

COLLECTIVE LOSSES: REPERCUSSIONS OF BIAFRAN WAR ON NIGERIAN LIFE IN BEN OKRI'S DANGEROUS LOVE

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Abstract: Ben Okri, in his novel *Dangerous Love*, gathers a pack of characters and weave their psyche with a single thread. Undoubtedly, that thread is the collective loss of identity and cultural heritage due to Biafran War. Biafran War brought holocaust to the people of these groups and provided with a sense of hollowness. Nearly every character of the novel is haunted by the mass destruction in this war. Central character Omovo is so much rooted in his morbid dreams and aloofness that he is unable to connect with anyone. Okoro symbolizes a war veteran who turns towards boozing, sexuality and night parties. He enlists himself in all these activities in order to avoid the remembrance of the drastic war. Okri, not only analyses identity of young people of Nigeria but also the literary identity of Africa. This paper aims to detect and evaluate this feeling of related loss of identity and sense of belongingness. Loss of this magnitude was brought about by the mayhem of corruption and crime that was introduced by Biafran War.

Keywords: Biafran War, Corruption, Postcolonial, Identity Crisis, Art, Culture, Paintings.

1.0 Introduction: Biafran War scattered the human life in Nigeria in the decade of the 1960s and the next decades consequently. Nigerian ethnic groups like Igbo and Yoruba, which once were unique cultural identities faced a massive attack on their ethnic values and their culture, art and social bonding broke down. It didn't happen suddenly that the war began and human life became inhumane in Nigeria but it took the feral colonial process of Europe to achieve this level. So, directly or indirectly even the Biafran War was the result of colonial rule of Britain in Nigeria. It seems that Biafran War was the ultimate result of British rule. The central concern of this paper is to examine mix impact of the Biafran War and the colonialism. Britain liberated Nigeria in 1960 but left its people with a segregated psyche.

Collective Losses: Repercussions of Biafran War on Nigerian life in Ben Okri's *Dangerous Love*

The Nigerian Civil War or in other words Biafran War, named after the secessionist state of Biafra started on 6 July 1967 and ended on 15 January 1970. It was a socioeconomic and political conflict started by the succession of the south-eastern provinces of Nigeria as the independent Republic of Biafra. Nigeria was created as a colonial entity by the British.

In the wake of independence in 1960, Nigeria was divided into three provinces with tribal lines. These groups stood as three different political identities: the Hausa and Fulani ruled in the north, Yoruba in south-west and Igbo or Ibo in Southeast.

These groups were highly tensed from each other on political, economic, ethnic, cultural and religious levels. The formation of these groups was based on the colonial power. When Nigeria got liberated from colonialism, nationalists who were elites of these cultures and exposed to western education and power system. They substituted an old colonial system with class based and exploitative protocol. It was the same colonialism, but with newer framework. They continued the legacy of old colonialism and their modal of nationalism scattered into regionalism. Due to this regional miasma Biafran War took place. The impact of this war was so devastating that people of these ethnic groups suffered from a sense of "historylessness" (Veracini). Nigerians' "really passionate dreams" (Okri

110) of rootedness and culture were transformed into “the long silences” (Okri 110). Ben Okri, in his novel, *Infinite Riches* puts these words in the mouth of a character named Governor-General that colonial rule and its resultant Biafran War has deprived Nigeria of “language, of poetry, of stories, of architecture, of civil laws, of social organisation, of art, science, mathematics, sculpture, abstract conception and philosophy... of history, of civilization and, unintentionally, of humanity too” (Okri, 110).

Ben Okri, in his seminal work, *Dangerous Love* depicts two types of realities, firstly, reality of socio-economic and cultural corruption in Lagos and secondly the artists’ responsibility to portray the reality of this indecisiveness in society and to gather the remains of culture. Overtly, *Dangerous Love* is a *Künstlerroman*, it portrays the journey of Omovo, an artist. He leads a life of dual existence: first, the evil life of Lagos he witnesses in front of his eyes and in his second existence he grimly suffers the inability to portray the morbid life of Lagos. Moreover, he lingers in his fathomless dreams of corpses and abstract cravings of an artist’s mind. He sees “corruption being the new morality” (Okri 9). His highly sensitive mind observes the fatal changes in society. He is not able to come into terms with it and this puzzling condition forces him to paint. Through his paintings he tries to synthesize the fragmentation of his psyche. Omovo gives “an attempt to connect the scattered threads of their lives and to weave a pattern” (Okri 74).

Initially, Omovo symbolises the condition of a highly sensitive and artistic mind in a post-war era. His only sojourn amidst this cultural chaos is Ifeyiwa who is succumbed to the marriage with Takpo, thrice of her age. Who treats her like a slave and rape her. Ifeyiwa finds Omovo’s companionship very soothing and relaxing. With him, she is able to forget her suffering and exile which she faces days in and days out with Takpo. Omovo loves her, and in her company, feels redeemed of his morbid dreams of dead bodies and cultural hooliganism. Omovo and Ifeyiwa connects to each other due to a mutual sense of exile and alienation. At one point, she comments that “ever since I was taken from home I don’t belong anywhere anymore” (Okri 25). But in their togetherness, they feel a “joyous disquiet” (Okri 18). Their small secret meetings always carry discussions about their hollowness instead of young couple’s romantic jamboree. They seem overgrown of their age and continue to indulge in their talking of nightmarish dreams. These dreams are the illusionary presentations of the highly treacherous civil war. At one point, Ifeyiwa says to Omovo that “something has been stolen from all of us” (Okri 38).

