FANTASY AS REALITY – A LOOK AT BEN OKRI’S INCIDENTS AT THE SHRINE
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Abstract
Realism is often considered synonymous with the actual. Literature which mirrors life is looked upon as realistic. Fantasy, more often than not, is considered the opposite of realism. Fantasy, thus, for all practical purposes, is fictitious. The fact that fantasy is meant to suggest the really real is the burden of this paper. With the modern writers, fantasy, through its story-shaped-worlds echoes the reality at the substratum, that which is silenced, unrevealed and concealed. Fantasy, has thus become the reality in a new clothing. Ben Okri is a contemporary Nigerian fantasy writer who has used the Nigerian political arena as the landscape of his works. Not only his novels but also his short stories are fantasy writings, which take us to the basis of the really real. In this article an attempt has been made to analyse the structure of fantasy in his short stories.

John Clute and John Grant in their The Encyclopedia of Fantasy have theorised on the Grammar of Fantasy. According to them, a complete fantasy work should have the four units: Wrongness, Thinning, Recognition and Eucatastrophe. They postulate that from these intensive structures, fantasy takes its birth. Okri’s three short-stories in the collection Incidents at the Shrine have been taken for analysis. Okri presents the contemporary political and social turmoil in Nigeria through a fantasy structure, as, for him, fantasy is the substratum of the bizarre real illusion, and an exposure to it is the solution for and remedy to the ills of life. This paper analyses how Okri’s fantasy novel stands for the Nigerian reality.

Keywords: realism, fantasy, wrongness, thinning, recognition, eucatastrophe

Realism
Reality can be defined as the actual. It is the plain truth without the mixture of the unreal. It represents real life. Reality in literature is realism. According to M.H. Abrahms, “…realism, … is said to represent life as it really is (260-A Glossary of Literary Terms). Realism refers to the depiction of the everyday happenings. The real shows everything without filtering anything. For example, “…a house was burgled. The policeman arrested the thieves. Many people died in the accident”. Newspapers publish these actual happenings. Newspapers are examples of the expression of realism. It presents the real life which may be jarring, startling, surprising, enchanting or endearing.

Realism in literature
Realism is different in literature. Literature is the mirror of life. If literature is the shadow of life then it is realism. While discussing the superiority of literature over history, Scholes says the following.
The agents in a poetic action were universal in that they said and did the things one would expect from men of certain types. Their actions were consistent in that they followed the law of probability and necessity. Its consistency, its universality and its representation not for actuality directly but of laws governing actuality constituted the superiority of the poetry over reporting. (121)

Though realism is the main concern of literature, it differs from journalistic writing in the way that it spices up the authentic facts with elements that make the literary writing interesting. Scholes says that realism is important for understanding the meaning of the literary work. The literary meaning is sought by establishing a connection between the textual world and the real world in
which the reader lives.  “Meaning, in a work of narrative art, is a function of the relationship between two worlds: the fictional world created by the author and the “real” world, an apprehendable universe”(82 The Nature of Narrative). The real in life is the seed around which a literary text is spawned.

**Realism as the source of literature**

Realism in life provides the source for the literary work. History, politics, society, war, struggles, family and the individual are the material for the literary works. Sometimes all the above aspects can be found in a textual work. Some writers, some times focus on only aspect in their work. Supplementary details are also added to the main story. The supplementary details present life in a different perspective. In Sheridan’s *The Rivals*, the main plot centres around Jack Absolute and his attempts to win the hand of Lydia Languish. The sub-plot unravels the problems concerning the marriage of Faulkland and Julia who are related to the characters of the main plot. Some writers employ fantasy elements in the sub plot or as an interlude to differentiate between realism and fantasy or to reinforce realism. With the growing industrialisation and modernisation, the writers resort to fantasy as it has become the appropriate tool for the portrayal of realism, the unreal, the super real the supernatural etc.

