eyes, national culture is corrupted and hence further disliked by the natives themselves and Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* suggests that reinventing national culture alone could bring the equilibrium of the nation as he says, it was with the greatest delight that they discovered that there was nothing to be ashamed of in the past, but rather dignity, glory, and solemnity. The claim to a national culture in the past does not only rehabilitate that nation and serve as a justification for

the hope of a future national culture. (210)

Allying this assertion of Fanon and Thiong'o, this paper identifies the novels of Ben Okri rich with cultural ethnicities. It has become a common observable fact for Okri to crowd his narration primarily with African cultural values. Okri, the Booker prize winner of *The Famished Road* has dedicated his works to explicit the exotic nature and inimitable quality of National culture of Nigeria in his fiction. Though he is often identified as the writer of fantasy, he is also eminent in predicting the cultural attributes of Nigeria. In all his novels, he attempts to restore the glory and dignify the past history of Nigerian culture. His fiction *Dangerous Love* is obviously not an exception. He portrays the life of Omovo, his association with the postcolonial Nigerian society and his speculation about the lost ethnicity of the nation. The researcher identifies that on one hand the fiction suggests social criticism while on the other hand it critiques the outlook on the native culture by the postcolonials. Through Omovo, the protagonist of the fiction *Dangerous Love*, Okri tries to convey that the feel of pride and ecstasy about the native tradition had lost for the Nigerians during the process of colonization. Okri considers it a serious issue and demands an immediate response from the natives.

This article demonstrates multiple factors that affect African identity. The researcher works on the fiction *Dangerous Love* (1996) which had been reworked from his earlier fiction *Landscapes Within*. Okri found the latter to be incomplete and redrafted to get it published later under the title. He has overtly projected the factors that affect the native culture and demands the necessity to eliminate all the forces that disorient the African identity. He focuses on the trade of the West in defaming the native culture so that imperialism would become possible even after political independence. Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* affirms the inevitability of national culture as he says, A national culture is the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify, and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence. A national culture in underdeveloped countries should therefore take its place at the very heart of the struggle for freedom which these countries are carrying on. (233)

Okri narrates the life of Omovo as the observer and the envoy of the social, political and economical transformations of postcolonial Nigeria. Omovo, being the painter represents the poverty of Nigeria which is denied to be represented by the elite Nigerians. Once he was invited by his friend Dr. Okocho to Ebony gallery for the exhibition of his painting. He was able to

see paintings there with caricatures of the white man's first arrivals. Some of the images were the usual ones of the white missionary armed with Bible, mirror and gun. Others were grotesque surreal representations. There were paintings affirming national unity; various tribespeople drinking palm wine together and smiling broadly. Paintings depicting traditional scenes: women eating mangoes, women with children on their backs, women pounding yams, children playing, men wrestling, men eating. (D.L 44)

When Omovo saw these paintings in the gallery he could realize that the national unity was absolutely a counterfeited portrayal. In contrast to these paintings he brought along with him, the hardest reality of the post-colonial Nigeria for which he was questioned and barred from the sale. Besides in these paintings he could not be able to see the glorification of the Nigerian culture rather it was a mere mocking of the native's culture and their independence.

The moral degradation was one other issue that swerves the African quality. The ideology of legal polygamy was popular among the Nigerians but illicit relationships are condemned and penalized severely. The novel depicts the illicit affairs of Tuwo and Omovo's mother Blackie. Further, the morality of Omovo's friends Okoro and Dele were put into question when he finds their wish to move abroad. They even suggest that Africa is not a suitable place to live in. They find it hard to exist with the rituals of Africa and so Dele tells to Omovo, "Africa is no place for me. That's why am going to the States" (61). Further, Dele says that he would enjoy his life in States as he describes his life would be happier and luxurious rather staying the native land,

You won't catch me with any useless women, man. Only the best. Heavy white women, black women, Spanish women. I'll have real fun and I'll buy myself a sports car. You won't catch me doing all those stupid jobs Nigerians do when they go to America, man. No waiters' jobs or cleaners' jobs for me. No! I'll study hard, I'll learn all their tricks, and I'll come back and make a contribution to our society, man. (147)

Okri reflects on the opinions of illegitimate affairs of the natives and questions on the fact of African identity that is disoriented because of the social contentions.

Meanwhile, Okri also ponders on the factor of language that disturbs the Africaness. Omovo's encounter at Valentino's Restaurant clarifies the tur-

moil existing in the culture. He witnesses, "Three white men seemed to be having a confused discussion with two Nigerians" (351). In the eyes of Omovo as he says, "They mixed badly" (351). When he looked at them he found that they were conversing in an affected English accent. Similarly, he also identifies his neighbor in the ghetto Tuwo speaking in affected English, Dele, his friend communicating in an American accent and Brownie, his step mother and Omovo's dad danced as if they are white. Omovo could not find comfort in the integration of the colonizers and the colonized. He remembers the ideology of Aime Cesaire who says that there is only the chance of violence and commotion when the colonizer and the colonized arrive at a common place. Through Omovo, Okri narrates his contempt and disapproval towards factors that affect the African cultural consciousness.

Okri comments on the influence of bribery and corruption in the postcolonial Nigeria. He claims that the manipulation of the powerful upon the poor through the value of money results in disorienting the African identity. The researcher affirms that African society is known for the equality and wealth is measured not in terms of money rather in terms of character attributes. The economical imbalance is the most controversial issue discussed in the fiction. In *Dangerous Love*, Omovo was intimidated by Mr. Babakoko for getting his papers approved. When Mr. Babakoko cannot threaten Omovo anymore as he shows stubbornness against being demoralized, he flatters him through the show of money. Omovo at this instance feels shame about the culture of the Nigerian society. He views that these values degrade the society and leads to the economical downfall of Nigeria.

The fiction portrays religious contention when Omovo observes Sunday visitor's in the ghetto particularly belonging to "Jehova's Witness" (187) to convert Africans to Christians. When Omovo's maternal Uncle Maki visited him, there was a trifle between both the families. In the mist of this strife, the ghetto people said, "it was Sunday and matters should be settled 'amicably'" (211). The belief about Sunday to be treated with sanctity is highlighted among the ghetto populace. This incident narrates the religious controversy that enquires on the validity of African identity.

Therefore, the researcher insists on the tumults in the social, economical and religious grounds in the fiction *Dangerous Love*. By focusing on the issues of cultural turmoil in the postcolonial context, the researcher attempts to find an answer for the concern. According to the researcher, the cultural confusions can be surmounted through the restoration of national

culture. The article is completely furnished with the evidences from the theories of Fanon, Cesaire and Thiong'o through which the unstable situation of the postcolonial Nigeria could be well changed. The fiction not only resonates in a postcolonial context but can also be viewed under the observation of Marxist criticism as a future scope.

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