Throughout the novel, every character is split between reality and imagined reality. They always feel disenchanted of the contemporary crooked reality and escape into the more horrific imagined reality where they meet both the moments of joy and sadness at the same time, there they see a hollowness and vacuum. Some characters find the solace in boozing and debauchery, some wants to escape to America. Omovo, always goes through a disjunction between what he intendeds to do and what exactly he does. This is his imagined reality. He tries to paint his ideological spectrum but unknowingly it turns out to be a product challenging the authorities of Lagos. Omovo, develops a detached observation and creative expression required from the artist. His aesthetic development culminates in a painting titled “scumscape”, which portrays the miserable conditions of Nigeria’s urban poor but the painting is quickly censored and confiscated because of its powerful social criticism. His philosophical reflections on art and culture, analyse the postcolonial dimensions of artistic production in a newly independent nation struggling to free itself from the complexity aroused from its liberation from colonialism and Impact of Biafran War. For them, as Fraser puts in “memories of a violent past are forever returning unbidden” (Fraser 19). They all are suffering from a collective loss of identity and “sad in a way that only a deformed kind of beauty can be” (Okri 179).

In the novel, Omovo is the most sensitive character, he understands the reflection of the past on their present as he remarks to Ifeyiwa that “we are victims here, we are strangers, refugees from the poverty of the interior. And even if we were in our villages we would still be strangers. It is odd that even in our own country we don’t have a home. Maybe that’s why my brothers left” (Okri 171).

Moreover, Okoro is a war survivor and he wakes up of dreaming of war as if

...war still going on. Bombs falling. A man, shot through the chest, is calling My name. I look. He is my father. Mines go off. Bullets sounding everywhere... My gun’s wet with someone’s blood and I am shooting in all directions like a mad man...I go back to sleep and enter another nightmare. (Okri 236).

Like this, time and again he dwells into his memories of war and in order to escape from them he turns out to be a debaucher enlisting himself in all types of merry-making. He goes to bar, drinks heavily and makes sexual relations with heterogeneous girls. This, is his version of escape.

From not only the individual identity and remembrance of the bad past they are suffering from but also the departure of cultural values haunts them badly. As many critics like Homi K. Bhabha of postcolonial literature have pointed out that people of newly liberated countries from the chains of colonialism always witness a grim situation of hybridity. They remain in “in-betweenness” (Bhabha) and find themselves unable to connect to their nativity and traditionalism. As Okoro broods that “nobodies, that’s what we are” (Okri 237). They feel enchanted by the glimmer and glitter of European cultural artefacts like dance and language and at the same time cry for the loss of their cultural language and dance. They find themselves pigeonholed in a dreamy situation where euphoric and dysphoric probabilities walk together. At one point, Okoro says to Omovo :

I found I had almost forgotten how to do our traditional dance. I was really Ashamed. All the elders kept mocking me. I mean here I am. I can do any disco dance, but I have forgotten the dance of my people. It’s really strange. (Okri, 237).

Initially, Omovo remarks at this: “I know what you mean, I can’t speak my mother’s language at all and I struggle with my father’s. How did this happen to us, eh?” (Okri 237). They all are going through a cultural haplessness. This novel, *Dangerous Love*, seems a philosophised Things Fall Apart as it provides aesthetic dimensions to past hooliganism. Okonkwo, brutally attacks the chains of colonial masters but Omovo is a more refined entity who faces post-war chaos in a literary and artistic style. But, like Okonkwo’s son Nwoye, Dele, friend of Omovo weaves dreams of going to America, “God’s own country” (Okri 146) where he can improve his American accent and can enjoy sexual pleasure with “heavy white women” (Okri 146). He is eager to wash away remains of his native culture and accept the utopia of American and European world. In remarks to Omovo and Okoro in a very enthusiastic manner: “you won’t recognise me. I will have changed. You guys can stay here and enjoy the insane struggles” (Okri 147). Through Dele, Ben Okri wants to project the incapability of natives to resurrect the remains of their culture, to look at the epicentre of it.

Okri also provide a symbolic dimension to the female characters of the novel. Ifeyiwa’s death is labelled as a sacrifice at the end of the novel. She made a sacrifice on everyone’s behalf. Her death is the symbol of fragmentation of societies and lives in Nigeria. Her body is recovered from a stream like the body of a girl child was recovered by Omovo in the earlier part of the novel. As, at the time of Biafran war ethnic groups go through a bloodbath, in the same style, on the death of Ifeyiwa, both the villages raised arms against each other and shot dead many people. Through these incidents, Okri hints at the vulnerability of ethnic groups in Nigeria.

The death of these innocents symbolises the death of order and life in Lagos after Biafran War. Regarding this, Toyin Falola puts it, “the enemy to fight was no longer the colonial government, which had indicated strong signs of dismantling itself, but fellow Nigerians” (Falola 92). Okri describes through these characters how the ethnic tensions traumatize the life of populace.

So, *Dangerous Love* is a tremendous exegesis of ethnic problems in Nigeria and Biafran War as the sole source of it and a true African novel in the glorious literary tradition of Chinua Achebe.

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