**Fantasy**

Fantasy is the opposite of reality. Fantasy is the unreal, the imaginary, the dream-like and the fictitious. There are some literary works that are completely fantastical. Fairy tales are examples. The fantasy stands for life values, moral standards and ethical principles. There are some works that rely upon fantasy to re-orient reality to the readers. The connection between the fictional world and the real can be either representational or illustrative. The images in a narrative may strike us at once as an attempt to create a replica of actuality just as the images in certain paintings or works of sculptures may or they strike us as an attempt merely to remind us of an aspect of reality rather than convey a total and convincing impression of real world to us as certain kinds of virtual arts also do. (84)

Thus, fantasy is flexible to take any form of realism as projected by the writer. While explaining fantasy Rosemary Jackson states that, “The fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible covered over and made ‘absent’(4 Fantasy: The Literature of subversion). Robert Scholes establishes that the fictions of the literary writers are beautiful lies (120). In the essay, “Magical Realism” while defining the realism and its appeal, Sharon Sieber quotes Roh as follows, “It seems to us that this fantastic dreamscape has completely vanished and that our real world re-emerges before our eyes, bathed in the clarity of a new day. We recognize this world, although now – not only because we have emerged from a dream – we look on it with new eyes”(170 The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature). In *Macbeth*, while explaining the overambitious nature of man, Shakespeare makes use of the witches, the unreal to show the people’s belief in supernatural aspects. Amos Tutuola’s novel *Palmwine Drinkard*, a Nigerian folktale in English, delineates the life of the Nigerians who live largely depending on tradition, culture, myth and legends of the past. All these unnatural elements are not beyond life as they exist in belief. One of the reasons for the popularity of Nigerian literature is that it portrays indigenous life tinged with ethnic ways. From the coarse political novels, Ben Okri has taken the seed and has developed complete fantasy works exploring the Nigerian myth and culture for projecting reality in a different way.

Ben Okri is an acclaimed magic realist grouped with Salman Rushdie, Gabriel Garcia Marquez etc. He is a novelist, poet and short–story writer. *The Famished Road* trilogy has received many awards for the exemplary blend of reality and fantasy. Not only his novels but also his short-stories are fantastical. Okri’s short- stories can be analysedas a fantasy writing as they concord to the features of the grammar of the fantasy.

**Grammar of Fantasy**
Reaching reality through fantasy is the area of study of John Clute and John Grant in The Encyclopedia of Fantasy. According to them, the structural elements of a fantastic narrative are wrongness, thinning, recognition and eucatastrophe. John Clute and John Grant consider them as the prerequisites of fantasy; hence these are called the grammar of fantasy. They are the intensive units framing the total structure and shape of any fantasy literature making it unique and different from the other genres. Fantasy arises out of the wrongness and the thinning of the world. Recognizing them is significant for a happy ending. Wrongness, like lawlessness, immorality, bribery, corruption, atrocity, murder, prejudice etc., is the base upon which fantasy is constructed. These realities are the source of fantasy.

Wrongness refers to the degradation of the living environment which may be social or political. According to Clute and Grant “The sense of wrongness, in fantasy is a recognition that the world is – or is about to become-no longer right, that the world has been subject to a process of thinning”(1038). From the healthy and happy environment, it has deteriorated to the present unhealthy state. In the Encyclopedia, wrongness means a land which has gone worse. “Wrongness may signal the transformation of the land that ensues when a Dark Lord triumphs or threatens to triumph, turning the old world into a parody of its prior being”(1038). Clute and Grant state that the atrocities and the immorality lead to thinning, the second structure of the grammar of fantasy. In their words, “Wrongness and thinning are two essential moments in the grammar of fantasy, but in the flow of story are distinct, even though they frequently manifest together” (1038).

Wrongness leads to the thinning of the real world and both are distinct though they appear to be similar. In their words, “It can also mark a state of Bondage, the unnatural freezing of reality –generated when a metamorphosis goes wrong, or cannot happen, or is imposed as a punishment”(1039). Fantasies are fables of recovery as the wrongness results in thinned land, and at last restores into a healthy land. The result of fantasy may depend on the story.

