



ARCHETYPAL JOURNEY FROM INNOCENCE TO EXPERIENCE IN BEN OKRI'S *FLOWERS AND SHADOWS*

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Received: 22/08/2017

Edited: 28/08/2017

Accepted: 07/09/2017

Abstract: Ben Okri was nineteen when he wrote his first novel, *Flowers and Shadows* (1980). Set in Lagos, the novel depicts the pernicious effects that a self-seeking generation has on the next. It is an archetypal story of Jonan Okwe, a ruthless businessman corrupted by ambition, finds that old sins cast long shadows. But, in the tragic climax of this significant novel, the full impact of the sins is visited on the hopes and dreams of his idealistic son. However, the completed cycle initiates the difficult possibilities of the optimism and love. *Flowers and Shadows* (1980) is a modern African rite of passage and a delightful novel because it very wittily fictionalized the role, the wiles and guiles of ideologies and hegemony in the play of African life. This paper explores and examines and archetypal journey of Nigeria from innocence to experience as fictionalized by Ben Okri in his very first novel, *Flowers and Shadows*.

Keywords: ideology, hegemony, slavery, colonialism, cultural imperialism, women's subjugation.

I had gone from being ignorant of being ignorant to being aware of being aware. And the worst part of my awareness was that I didn't know what I was aware of.

- Maya Angelou: *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

We don't cooperate – we *obey*. We fear being outcast, being called lazy, dysfunctional, egoizing. We fear our neighbor's opinion more than we respect our own freedom of choice.

- Ursula Kroeber Le Guin: *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia*.

It is generally observed that attempts to define the terms 'innocence' and 'experience' remain, by and large, severely limited by theological, ethical and vague psychological connotations. Implications of the experience of slavery, colonialism, cultural imperialism and masses' subjugation seem to fall outside of the purview of these definitions. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language* (1981:1166), for instance, defines the term 'innocence' as:

Freedom from guilt or sin esp. through being unacquainted with evil, Chastity, the state of being not chargeable for guile or cunning, artlessness, simplicity, Lack of understanding or penetration, silliness, naivete' Lack of knowledge: ignorance

and an 'innocent' person as:

Free from guilt on sin esp. through lack of knowledge of evil: blameless, pure, untainted ... being without evil influence or effect ... reflecting or indicating freedom from guilt or sin : candid ... free from legal guilt or fault ... being without knowledge of circumstances ... being without intention of evading or circumventing the law ... lacking or devoid of something: destitute ... lacking or reflecting lack of sophistication, guile or self-consciousness: artless, ingenious, naïve ... foolishly ignorant or trusting: subject to being duped: simpleminded.... Not adept in or conversant with something: ignorant, ... unsuspecting, unaware ... innocuous ... harmless ... benign

First published in 1980 when the author, himself a Nigerian, was just nineteen, *Flowers and Shadows* has an ideological theme with a perfect plot

and structure supporting and suitable to each other. Built up on the modern city novel structure of Africa, Ben Okri's first novel, *Flowers and Shadows* (1980) focuses on African people's archetypal journey from innocence to experience related to cultural hegemony and ideologies and the corruption in individual, social, psychological, political, cultural and all levels of life in Africa.

Ben Okri in his twenty-four chapters' text, *Flowers and Shadows* (1980), builds up structure which supports the classic theme. Theme and the plot in the novel remain supported to each other. The novel stands divided into four parts which operate like massive columns supporting a massive structure. The thematic structure of the said novel develops like a flow of a river: thesis, antithesis, synthesis and verdict. The first part of the novel deals with premonitions of disaster, hence the title of the first section, 'Presentiments', which effectively sets the tone for everything that happens in the course of the novel. The first section, 'Presentiments' consists of ten chapters (chapter one to ten). The second section of the said novel is entitled as 'Shadows' and consists of seven chapters (chapter eleven to seventeen). As the suggestive title indicates, this section gives an indication of the tragedy. The third section of the said novel is entitled as 'Darkness' and consists of four chapters (chapter eighteen to twenty-one). As the suggestive title indicates, this section describes the gloom and tragedy in the life of African people. The fourth section of the said novel is entitled as 'Flowers' and consists of three chapters (chapter twenty-two to twenty-four). As the suggestive title indicates, this section describes the beauty and bounty in the life of African people overshadowed by corruption, exploitation and other dark evils. The novel has also a meaningful Epilogue which gives a scope for imagination to explore the probable future avenues in the life of African people perpetually affected by ideologies and hegemonies.