Fantasy tales can be described, in part, as fables of recovery. What is being regained may be a)the primal story that the surface tale struggles to rearticulate b) the true name or home of the protagonist c)the health of the land through a process of Healing or indeed d) the actual location of the land itself (942)

The thinned world, having lost its power and glory, appears barren with a bundle of contradiction and confusion. The messy land has to be recreated. With this ideology, the writers take up the task of throwing light on the waning glory. Focussing on it, the restoration process becomes the core of the fantasy story, as the thinned land is the setting of the fantasy novel which strives to change itself. While developing the story, the writer’s focus is on the environment and the unhealthy land and not on any interludes. In some fantasy tales, the readers can understand that the thinning of the land is the revenge act of the Dark Lord who turns the land from its happy state to its sad state. The unfavourable land leads to the construction of a land of imagination which is part of the entertainment and education. This man-made land provides a short-lived happiness and enables a comparison and contrast with the real world. This leads to recognition.

The novel excavates the problem, unravels it, works upon some trouble and sets it right and educates the reader. In a story, the artistic nature tends to make the art totally a trick played by the writer in order to create a wonderful piece. In the words of Clute and Grant,

For much mimetic or realistic literature this process inherent to the telling of story proves to be an embarassment, a scandalous admission that fiction is an artifice. For most non-mimetic literature, the opposite is the case: the literature of the fantastic positively glory in the fact that they present and embody, story-shaped world.(804)

In a fantasy novel, the events take place in a world which is a story-shaped world, which is in contrast to the day-today-world of a mimetic art. This story-shaped world lays emphasis on the transformation of the land which has lost its past glory. But in fantasy, the world which has gone wrong is placed with an ideal world created by the writer. This knowledge on the part of the reader, leads to an understanding. It is a movement from ignorance to knowledge.
recognition which is recuperative, instructive and inward-turning. In this part of the story, the characters understand their situation, helping their movement and making the textual world comprehensible. In the Encyclopedia it is, “It is the moment at which the characters understand their predicament for the first time... it makes the world (and the text) intelligible (804)”. During recognition, movement of the story is held up making the readers dwell in the actual essence of the story. In a complete fantasy tale, the protagonists get a view of themselves, their stand and their function.

It is at this moment of Recognition that the inherent story at the heart of fantasy texts is most visible, most “artificial” and most revelatory. At this moment in “the structurally complete fantasy tale (Brian Atterbery’s phrase) protagonists begin to understand what has been happening to them. They understand that they are in a story; that properly recognized (which is to say properly told) their lives have the coherence and significance to story; that in short, the story has been telling them.(804)

There may be the play of the past and the present events, that is, the two parallel realities meet at a point in the literary world of fantasy. From recognition, the writer moves on to the happy ending, hoping to get the desired end, eucatastrophe.

Wrongness

“Laughter beneath the Bridge” the first story in the collection Incidents at the Shrine traces the city and its landscape during the civil war emergency period. The soldiers in the story threaten the people with their guns to make them obey their orders. The narrator’s mother pleads with them when the boy is silenced in fear. In his native place, the narrator observes a similar situation. Monica, the narrator’s friend who is a small girl is molested and killed brutally by the soldiers. Okri pictures a soldier’s action. “He looked at her breasts and then at her neck(15)”. The security forces of the country have become ruthless murderers, killing and manhandling the people who are the people of the same soil. Okri presents the city landscape that is filled with bloodshed and corpses. There are religious maniacs and mobs searching for the rebel tribe. The violence is presented as follow,

“Sirens and fire engines made it seem like there was an insane feast going on somewhere in the country. In town we saw a man set upon by a mob: they beat him up in a riot of vengeance, they broke sticks and bottles on his head. So much blood came from him (3 Incidents at the Shrine). The short-story “Converging City” portrays the wrongness on the part of the people in power. The Head of the state is portrayed from his political sphere. When he cannot move due to the traffic jam, his reaction is truly bad. He wants to implement laws for the reduction of traffic jams. “...in the shape of an earthworm moving across the tinted window(31)”. He pays little attention to a man in rags sitting in the middle of the road, to the unpleasant smell emanating from a dead cow left out in one corner. The officials work for their personal benefit and they have moral scruples while demanding and accepting bribes and while encouraging the trade of smuggled goods. They want to be wealthy; hence they do not intend to curb such illegal activities which will affect the country’s economy.

The story “Incidents at the City” begins with the representation of the bossy nature of the supervisor, assistant and clerk and the rough meat seller. “Anderson started to protest, but the clerk got up and pushed him out of the office”(53). Anderson is stripped of his living necessities in the city. Okri goes into the roots of the problem, analyses the problem and shows the impact of the problem. All these erroneous, mischievous, and biased leaders stand for the thinned world.

Thinning

The evil doings of the political leaders lead to the civil war that leaves the land festered. The inhabitants are disheartened. A city’s strength can be estimated by the number of inhabitants it could promote but the city has lost itself in the darkness, gradually turning into a haunted place. The writer presents the stretch of forest that is corpse-laden, and filled with molested women, crying mothers, tortured old men, and tormented individuals. “We passed stretches of forest and
saw numerous corpses along the road. We saw whole families trudging along the empty wastes, children straggling behind, weeping without the possibility of consolation(5”). The narrator’s dream of calmness in his native place is shattered as the same pain, suffering, murder, brutality and suppression are heard everywhere. The narrator sees similar tyrannical soldiers. The land turns futile for the people of all ages.

In “Converging City”, the problems of the commoners of the city are shown as follows: a town where people are stripped of every element of decency and morality. Consequently, they become grabbing animals, grabbing at money, women, wine, drugs, anything...It is a city of mad, violent and angry characters who have known suffering and deprivation. It is also a city marked by filth, decay, crime rebellion and exploitation.(3 Ben Okri An Introduction to His early Fiction)

The decayed world is marked with a bloated corpse of a cow which is lying on the street preyed upon by scavengers and it is left uncared for by the people or any organization. “…the corpse of an upturned and bloated cow at the side of the road. Exulting flies formed a buzzing black cloud above the swollen body.”(26) Okri shows this as a common sight in Nigeria.

The city environs lower the spirits of Anderson in the story “Incidents at the Shrine”. Anderson is enraged by the supervisor’s bias, the clerk’s brutality and, the meat seller’s coarseness. “Seven years in the city had begun to make Anderson feel powerless because he didn’t belong to the important societies, and didn’t have influential relatives.(54)”. Hence he moves to the village where there are people, to strengthen, to teach and to motivate him.

In a fantasy, during recognition, the characters and the readers move from ignorance to knowledge. Here Okri describes the wrongness and the thinning, compelling the readers to derive knowledge from these. The building of the nation, according to Okri, lies in the hands of the people of the land. This knowledge helps in the recreation, called eucatastrophe.

**Recognition and Eucatastrophe**

In “Laughter beneath the Bridge” the knowledge, of the characters of the story, the mother, the father, Monica, and the narrator is different. The recognition in the narrator has made Okri end the story with the words, “The young shall grow(22)”.Amidst all these, he makes the emphatic statement that the young must grow and stop all these with their iron hand.

In “Converging City”, Agodi leaves the place in search of wisdom. His different experience in the forest tells him of the secret of life. Entering the forest, which offers a serene atmosphere, has helped him to look at the problem in a different angle. And recognition lies here. Eucatastrophe is also indicated as Agodi could construct his shed, print cards and keep signboards which indicate his development. Agodi takes a new form with a reddish beard and braided hair after a temporary absence. He understands that God and money are inseparable .In “Incidents at the Shrine” Okri creates a world for Anderson to be enlightened. Through Abbas he feels that nothing can be understood by merely looking at it. “The more you look the less you see”, the Image-maker said.(59)”. Anderson comes to know that resemblances are false. “We don’t speak of resemblances in our village,...(60)” Okri completes the story with the following observation: “Anderson experienced the new simplicity of his life, and continued with his journey(66)”.

The Nigerian political reality is the seed of the short stories. many political satires of Nigerian literature mark the reality of the land. The Nigerian writers create political leaders, political members and election campaigns showing the turmoil. But Okri turns to fantasy to narrate the real story. He makes his writings striking with the fantasy that is revolving around the land and the soil. In his novels, fantasy takes a full form whereas in the short stories with their economy of words, the writer has made it striking and expressive. The fantasy in Okri does not create worlds of spirits and adventurous heroes but it pinpoints the real land from where the fantasy has taken its true shape.
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