The corruption of modern Nigerian society is the dominant theme of Ben Okri's first novel, *Flowers and Shadows* (1980). The writer has attacked corruption in newly independent Nigeria and tells

about a successful businessman whose jealous relatives make his life difficult. The action takes place in Lagos, the capital city, and centers on Jeffia Okwe, the only son of well-to-do parents whose entry into adult life, a sort of rite of passage, is affected in the course of the book.

At the very beginning of the novel, *Flowers and Shadows* (1980) Ben Okri introduces the situation created by the dominant ideologies and hegemonies. There is different impact of the environment on different people as per their psyche. Ben Okri describes a strong psyche never get affected by the hostile environment at the very beginning of the novel as follows:

It was a scorching day. But the heat did not bother everybody alike. For some it was a menace. For others it was just another hot day to be tolerated. For a few whose minds were occupied with good thoughts, it didn't exist. One of these was Jeffia Okwe (*Flowers and Shadows* p. 1).

Flowers and Shadows (1980) opens with premonitions of disaster, hence the title of the first section, 'Presentiments', which effectively sets the tone for everything that happens in the course of the novel. Ben Okri vividly shows that ideologies and hegemonies are associated with wickedness. Rather, both, ideologies and hegemonies, are being executed through physical power, they are the product of wicked psyche. Walking home after visiting a school friend, Ode, Jeffia comes across two boys torturing a puppy. Ben Okri describes the archetypal torturing of the weaker class by the dominant class through a symbolic attack on a puppy by two wicked boys in the following words:

He (Jeffia Okwe) turned into Park Avenue. That was when he first heard the howls. Then he saw the two boys. They were at the corner of the road, under a whistling pine tree. One held the dog by the legs, while the other, it seemed, tried to stick a piece of wood up its anus. Indifferently they watched it struggle. The bigger of the boys held the dog's mouth to prevent it yelping. It was a small brown and white puppy, too small to fight back (*Flowers and Shadows* p. 4).

By observing the torturing scenario Jeffia Okwe understood as Ben Okri explains that a person is a product of situation, environment, ideologies and hegemonies. Ben Okri elaborates the scenario and the cause and effect of this incident as follows:

Jeffia Okwe, who had all along stood watching them, was moved to the warmer end of the scale of feelings where other people's suffering registered more strongly. He understood. But it was an understanding born not of experience, but of instinct. He understood that who knew pain lived pain. They were like weeds that spread the offensive odour of their lot wherever they went. That was why a hungry man is an angry one (*Flowers and Shadows* sp. 5).

Virginia Woolf in an essay, "A Room of One's Own" presents the same ideology in the words: "One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well." Ben Okri also presents the 'conditions of interpellation' which means one has to make choices in a choice less condition. Ben Okri elaborates such 'conditions of interpellation' as "The worst thing a person can experience, ... is helplessness. It's like being in a dark room in a wilderness, not knowing what to do, where to go" (*Flowers and Shadows* pp. 5-6).

Jeffia Okwe rescues the dog and takes it home with him. No permanent damage has been done to the poor puppy. Through the relationship between Jeffia Okwe and his father, Ben Okri presents the diabolic effects of poverty, a product of ideologies and hegemonies. Wealthy people resist any hostile condition but poor people suffer and suffer. Ben Okri describes this dual condition caused by poverty as follows:

A Plague had attacked the village and people died like poisoned flies. Those who were wealthy got their people out, the ordinary folk died miserably. When his father was dying, his father spoke six words to him, and didn't finish the sentence. They were the words behind his life, Jonan said, "*My son, poverty is a curse...*" He was terrified of falling back into the poverty from which he had risen. (*Flowers and Shadows* p. 9).

Ben Okri further presents the diabolic effects caused by poverty. Jeffia Okwe's father, Jonan Okwe, is successful businessman who all his life has been driven by the fear of poverty. It was poverty that killed his own father when he was still a child. Ben Okri describes the agonies of poverty in the following words:

From the day, he was old enough to know what impossible things money could do, from the time his father died consumed by a mysterious plague, from the moment he realized the truth of his father's words that poverty was a curse, he always dreamt of the big time. He had worked ceaselessly, even ruthlessly, towards it. And when he arrived it still looked to him a distant thing (*Flowers and Shadows* p. 11).

Ben Okri also presents the diabolic effects of *dilettantism* i.e. taking nothing seriously attitude. The common people should be quite particular, punctual and alert. If they fail to be particular, the system characterized by ideology and hegemony never hesitate to exploit them at any condition. Ben Okri very wittily and intensively describes such ideology and hegemony of exploitation in the following words:

Never forget to carry your license with you when you are driving. We are in a sick society where nobody would hesitate to exploit you if you gave them the slightest chance. Once you are caught without your license, you might as well be in a boxing ring with your hands down. They will hound you till you grease their palms. Watch it, son, you still has a lot to learn (*Flowers and Shadows* p. 35).

It is this ideological dilemma that haunts the protagonist and that makes his success possible. But hard work in itself is not enough to make the kind of money he wants. Ben Okri also unveils how people explore short-cuts of success. To succeed Jonan Okwe must himself become corrupt. In order to take control of the paint factory that makes him his fortune he frames his half-brother, Sowho, on a trumped-up charge which lands him in prison. Ben Okri time and again highlights the relevance of experience in the life of human beings. He

fictionalizes experience as the best teacher. Ben Okri writes: "Experience, son, are the stuff our lives are made of. Learn to face them. Never be afraid of the unpleasant. Never forget that you are a man" (*Flowers and Shadows* p. 49).

Ben Okri also points out the importance of good relationship among the life mates. Okri explores the nature of womankind. Ben Okri writes: "Women.... One moment they are devils prying into your mind trying to divine secrets that's bound to upset them. The next moment they are like children" (*Flowers and Shadows* p. 61). Ben Okri also points out the pivotal role of life mates. Ben Okri writes: "My father always prayed that I should marry a good wife. My father used to say, 'My son, a good wife is what a man should prey for. Have a good wife, and you will have a happy life'" (*Flowers and Shadows* p. 61).

At the conclusion of the first part, Presentiments, of the said novel, *Flowers and Shadows*, Ben Okri introduces the complex and subtle social system resulted and dominated by various ideological hegemonies in the following words:

The society in which we live is a complex one. To get anything out of it you have to rise above the system. You might not know what I mean, but some day you will. Today one is either big or small, you either clutch at the straws or you swim. The choice is yours. We are in a large entangled web of law and disorder, power, waste, and misuse. And in this creasy society it is the powerful people that really count. All the rest are means to an end. My choice was wealth and power. I have had my share of the people who passed through my fingers. But the price is an uneasy head that trembles at every creak in the edifice, a disturbed mind that remembers the threats of life-long enemies. My advice to you, son, is ... is to go your own way into life. Stand on your feet. Find your own blueprints. Be a tough, unshakable man. But do not follow my example. I have made many mistakes and have many enemies (*Flowers and Shadows* pp. 73-74).

The second section of the premonitions with which the novel opens on the arrival, early one morning, of telegram from Sowho announcing his

imminent visit. This is followed by a series of mysterious phone calls in which Jonan is threatened with a revelation about his past: specifically, the supposed existence of a photograph showing him and Juliet in bed together. Throughout the novel Ben Okri depicts the pernicious effects that a self-seeking generation has on the next. John Okwe, a ruthless businessman corrupted by ambition, finds that old sins cast long shadows. But, in the tragic climax of this significant novel, the full impact of the sins are visited on the hopes and dreams of his idealistic son.

Ben Okri very wittily presents that there is no poetic justice in this material world, it might be in the literary world, but it is not in the real world. Ben Okri writes:

Such people who press other people down are the world's real enemies. For them only a disgraceful and wicked end would be fitting. But she knew it was a hopeless wish. Somehow it is people like that who sail on, crushing people, and weathering the storms to a comfortable old age. In the end they get eulogized as philanthropists and great men. Where is justice? Where is it? (*Flowers and Shadows* p. 82).

The climax of the novel and the significance of the title is worth appreciable. Due to various ideological hegemonies common people, the masses are being turned into things. This is nothing but thingification, changing living people merely into things. Ben Okri describes this condition of *interpellation* through the advice of the mother of the protagonist of the novel, *Flowers and Shadows*, as follows:

I'm afraid for you, son. I've never felt like this before. Look at what happened to poor Ode. Look at what your father was saying in the night. I'm afraid for all of us. She looked at him, distantly, as though she were not going to see him again. 'Little flowers in the shadows': that's what we are. Nobody knows what the larger shadows will do to the flowers: nobody knows what the flowers will become. All this was spoken with an oracular intensity, in a voice of unfamiliar hoarseness. The shadows, Jeff, the shadows. They are so many, and so strange (*Flowers and Shadows* p. 90).

Ben Okri states that due to various occidental and oriental ideological hegemonies we have lost the basic instinct, the power of prediction. Ben Okri describes such a loss in the words such as: "Things happen strangely in this country nowadays. In catching up with the Western world in such activities, we are becoming unpredictable" (*Flowers and Shadows* p. 97). People, accordingly, are carrying the burden of colonialism, ideological hegemonies

Ben Okri points out how old sins cast long shadows in the following words:

A man suffers for the sins of his father, which he knows nothing about. The hard-working man suffers while the lazy lounge in an abundance they never truly earned. The weak are oppressed while the strong go on in their oppression, evil rages in spite of good... it's endless. I don't pretend to understand the contradictions any more.... A son lives in the sins of the father... the father sows, the son reaps... the son becomes the father... the cycle continues (*Flowers and Shadows* pp. 126-127).

Like T. S. Eliot, Ben Okri points out the hollowness in the contemporary world as: "There is too much 'book' now, too many petty and unrealistic values. They are too weak, and too short-sighted." (*Flowers and Shadows* pp. 136). Jonan Okwe, a citizen of Eliot's *Wasteland*, is a hollow man. Spiritually, morally he is an impotent. His empty mind has become a devil's factory. There was a hot quarrel between Jonan Okwe and his life-mate, Juliet in which Juliet criticized him severely and made him naked with the following words:

Because I hate you. You are a wicked and selfish man. I have heard many of the things you have done to people. I regret knowing you at all. You, Sowho, and the rest like you are scum in society, walking all over people's lives... Your Waterloo is just somewhere around the corner (*Flowers and Shadows* p. 90).

Enraged at what he supposes to be Juliet's duplicity – how else could they have got hold of such a photo? – he calls on Juliet. Faced with her denial he beats her up. Ben Okri vividly describes the

wickedness in the unscrupulous inhumane character of Jonan Okwe in the following words:

Suddenly he pounced on her and began hitting her. She screamed. The dog came into the room, and began barking, jumping around Jonan. He breathed heavily. Her clothes were torn. She cried freely. Anger rose in him like a thermometer on a hot day. The dog barked at his feet, pulled at his trousers, and bit him on the ankle. Jonan turned round and kicked it savagely. The dog howled, landing near the door. It gave a short sad whimper. Then fell still' (*Flowers and Shadows* p. 156).

In the novel, *Flowers and Shadows* Ben Okri presents various wiles and guiles of ideological hegemony such as archetypal journey from innocence to experience, perpetual struggle between haves and have not, the corruption of modern Nigerian society, poverty and ignorance, exploitation and dominance, victimization, crime and justice, revelation of history, culture, society, love and changing nature of human relationships, fantasy and vision of a an adolescent, supernaturalism, magic-realism, simplicity of Nigerian peasant life, conflict between rich and poor, subjugation of the poor, diabolic effects of cultural hegemony, ideological enslavement and the most probable and practical antidotes and panaceas to colonialism and cultural hegemony. Corruption is an important device to execute ideological hegemony. Ben Okri also very aptly and wittily fictionalized the ideology as mentioned by George Orwell in his ground-breaking fiction, *Animal Farm*: "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely". The theme of corruption is not new to modern Nigerian literature in English. In many ways, it can be said to be the dominant theme of Nigerian writing of the last thirty years or so. To understand why this is the case one has only to experience the scale of the corruption as explored by writers like Achebe, Soyanka, Ben Okri and other few ones.

The world of *Flowers and Shadows* is quite dark and gloomy. One of the most effective scenes in the novel is the description of soldiers beating people inadvertently caught in a traffic jam. Ben Okri very

wittily, skillfully and vividly describes the unscrupulous ideological hegemony of the Military Raj in the following words:

A policeman had come to the scene of the accident. Soon also, the soldiers arrived. They had whips. They looked fierce....They shouted at the motorists. The jam eased up bit by bit. They flogged the bonnets of cars, screamed at drivers as though they were partially deaf. One of them pounced on a motorcyclist who was without a crash helmet. The soldier lashed him three times on the back. The rider wobbled and tried to speed off. The soldier grabbed the brake and stopped the machine. 'Bloody fool!! Get down, you idiot! Bastard! You want to kill me, eh? Other soldiers had gathered there. The defaulting motorcyclist was beaten and reduced to a whimpering mass of respectability. His face was soon swollen, his neck where the Koboko had landed was bleeding and rope-like. 'Get down, you goat! He got down, and was told to frog-jump. He was a man about forty. He had on a black suit and a tie. He looked absurd frog-jumping at the corner of the road, beside his fallen motorcycle. They drove past the frog-jumping man. He was crying. The soldier shouted at him: Where your helmet, eh? Where am? 'Fuckin' man. Where your license? 'Where your insure?' A kick was aimed at his buttocks. He had stopped frog-jumping. The kick

landed, and he fell flat on his face (*Flowers and Shadows*pp. 98-99)

Later we learn that the motorcyclist is reduced to 'a whimpering, groaning, crying mass of respectability'. At a technical level what is interesting here is the author's use of language. The soldier, uneducated and brutish – by no means synonymous – can only manage Pidgin English: ' "Where your helmet, eh? Where am?"'; ' "Fuckin' man. Where you license?"'; ' "Where your insure?"'. The use of pidgin in a novel otherwise written in a simple, straight forward style not only helps to define the characters but to stretch the resources of the available language. All Nigerian writers have made use of pidgin to a greater or lesser extent. Ben Okri, who has a good ear for dialogue, captures the rhythm of pidgin exactly. By and large, one comes to a conclusion that Ben Okri's first novel, *Flowers and Shadows* (1980) explores and examines innovative avenues of cultural hegemony quite wittily and skillfully. A critic, Harry Garuba (1993: 35) rightly offered praise worthy remark to the literary work of Ben Okri in general and *Flowers and Shadows* (1980) in particular in the following words:

Ben Okri has successfully captured a world only glimpsed but never before recollected in its wholeness and wretched glory in any of his previous work, or any previous work..... hidden and revealed.

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